



No. 32

# GOING DOWN SWINGIN'

*Anthology // CD  
// Flipbook // Poster*



GOING  
DOWN  
SWINGING

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## CD Track Listing

1. The World's Worst Batman (live at Story Club)  
*Ben Jenkins*  
*Engineered by Brooke Olsen*
2. Lucky  
*Anthony W.P. O'Sullivan*  
*Engineered by Kieran Ruffles*
3. Four Ways to Leave a Burning Bedroom  
*Briohny Doyle*  
*Engineered by Kieran Ruffles*
4. Megafauna (live at the Sydney Opera House)  
*Neil Gaiman*  
*Head of Music: Fergus Linehan*  
*Contemporary Music Producer: Ben Marshall*  
*Under licence from the Sydney Opera House Trust*
5. Small Ghosts  
*Joelistics*  
*Engineered by Kieran Ruffles*
6. The Very Best Story That I Know (live at the launch of *GDS #31*)  
*Eleanor Jackson*  
*Engineered by Zen Mejglo*
7. Fool Card  
*Dawn Sperber*  
*Produced and engineered by Jerome Covington*

8. White Crane  
*Graham Nunn*  
*Engineered by Sheish Money*
9. Skeleton of a Postman  
*Benezra*  
*Engineered by Kieran Ruffles*
10. The Mining Boom That Ate Fremantle Town  
*Zoë Barron*  
*Engineered by Ben Ainslie*
11. Maggie  
*Ken Arkind*  
*Engineered by Hot Congress*
12. Drunk Tram Sways Away from Melba  
*Ezra Bix*  
*Engineered by Dan West*
13. It Goes That Way (for Laurie Anderson)  
*Philip Norton*  
*Engineered by Philip Norton*
14. Some Dream Was Brewing  
*Maxine Clarke*  
*Engineered by Kieran Ruffles*

## Going Down Swinging Comissioned Works 2011

*Over the last few years, Going Down Swinging has kept expanding its program of commissioning new work. This year saw two more firsts: our first non-fiction commission, and our first writer/illustrator collaborative work. These added to our three spoken word commissions to round out a year of astonishing new work produced just for readers and listeners of GDS.*

For our commissioned non-fiction work by **Rebecca Giggs**, please see page 68.

**Leanne Hall** and **Dylan Martorell** joined forces for Celestial Taxi, our first completely new collaborative work between a writer and an artist. The resulting collage/story/flipbook/poster is as indefinable and idiosyncratic as we could have hoped. Leanne is a Melbourne writer, initially of short fiction, who then shot to public attention with her uncanny and beautiful novel *This is Shyness*. Dylan's "magpie junkyard aesthetic" shines through here. A local design star, he has exhibited in Australia and overseas for over a decade. You can even get his work on pillowcases.

Our 2011 spoken word commissions came from **Eleanor Jackson**, **Felix Nobis**, and **Mantra**. Eleanor's is on this edition of the CD, the others will be on a 2012 production. Eleanor is a much-admired poet and the brains behind the Melbourne Poetry Map. Felix is a veteran Australian actor of stage and screen, and a playwright for the MTC. He also lectures in classics at Monash University, and retranslated Beowulf to turn it into a one-man stage show. Mantra is one of Australia's most highly-rated rappers. His second album, Speaking Volumes, will be released on the prestigious' Obese label in late 2011.

## Acknowledgements and Thanks

Many, many thanks go to our predecessor and spiritual advisor Lisa Greenaway, without whom we would certainly be completely adrift; and to Steve Grimwade, who is in it for the long haul. Thanks also to our remarkable board, for all the help and hard work given us over the last year.

Thanks to Christabel Harvey and Arts Victoria; Paul Riggs and Salon Productions; The Melbourne Writers Festival; Neil Gaiman; the Sydney Opera House and its crew of Ben Marshall, Gloria Carmona, Andy Lown, and Fergus Linehan; Tait Ischia and Ned Dwyer of Native Digital; Julien Stoeffler; Dave Houtin, Lauren Taylor, and Kieran Ruffles at RRR; Brooke Olsen and Alana Hicks of FBi; Andrew Watson; Eleanor Jackson and the Melbourne Poetry Map; Adam Dempsey; Shehab Tariq; Jeff Sparrow; Sam Twyford-Moore; Story Club; Penguin Plays Rough; Luke Pocock and Bar Open; Ishara Wishart; Denise O'Dea; Rohan Latimer; Zoe Dattner and SPUNC; Hugh McNaughtan; Bo Svoronos and Global Poetics; Thomas Butt and Andy Lane.

And a special thank you to Nigel Quirk, the only commercial printer we know who gets excited by zine-making.

### *Geoff thanks:*

Drinking; late-night toast; Andrew Lemon and Judith Cordingley; This is Not Art Festival; Rebecca Lewis and Troy Penfold; Joel Ma; Emily Hollosy; Bhakthi Puvanenthiran; Geelong Football Club; Nic Hodges; Barbara and Frances; Patrick Lenton and Bridget Lutherborrow; The Spontaneity Review; Zac Zavos and Tristan Rayner; Janet de Neefe; Ruski, Will, Corch, and Rory; Meredith and all her children (Kash, Anita, Jesus, Mish, Ed, Simon and cetera); anyone who has spooned me in the last 12 months; Mark Zuckerberg and Jack Dorsey; Sparky McSparks and the invention of the eye-hug.

### *Jessica thanks:*

Her remarkable family and friends; her remarkable second family at Small Giants (inc. all the et als.); and Michael Baylis, for everything, and then a little bit more.

## Editorial I—Geoff Lemon

Looking around to find myself editing *Going Down Swinging* has been a bit like suddenly finding myself playing in one of my favourite bands. For years GDS has been there in the eyeline, doing new projects, putting on shows, publishing genuine artists who made me stop, think, shift in my seat. When they first published me, still young and raw, I high-fived myself around the room. Other journals were other journals. This one was something special.

It has been that tradition of new thinking, of pulling in directions in which others are not, of making a new generation of readers and viewers and listeners feel that we are doing something all our own, that has guided this next chapter of *Going Down Swinging*. All its life it has been passed like a Chinese whisper from one set of editors to the next. Lisa Greenaway, Ella Holcombe, and Nathan Curnow whispered well.

There are times when you wonder why you're doing this. When you're pulling 16-hour days for weeks on end leading up to deadline, wondering what funding bodies would say if you quoted your actual work hours. When you spend your holiday in Queensland gummed to a laptop. When people think you're ignoring them while your inbox looks like the internet threw up into it during turbulence.

But there are times when you know. When the ideas and language in a Rebecca Giggs essay shock with their freshness like a squirt of lemon in the eye. When Wes Lee and Fred Aceves break your heart with the everyday, Mike Baylis makes you shout with laughter and email your friends, Ruby Murray gets you teary at 4 a.m. when you've read so many stories your eyes were already blurred. When Neil Gaiman says he has just the thing for you, while wordsmiths like Felix Nobis and Mantra start work that no-one else has known. When a jam-packed room on a drunken Friday night stays dead silent, locked on to every breath and syllable that falls from Eleanor Jackson's mouth. When you remember that you're able to wrap up these gems, and press the parcel into someone else's hands.

I said at the launch of *GDS #31* that however hard one's work, it can become a joy if friends are lifting with you. My comrade-in-editorial has done just that. I couldn't be more proud of what we've done. *#31* was a new step in Australian digital publishing, something that wasn't mere text made electron, but a collation of movement, image, sound, and the written word. Something that shifted as quickly as our concepts do. *#32*, which you hold in your hands, is the distillation of thousands of artworks, and thousands of hours, rendered in text, image, and speech. If I may paraphrase Eleanor, these are the very best stories that we know, and in them, we are young, and old, and whole, and broken, and beautiful.

## Editorial II—Jessica Friedmann

When Geoff wrote to me about a year ago and suggested that we edit *Going Down Swinging* together, I quite frankly thought that he'd lost his mind. Though I have the greatest professional respect for his opinions, I have never once agreed with them, and most of the time we've spent talking about fiction has devolved into time spent hotly arguing about fiction. I anticipated brawling, retribution, name-calling, and general disaster.

Somewhere along the way, though, it began to make sense. Our (very divergent) tastes have formed the parameters of this publication, and made for an extremely varied and fertile middle ground. And from that middle ground has sprung the beanstalk of the thing itself, *Going Down Swinging*; a publication with its own voice, its own personality, and ever-outreaching tendrils that stretch to encompass one editor's love of time-travelling ekphrastic prose poems and another's taste for Spanish-language-inflected amputation romps.

Watching that voice begin to assert itself as submissions—three thousand of them!—came flooding in nine months ago has been a marvel and a joy. There are sentences in this book that I kick myself for not having written first; poems that are meditative and incantatory, images transfixing and immersive. Putting this book together over the last few days, I've found myself abandoning highly necessary layout tasks in order to just read things, again and again. That's what fiction does, the best of it; draws you firmly into the eye of the storm, and forces you to be, for a minute, perfectly still. It's why a publication like *Going Down Swinging* is, to me, worth its weight in beanstalk gold.

I'm sitting here writing this, late, late at night, in the madness of deadlines and production, and anticipating the moment I get to sit down with this book again—perhaps a few years down the track—and come across each piece afresh. I suppose that's a kind of time-travelling as well—a kind of wishful-thinking projection of myself into your shoes. You're about to discover for the first time the thing we've spent the last year immersed in. And I envy you that. I really do.



# The Closest I've Come

*Fred Aceves*

BETWEEN ME AND GIRLS, there's always this humongous distance, even when I sit near them in class, close enough to pull their hair. Sometimes I get these weird crushes that pop up out of nowhere. That's how it happened with Megan Harrington like three weeks ago when she stuck her head out of her mother's shiny-blue Caravan and asked, "Do you mind calling Jeremy?"

I went inside the Boy's Club to get him, love stirring inside me.

With junior high two months away, I'm not the only one into girls now. Me, my cousin Pedro and most of our friends are all girl-crazy, which it's finally okay to be. Cooties don't last forever. You can like a girl now, can even get a friend to talk to her for you, but when a kid accuses you of liking a girl you have to be all, "Nuh-uh."

It's Saturday morning and I'm watching SpongeBob SquarePants when my cousin Pedro walks in. He lives in my apartment complex.

"I'm here!" he says, which are my favorite words to hear.

Being alone sucks.

"I'm here, honey," is what my mom says when she has time to stop by after her day job, before cleaning offices in the evening. I hardly ever see her. Even if the weather is awesome and there are a hundred boys on the basketball court, I make sure to be home between 3 and 4:15, in case she shows up.

She asks me how I am and I say, "Fine." Then she does her Mom checklist of what have you eaten and where did you go and where will you go and who with and for how long, and so on.

I try not to give her any trouble. I tell her I'm fine no matter what. I mean, all I have to worry about, basically, are my holey sneakers that are about to fall apart. She has a crazy list of worries like working too much, like bills to pay, like no man to help her, like the headaches that don't go away no matter how many aspirins she pops.

"What's up?" Pedro says.

"I'm in love with Megan Harrington and nervous about talking to her and don't like that my sneakers are ugly and about to fall apart," I want to say. Instead I say, "Nothing."

"You ready to go?"

"It's too early."

Pedro grins like he's found money. "So are you going to kiss Megan?"

I keep my eyes on the screen. "Who's that?"

"Yeah, right. You check her out every time she goes to pick Jeremy up. You know you like her."

"Nuh-uh."

Pedro goes into the kitchen. I hear the fridge door open and close, two sucking sounds, and then the cabinets creaking one by one.

“Damn, Marcos. You got jack squat to eat.”

“Same as you.”

Pedro’s back in the living room.

“I know. That’s why I came here.”

At his house and mine it’s forever beans and rice. For breakfast it’s cereal.

“I got cornflakes,” I say.

Pedro sits next to me on the couch.

“Cornflakes,” he repeats with a sigh.

He has the same big white box at home.

It’s pretty cool when Pedro sighs. It’s like the only time I can know how he feels. Sometimes I hear big sadness in his sighs and other times, like being bummed out because there’s no food in the fridge, I hear only that something is bugging him. It can be a small sigh or a gigantic sigh but somewhere in it I hear disappointment, which I got plenty of, too.

“Oh damn.” He points. “Your ghetto TV is flipping out.”

“I got this.” I walk over to it. “I know the technique.”

The TV is a bulky floor model that looks like a piece of furniture, all fancy wood and black knobs, which is how they made TVs millions of years ago. The shaky image on it sometimes does flips.

I smack the top of it a few times. Now the image is rolling slow enough so that you can kind of see SpongeBob’s yellow shape.

“Hit it!” cheers Pedro. “Beat it like it owes you money!”

I raise my fist into the air and bring it down harder than ever, wham!

The image on the screen blinks and dies.

“Dammit!”

I stare at the TV and sigh. A gigantic sigh. I feel my fists tighten, and then I hear Pedro laughing. I turn around. He’s laying on the sofa, cracking up, the remote control in his hand. He pressed the power button.

Palm Apartments, our neighborhood, has nothing palmy about it. No plants, no trees, no nature stuff at all if you don’t count the blades of grass that poke out through the broken concrete. It’s just fifteen look-the-same buildings with dumpsters and the parking lots that wrap around it all.

Little kids are playing as usual, but we also see Mariana on her porch, talking on a cordless phone. She’s a high-schooler, the prettiest girl in Palm Apartments, probably in the universe. She makes jeans and a T-shirt seem like the hottest outfit ever. Older boys have been nuts about her for a while, but me and Pedro have just started really noticing her.

“Check her out,” Pedro says.

“I know. How could ju mention Megan?” I say in a Mexican soap-opera voice.

"After Mariana leaved me, I never give the love or make the sex again."

"You wish."

"Jes, I wish."

Minutes later I'm pedalling fast, keeping as close as I can to the curb, Pedro just behind me. As cars zoom past I think of what I should say to Megan when I see her. It has to be something good, and I really got to use it. I can't wuss out like I've done a thousand times.

Like with Claudia who I liked right before Christmas vacation. At recess one day, when she picked up the ball I was chasing after and handed it to me, I fell in love. But I waited too long to ask her out, and then she moved away.

The closest I've come to having a girlfriend was Trina. That would have been a cinch. I knew she liked me because her best friend told Lisa who told Pedro who told me. All I had to do was ask her, but I stalled for weeks. Then came the most perfect chance ever to talk to her. It was just us two in the hall, walking towards each other, both of us carrying bathroom passes the size of license plates. What did I do? When I got closer to her, when eye contact and a "hello" would have been the most normal thing in the world, I turned my head as if the wall had become more interesting. A week later she was walking through the halls holding hands with Martin, the freckle boy.

But I won't lose my chance with Megan. After lots of thinking, I decide on the perfect thing to say to her and then just focus on pedalling down the street, making sure I don't leave Pedro behind.

Pedro and I met Jeremy and his friend Ronnie when they showed up at Reyes Street Boys' Club a few weeks ago, when the summer basketball teams were forming. They stuck out because they were white, and after we got accustomed to their whiteness they continued to stick out for how they amazed us. Jeremy because he's such a good player and Ronnie because he can't sink a shot, not even a layup off the backboard. Pedro and I liked both of them, though, and they liked us. Probably because we didn't call them "the whiteboys." We called them "Jeremy and Ronnie."

Jeremy goes to another school. That's how far away he lives. Pedro and I had to take Fulston Street and swing a right, ride for a couple of miles, and right now we're on Valencia, real restaurants—not just fast food joints—on both sides of a four-lane street, a bank building on every block, parking lots with no litter.

After we turn right down a street I see the entrance of a subdivision that matches the name in my pocket. I brake and pull out the invitation to make sure.

"Yep. Cambridge Woods."

"Fancy," Pedro says.

The letters on the "Cambridge Woods" sign are huge, and underneath it, underlined by bright yellow flowers, it reads: "A deed restricted community."

"Who's Deed?" asks Pedro.

"Don't know. It's not us, so we can go in."

Balloons are tied to the mailbox. It's a peach-colored house, one storey, the shiny-blue Caravan in the driveway. I tell Pedro we don't have to lock up our bikes and he believes me.

When I ring the bell I start to feel weird. My forehead sweats and my heart beats. I mean, I know from school that my heart pumps blood, that it beats non-stop, but right now I'm actually feeling it in my chest, thumping like mad.

Jeremy's mom opens the door, all smiles. There seems to be nobody else around. She points down the hall and says, "Jeremy's in his room."

As we pass the first door in the hall I think of how Megan might be behind it. Pedro whispers, "Megan."

I look at him. He makes a circle with his thumb and index finger of his left hand and he's sticking his right finger in and out of that circle, in and out. He can be gross sometimes. I show him my favorite finger.

No way do I want sex. I don't even understand it even though I've seen lots of pictures and about ten minutes total of Internet porn. I know what sex is, pretty much, and know that's what older kids do eventually, but me, I just want to be close to Megan. And I'm not talking about holding her hand or kissing her lips. I want to feel close to her.

We find Jeremy in his room. He's on a beanbag chair, a video controller in his hands, shooting and blowing things up with quick fingers.

"Hey," Pedro and I say at the same time. Like we practiced or something.

The game freezes on the screen and Jeremy turns to us.

"Hey, you guys are early. Let me finish this level."

He goes back to his game. Pedro and I sit on the bed and check out the room. It's just like I'd have my room if I could have my own. A sweet Spiderman alarm clock shows the exact time. Two Kobe posters hang on the wall. On the dresser, beside three baseball trophies, are tons of Marvel Comic super heroes.

"Wow," Pedro says.

Jeremy, leaning forward now, is very much into the game. Beneath the console is a DVD player and on both sides, in tall stacks, movies and games.

"I'd never leave this room," I tell Pedro.

Then we get up to follow Jeremy out back where tables and chairs are set up on the grass. Soda bottles of different colors, too many to count, stand on a table across the green yard. We run towards it, Pedro and I, and both grab for orange. I fill my cup to the top and then down it so fast that I have to stop in mid-chug to burp.

Soon the yard is filling up with white kids I'm meeting for the first time. These kids brought presents, brought their moms, too.

Although they're nice and all, they make me feel uncomfortable. It's their clothes. Nobody has a strawberry Kool-Aid stain on their T-shirt or a rip on the bottom of their shorts, like Pedro. My own outfit is a little better because I made sure to wear my least ugly clothes, but I can't do a thing about the two holes on the tip of my right sneaker, the size of quarters. These kids all got new clothes, like it was all their

birthdays yesterday.

Pedro says, "Jeremy and Ronnie look different without their basketball uniforms on."

A friendly kid with a tucked-in T-shirt gets us all playing dodgeball. More kids show up and join in until there are about twenty of us running around, screaming like a bunch of crazies.

Then I spot Megan. I spot her as she opens the sliding glass door to bring out a stack of plastic cups. She got her long brown hair in a pony-tail that flaps as she jogs over to her mother. It slows my run and that's when the girl with braces pelts me with the red ball. I'm out. By an actual girl.

I watch Megan helping her mother set up a table. She makes a neat stack of napkins, no overlap, just like the front-row girls do with the homework when we turn it in, before handing it over to the teacher. Thumpy heartbeats or not, I'm going to talk to her.

When the pizzas arrive everybody stops playing. I sit with Pedro at one of the only tables that aren't full. Megan and her friend with the glasses sit there, too, across from me and three kids down.

When some woman announces that soon they'll be singing "Happy Birthday" Ronnie asks if somebody wants to go quickly to his house, where he forgot the present.

I'm getting nervous about talking to Megan so I almost speak up.

Pedro says, "How far away do you live?"

"Down the street. Don't worry, we won't miss the cake."

They take off.

The friend with the glasses gets up and takes her cup to the soda table. I'm alone with Megan now. My heart thumps are out of control and I'm trying not to look at her. Like an idiot I take imaginary sips from my empty cup. I do it every time she looks my way. The cup is transparent.

I'm about to use the line I've decided on—"What's your favorite TV show?"—but then I think of something even better.

"Do you...ummm...ever...ummm...climb that tree?"

"What?"

It comes out perfect the second time I ask.

"No," she says.

I don't know what else to say. I can ask her what I have planned, but suddenly I can't remember my line. I'm panicking.

"Jeremy climbs it," she says. "But it's too high for me."

"I can climb it," I say.

And then, partly because I don't know what else to say, and partly because I'm a better doer than talker, I get up.

"Check this out."

I go over to the tree and begin. I put my foot as high on the trunk as I can and

boost myself up to the first branch. As I hang onto the branch with both hands I try to wrap my legs around it. I pull with my arms and lift my legs. The idea is to lock my legs around the branch, roll myself onto it and keep climbing. But my shoes keep scraping against the trunk and I'm left dangling there.

When the kids start laughing, I realize what has happened. I land on the grass and look down at my right shoe. It's ripped. The holes in it have opened up, have separated much of the top and bottom part. I wiggle my toes and the top of my shoe ripples.

Everyone's laughing, and although Megan is far away, still back at the table, I can see her smiling and think I hear her laughing the loudest.

I say, "Damn shit."

"Watch your language," says someone's mother.

"Sorry."

"Ghetto sandals!" some blonde kid shouts, and everybody laughs more. I want to punch that kid, but there are adults all over the place.

Then Jeremy's mom saves the day by shouting, "Let's sing happy birthday!"

I walk carefully to the cake table. I don't want to rip the entire sneaker off my foot.

Pedro shows up in the cluster of kids just as the song ends and everybody is clapping.

"I'm here," Pedro says, which makes me feel a little better.

He pokes me on the shoulder and leans in, like he's going to tell me a secret. "Ronnie is richer than Jeremy."

"No way."

"He's got like twice as many video games and his house has two floors."

"Nice."

"Yeah. And the stairs are inside."

We walk to where Jeremy's mother is giving out cake on tiny paper plates.

Pedro asks, "Why are you walking weird?"

"Skiing accident. I broke my leg."

As Jeremy's mom hands me a little paper plate of cake the blonde kid says, "Hey, you could be a ventriloquist. Put some fake eyes on top of your broken shoe and do a show. You could be the talking-shoe guy."

"Hey, that's not funny," Jeremy's mom says.

But these kids think it's hilarious. Especially Megan who laughs so hard her eyes shut. I hate her more than the kid who told the joke. I feel my fist tighten. I want to punch the kid so bad.

I say, "You could be the kiss-my-ass guy."

"Hey!" Jeremy's mom says. "We don't use that kind of language here!"

"Sorry," I say. And I really am sorry. I don't mean to cuss. It just comes out.

Pedro and I sit alone at a table.

After a few bites of cake he says, "Don't worry about her."

"I won't."

Suddenly I realize that he's not talking about Jeremy's mom. He's talking about Megan.

"We can leave if you want," he says.

I know he's having fun, that he doesn't want to leave but he will, because of me. For the first time ever he becomes more than my big-mouth cousin from a few doors down. It's the closest I've come to feeling love for a guy.

I hear some laughing behind me. I turn. It's the blonde kid, who has just said something else that is cracking everybody up. He looks straight at me, a big grin on his face.

I know I can't do it. I know where I am. This isn't a basketball court, this isn't Palm Apartments. This is a happy yard with colorful balloons tied to the ends of tables and nicely dressed kids and, more importantly, moms are all over the place.

I try ignoring him until I hear even bigger laughs. The blonde kid turns to me, makes a sad face, rubs his fists over his eyes. It's the crybaby taunt from years ago.

"Hey, ghetto shoes," he says. "Are you going to cry?"

I wonder if I should do it. I look around and see three moms nearby. It takes everything I got to control myself, to not get up from where I'm sitting. I look at Pedro.

"Go ahead, man," he says.

So I walk over and punch the kid right in the jaw.

We go for a long bike ride, Pedro and I, and then take a short break and lie down on the grass at Delaney Park. Pedro gets up after a while and does an impression of the blonde kid. He jerks his head back like he just got punched in the jaw and then holds his face, whining a bit. Then the whine becomes crying and he stumbles away to find his mother.

It's so perfect that I can't stop laughing.

"Come on," Pedro says. "Let's go watch the game."

By the time we roll into our neighborhood it's getting dark. The street lights give the dusty gray buildings an orangey glow. At night our apartments almost look nice.

We lock our bikes in front of Pedro's apartment and walk in. We collapse on the sofa.

The remote hasn't worked for months. Pedro sticks a hand down between his feet, underneath the sofa, and pulls out an old broomstick. He leans forward a bit, holds the stick over the coffee table and, with the far end of it, presses it to the TV's power button.

"Ghetto remote," he says after a while. He says it because I didn't say it, even though it's my turn to make fun of him. But I don't want to use the word "ghetto." Not anymore.

About fifteen minutes later the Lakers are ahead by a few points but still I show no excitement. I sit quietly looking towards the TV but really watching the

afternoon replay in my head. Even when Kobe scores three times back to back I stay quiet.

Eventually Pedro says, “What’s wrong with you?”

I open my mouth to say, “Nothing” but then I decide to tell him. I mean, it’s already been a weird day—so what if it gets weirder?

I say, “I’m feeling sad, I guess.”

One of Pedro’s eyebrows goes up. When it comes down he asks, “Why?”

“I was just thinking that maybe Jeremy and Ronnie aren’t rich.”

A commercial comes on and Pedro turns the volume all the way down with the broomstick remote.

“What do you mean?” he says.

“They’re normal kids.”

“Normal kids,” he repeats, and his face goes into thinking mode—narrow eyes and a slow nod.

“They’re normal,” I say. “We’re just super poor.”

“I guess we are.”

We don’t say a thing for a good ten seconds.

“This sucks bad,” he says.

“I know.”

He lets out a sigh. A gigantic one.

“Do girls in junior high go out with poor boys?”

I shrug. “I don’t think so.”

We think some more about it until Pedro leans forward in his seat. “What are we going to do?”

An entire beer commercial of girls in a swimming pool passes before I come up with something.

“Maybe we can find some way to make money and buy nice clothes so at least we don’t look poor.”

“I guess.”

“It’s just that I don’t want kids to laugh.”

“I understand,” he says.

I like that. They instantly become my two favorite words.

# **1977.**

*Sean M Whelan*

1977.

These things I know.

Elvis died.

The Atari 2600 game system was born and changed everything.

US Park Ranger Roy Sullivan was struck by lightning for the seventh time and entered the Guinness Book of World Records.

Star Wars opened in cinemas across the world.

Fleetwood Mac's Rumours album was released.

And you and I broke up standing in the gaping mouth of Luna Park in a silent arc of frozen laughter.

All of these things are true and back then I learnt them without the internet.

Guitars make good pets.

We took them for walks along The Esplanade anytime we could.

Why?

Because we were made of rock and roll and everybody needed to know it.

You said the salt air invested the strings with a secret sadness  
of places they'd never been to.

On a clear day, you could hear a heart breaking in California.

The sound,

so glad to reach land again.

It pushed impatiently

across the beach,

over the sea baths,

up the manicured slope,

past the clock

into Alfred Square

(our occasional lair)

and straight over the frets of your machine that killed fascists.

One day you handed me a newspaper clipping with a photo of a brawny man in a park ranger's outfit who looked a lot like Gene Hackman.

This was the story of Roy Sullivan.

He was struck by lightning seven times between 1942 and 1977. Each time injured severely enough to be hospitalised. The second strike knocked him unconscious and completely burnt off his eyelashes, eyebrows and most of his hair. His uncontrolled truck stopped just short of a cliff's edge.

He began carrying a can of water with him all the time, just in case.

Whenever the sky would go dark, if somebody was in his company, they suddenly made excuses about having to be someplace else. But he knew the reason they were leaving. He always knew.

Whenever rainclouds would sweep over Port Phillip Bay we would wonder where Roy Sullivan was right at that moment. The newspaper article said he became so fearful in storms that he would stop his car and lie down as flat as he could on the floor until it passed.

We talked about Roy Sullivan a lot that year.

That, and Fleetwood Mac, and Star Wars.

We watched Star Wars four times in four weeks and listened to Rumours every night of every week.

We pashed in every shadow in St Kilda but that's where it ended.

One night at Luna Park I thought I had reached second base on the Ghost Train, but it turned out to be your knee.

Sexual frustration reigned supreme.

The airbrushed sex fantasies of Princess Leia and Stevie Nicks became so intermingled that I couldn't tell them apart anymore. At night I dreamt of rescuing Princess Nicks from a tambourine shaped death star.

Those sunburst afternoons that bled into night.

Palm trees became light sabres

and I wrote our rock and roll history across the sand.

Every night the bay slurped up our love stories

grew fat on adoration

and developed a shiny pink glow.

The next afternoon, I'd write it all again.

Every day a different movie montage.

Stormtroopers on guitar.

Chewbacca on drums.

If the pier didn't have a full stop at the end of it  
we would have kept walking all the way to Williamstown.

Our heads were so far from our feet  
and our guts floated somewhere in the middle,  
in spite of the fear  
of love fleeing the scene,  
or lightning giving up on Roy Sullivan  
and coming for us.

To this day the bay coughs up our love story  
back onto the shores every night.  
Sometimes I walk through it  
and think about you and Stevie and the Princess.  
And I watch every promise we ever made  
and every kiss we ever gave  
swirl and eddy  
around my feet.

# **Boxhead**

*Connor O'Brien*

IT'S FUNNY HOW YOU TOOK YOUR CLOTHES OFF so quickly, all things considered. "Take it off, take it off, take it off, take it off," I'd say. And you'd hand me your stockings and your shirt, your bra, your panties – even though you knew these weren't the garments I wanted shed. You know what the word 'panties' reminds me of? A small dog in the summertime, head flopped out a car window, tongue out, slurping. And the mother in the front seat would say to the father, "Looks like schnooky-chops has a case of the panties," and everybody else in the car would say, "Cute!"

I sense I'm getting sidetracked.

We were in your apartment, on the living room floor, because there were no cushions left to lean on. Nor a sofa, nor a bed. Your house was empty, like you were moving someplace new. I love the look of bare houses, which is weird, because mine is so full I can see neither wall nor floor, and sometimes not even the ceilings.

And you were naked, except for that one thing, and I was fully clothed, and I thought, "We look like opposites."

And you said, "Tell me how we met," even though we were still strangers in a sense, and your voice reverberated, as per usual.

I normally start my stories with "One day," because every story begins one day, after all, unless it begins at night, so it seems show-offy to start out any other way.

So, one day, I signed up for the classifieds. And on that day, I thought about something, which was that everybody is either a buyer or a seller. And if you're a buyer, you want to fill your life up with junk and clutter, and if you're a seller, you see the objects in your possession as marking out the shape of a history you badly want to forget.

When I signed up for the online classifieds, I chose the name 'whitechristmas601', because I was always thinking about snowflakes in December, alongside six hundred others. I've heard it said that names are just glorified table numbers, but I think they can say a lot about a person. You were 'like\_tomorrow', which I found fascinating. How can something be like tomorrow when you never know what tomorrow's going to be? Or was it a command? Were you telling me to stop being anxious about all the things I couldn't see, that lay sequestered on the other side of sleep?

So I browsed the classifieds, looking for pictures of items I thought might

mean something. Objects that were scuffed, that carried the marks of use. Dolls with missing hair, chipped tumblers, bed sheets with stains.

When I came upon the tiny rocking horse you had up for sale, I noticed dirt on the cradle, peeling paint on the mane. In the photograph, you held the toy, and your hands were the loveliest I'd ever seen. Before bidding on the horse, I printed out the picture and tacked it up, right above my bureau. My bid was generous, well above asking, and the horse arrived in the post the next Thursday, along with a receipt rendered in shaky italic script. I imagined your hand gripping the pencil, each word scraping onto the page, then you folding the paper in half and slipping it into the parcel. When I brought it up to my nose, the paper smelt like a pine forest sleeping under snow.

The toy horse had wide eyes and a hysterical smile, and I wondered what could lead a person to want to rid themselves of anything so manically, forcefully cheerful. Perhaps the toy was the last-ditch offering of a lover spurned, or the ancient plaything of a once-young parent just recently turned to ash. Perhaps a hard fall from a clumsy pony resulted in a sudden and dire aversion to all things equine. Or perhaps you recognised that one part of growing up – the heartbreak part – involves the construction of an unscaleable wall securing the now from then. Every time I saw the horse, a new history would emerge.

I became one of those people: a classifieds fiend. My plan was to construct a past out of detritus. My biography would read as a collage of collected lives.

The first time we corresponded, it was for me to tell you “AAAA++++! Fast postage, well packaged, will buy again.” And so I did. Every week, your hands would offer up some new sliver of a past you no longer wanted to save. And I'd bid, but only after printing out the photos first. Much later, you'd ask about those yellow constellations of sticky pock-marks on my wall. They were the last traces of those pictures: those glimpses of thumb, and on the luckier weeks, those glorious inches of forearm. I came to know you by your cuticles. I could've picked your fingertips out of a line-up.

Perhaps I was lonely, in the sense of ‘not having anybody to talk to’. You'll find that thirty year-old men who bid on rocking horses and click-pens and broken light-up yo-yos often are. But there's a difference between loneliness and sadness. My life was empty in some ways, and full in others. I smiled, even with nobody watching.

My house filled slowly with the essence of you. As you shed your past in manufactured pieces, they'd turn up on my mantel, or in the den beside the smaller television. You could have sent a dump-truck around my place and unloaded, and we both could have saved – I on shipping, you on masking tape and bubble wrap, and those tiny off-white envelopes.

Beyond those beautiful hands, here's what grabbed me: you were an

unsystematic seller. One week it would be an ornate silver mustard spoon, the next a flaking vinyl copy of ‘Abbey Road’ signed by four mop-topped Vegas impersonators, or a pair of pea green heels, worn barely if at all. Were you the kind of girl who went to parties, or the kind who kept her cutlery on display? I drew a Venn diagram, slowly, with different coloured markers, placing ‘owners of antique gold fob watches’ in one circle and ‘owners of turtle-shaped sequined decorative pillows’ in another – the rings were so far apart one only barely grazed the other, but where they did, I could make out the shape of you. Just as I began to wonder how you came to be in possession of a glossy lock of Stevie Nicks’ hair, you began to wonder how I came to be in the possession of such a tidy income that I could bid and bid and bid on everything you had to offer.

There was a game to it. The more I bought, the more you asked. Would I pay the \$400 reserve for a framed, but unsigned, photograph of a Jolene-era Dolly Parton? \$683 for a mud-flecked Disneyland cap with floppy little mouse ears? It was a stretch, we both knew, but why not? You go so far, and then you keep on going.

When you started placing ads for individual, run-of-the-mill paperclips, I knew things were nearly through, and truth be told, I was half grateful: my drawers were filling, and I was on the verge of spring cleaning, sending pieces of you off to landfill.

You placed a blank notebook up in the auction space, and for several hours, I sat, tapping ‘Bid’, watching the price bud and blossom. The fact that I was in competition for a piece of you gave me a strange jolt of energy, as though I were bar-fighting for your affections. Was the anonymous coward – that mad-for-it other bidder – a former lover? It doesn’t matter now, of course, but back then, it did. Thirty-three bids and the price of the notebook had spiralled to a thousand dollars. Your description discouraged such ridiculousness: “Just an unlined notebook. Nothing special. From Target, I think. Maybe Walgreens.” I wasn’t worried. I had deep pockets. What made it tricky to breathe was that there was somebody between us.

The notebook arrived, express. You didn’t charge me for postage, which was nice and unusual. Then again, cross-town postage was \$4.50, and your 96 unlined pages, bound in cheap mock-leather, cost me well over ninety thousand dollars.

When I dialled the number printed neatly on the first page of the notebook, you picked up on the third ring and I stood in my room, wheezing a mist of butterflies straight down the wires. “I’m playing with your horsie,” I said in the deep and booming baritone of a much larger man. It was meant to come out differently. Really, it was. You hung up the receiver.

It took me four weeks to call again. This time, I held the handset up to my computer speaker and used text-to-speech to speak without scaring you. The

words I wanted to say came out of the fractured metallic larynx of a young female robot. You asked why I couldn't talk to you directly. I typed, "Guess I'm a little bit nervous" into the computer, selected the text with my cursor, and clicked 'Read'. You called me Stephanie Hawking. I typed, "Hahahahaha", selected the text with my cursor, clicked 'Read' again.

You spoke slowly and warily, and probably out of a sense of obligation. After all, I'd basically paid for your house. Eventually I turned off the computer and put my mouth close to the receiver. "Hello," I said quietly, and this time in my own voice, which you said sounded gentle and warm, like the last embers of a fire. "This is the first real conversation I've had in months," I admitted, and you said that was a shame and I could tell you meant it. Then we began to tell each other everything, except all the things we really wanted to hear. I didn't know whether you were married or looking, but I did know that your beagle always shat in the lounge room. You spoke of your brother and your sister, your mother and your father, your grandparents and your stillborn niece, which was all fine and good, except that, in your reluctance to answer even the vaguest questions about your own situation, you became a wholly invisible presence at the centre of your own existence. Did you have a job? Did you dance? Did you love anybody that didn't love you back? You filled everything else in so completely that the gaps took on a well-defined shape, and as the conversation progressed, you came to construct magnificent bridges, shuttling us from one thing to another across the blank expanse of The Things She Will Not Say. It was as though you were a world half underwater.

Your telephone shuttled your voice out as a string of echoes. I always thought it was a bad connection.

The first time you rejected me, it was reasonable, and the fifth time you refused to see me, it was still cute, in a way. I was living in a house filled with your old records and chairs and books and spoons, and your bank account was heavy with my money, and yet you were faceless to me, and I to you. If I'd had anybody to talk to, maybe I would have laughed about it.

I thought I understood why you didn't want to meet – there's only a certain violence that can be done to a person over the telephone. After all, how could you know I wasn't one of the crazy ones?

You decided to meet when it became clear you were going to lose me. Over the telephone, your silences grew louder. We were always talking around things. I raised my voice and told you my right ear was buzzing from holding the receiver so close, day after day. "Switch ears," you said. Our conversations would end abruptly, with hanging questions answered in dial tones. Arguments on the telephone are clean-cut: a burst of anger, a disconnection, and two people are suddenly alone. I just wanted to touch your beautiful hands.

There are such a huge number of people in the world, nothing is difficult for me to believe. I've read about men burdened with lobster-claws and children blessed with the power of flight. I also know that everything comes as both a benediction and a curse – one of the flying children levitated in her sleep, hovered right out the window, and was taken into the engine of a Boeing 747. What I mean to say is that I wasn't entirely surprised when you opened the door and you were wearing a cardboard box over your head, with tiny cut-out slits for eyes.

We sat in your lounge room and drank beer. You would manoeuvre your bottle underneath the box and throw your head back to drink. The box was large enough for a microwave, or a stereo. It wobbled when you laughed.

Your apartment was a wash of off-white: cream carpet, cream walls. Nothing unusual, but what else can I say? In the absence of objects, a room is a floor, a ceiling, some walls and a door. Or maybe two doors, or three.

Your eye holes had been stabbed out with scissors, jagged and uneven (I considered for a moment the possibility that your eyes, too, sat crooked, but the way you walked into the wall on the way into the loungeroom suggested otherwise). The cardboard was corrugated for strength, which gave the enclosure the look of a tin shed grown brown with rust.

Near the kitchen door, an old red rotary phone disturbed the chromatic austerity of the place like a pool of fresh-spilled blood. Those paperclips, that notebook – you really did have nothing left.

I decided to wait for you to explain yourself to me, but you never did, not then. Your house smelt of cupcakes and packing tape, all sugar and adhesives. Did you take that box off to shower? To leave the house? Or was the box something new, worn in my presence only? I consoled myself by staring at your hands and stealing sneaking glances at your figure. If you don't mind me saying it, for a girl with a boxhead, you certainly didn't dress like a Mormon. When your beagle trotted in and shat on the carpet, I knew it was time to leave.

If I'd had anybody else to talk to, that probably would have been the end of it. "I'm familiar with dickheads, but boxheads are something else entirely," my companion might say, and I might laugh and splutter and take another sip of too-sweet coffee. But I had nobody else, and so sat in my bedroom, surrounded by your collection of rare Trolls and Parker pens and back-issue magazines, and I wondered. The box held promise. If you don't mind me saying it, your face was Schrödinger's cat. You could have had rainbow eyes and hair like silk, or sandpaper cheeks and a mouth of chipped teeth. With the box, you had it all, and none of it. Reality is the sworn enemy of possibility.

When we met again, you opened your door and still had that goddamned box on your shoulders. I almost expected worse: maybe your head stuck in a gigantic tuna can. Still. I may or may not have started out by explaining, in garbles, that,

while I wasn't vain, and didn't place huge import on appearances, when a person walks around with a large cardboard box on their shoulders, it becomes a cause for concern.

You spoke in echoes, and explained everything in halves. Your life had become sprawled out and unwieldy, so much so that you weren't sure you knew where it began and where it ended. The world was too big – bigger than it had any right to be. You placed a box on your head and it all went away: the world reduced to thirty dark centimetres in front of your eyes, and thirty behind your nape and beside your ears. It felt like an elegant solution to a problem of ridiculous complexity.

Then, I suppose you could say you managed to shock me again, because you moved one hand up and into the box and came out with something tinier than tiny. You held this thing up to me and I could see that you were holding the same toy rocking-horse I now had sitting on my windowsill, only several dozen times smaller. The paint chips were all there, the dirt, and the dust. You handed the horse to me, and I sat it on my palm and pushed its tail with my pinkie. It rocked backwards and forward, and when it stopped rocking, I pushed it again.

I recognised the fruitlessness of asking questions.

Over the next hour, you removed item after item from the box on your head, each one crafted to scale: a leather sofa the length of my middle finger, a decorative watermelon the size of a grape, and a number of hardcover classics which, when stacked carefully on the floor, towered precariously to your lower ankle. When you held a clapper lamp in front of me, I clapped and your hand was showered in feeble orange light. From your matchbox boombox, Mick Jagger whispered "Gimme Shelter".

I couldn't see your face, but I could tell you were smiling.

Like I said, it's funny how you took your clothes off so quickly, all things considered. You lay on your back, naked except for your boxhead, and I lay on my back, fully clothed – except for my head, which was exposed.

When the story was all done, you stood up and walked to the kitchen. You had the gait of a woman full of vigour and certainty. I wondered what you saw, how it felt to live with your head jammed inside a makeshift dollhouse.

"It needs windows," I shouted, in my voice of a dying fire.

"It needs a roof."

And you came back with board and a scalpel, paintbrushes and a palette.

"I can't paint the outside," you said. "It's too tricky. I'd have to take it off to do it properly."

And so we both sat up and leaned against the wall of your house, and I mixed up the paints to form a thick white base, which I applied evenly to the outside of the cardboard. When I was finished, I washed the palette in your laundry sink

and waited for the primer to dry.

"Everything that was once mine, it's up here," you said, pointing to the house on your shoulders. "Only smaller. Obviously."

"Obviously."

"Smaller things are easier to manage."

With the primer still wet to the touch, we fashioned a gently sloping roof by folding the board in half. I began cutting straws in half lengthwise, then used superglue to affix them to the edges of the board.

"Gutters and pipes," I explained. "In case it rains."

By the end, your head was a red-brick cottage. When I sliced into the front to fashion a wooden door, I was afraid I'd stab your lips with the scalpel, but I did it gently, and I didn't. When I pushed open the door, you grinned. I wanted to jam my head up against your front porch and stick my tongue right through the doorway.

"I think bay windows could be the way to go," I said. I let the scalpel slice neatly round the crude scissor lacerations you'd made in front of your pupils, and the light flooded in.



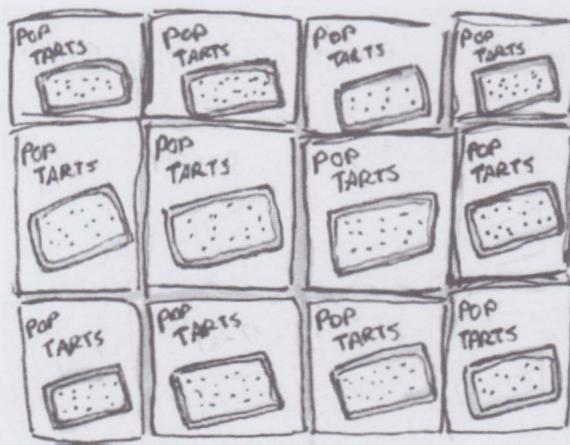
SITUATIONS IN WHICH  
WILD HORSES COULD, IN  
FACT, DRAG ME AWAY

BY MICHAEL BAYLIS

SITUATION #257

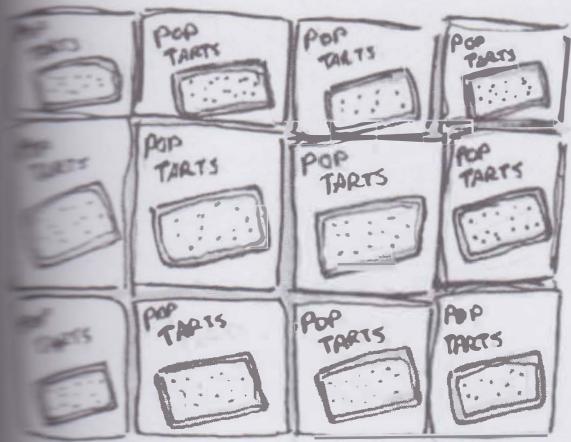
WILD HORSES ARE BABYSITTING  
ME AS A CHILD AND NEED  
SOMETHING FROM THE  
SUPERMARKET





PSST! KID!  
HEY, KID!





IF YOU BUY ME,  
EVERYTHING WONDERFUL  
WILL HAPPEN!

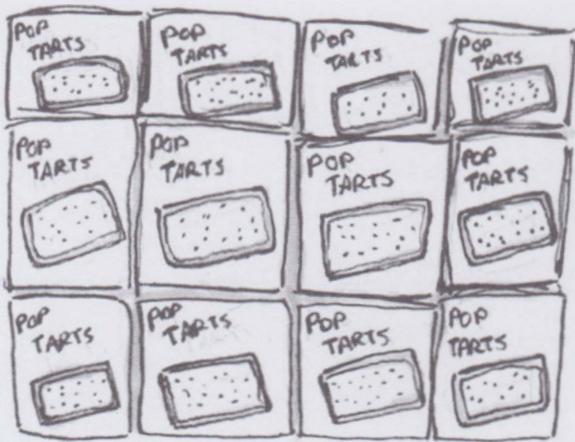
YOU'LL GET A NINJA  
TURTLE FOR CHRISTMAS!

DONATELLO?

SURE.

I'M LISTENING.





YOUR CLASSMATES  
WILL WANT TO HEAR  
EVERYTHING YOU HAVE  
TO SAY ABOUT THE  
TRICERATOPS.

ALSO, I CAN  
STOP YOUR PARENTS  
FROM GETTING  
DIVORCED.

AND YOUR MOUTH  
WILL TASTE LIKE  
RAD-BERRY!

I WANT THAT.

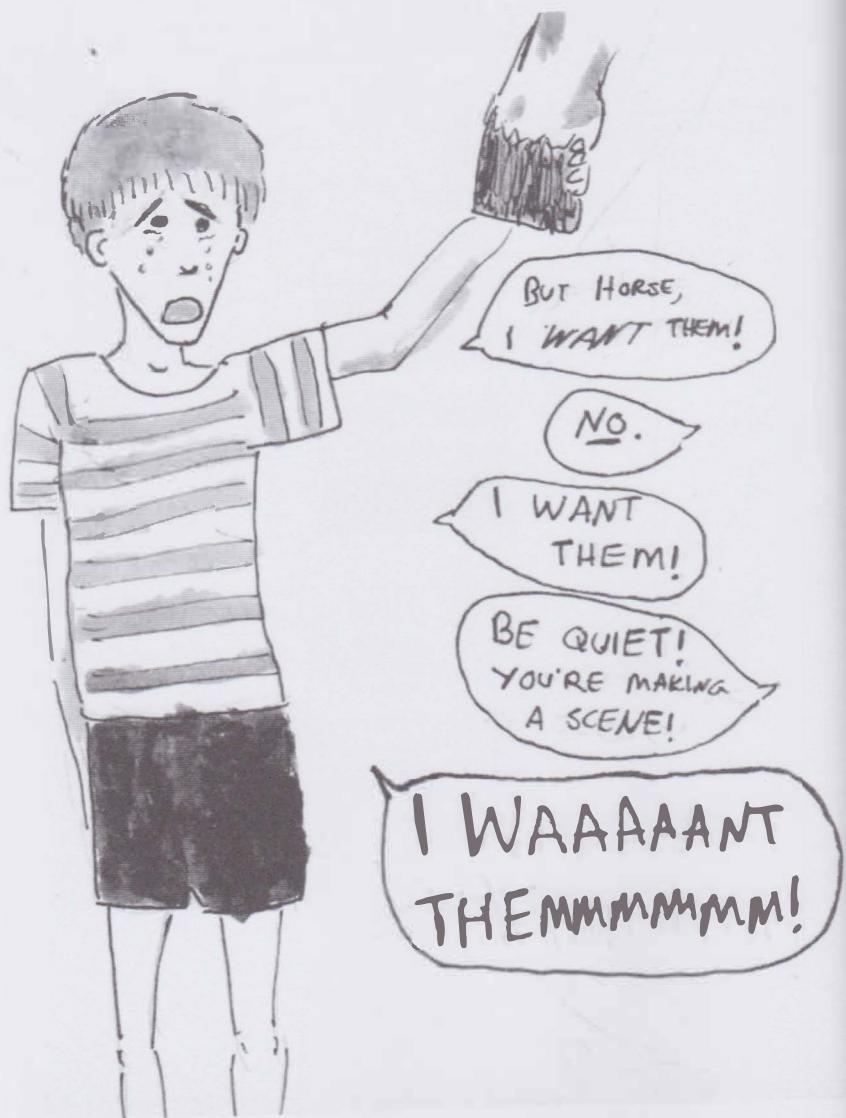


HORSE? CAN I  
HAVE POP TARTS?  
PLEASE? PLEASE  
PLEASE PLEASE  
PLEASE PLEASE?



UGH. NO.  
YOUR MOTHER  
WOULD KILL  
ME.







## Benny wins Powerball

*Erin Gough*

BENNY WINS POWERBALL, the entire jackpot.

It's a Saturday night. In Gran Donna's lounge room the heater's on and they're watching the draw on Channel Seven. All three of them crowded in front of the screen, eyeing the coloured balls as they whizz down the plastic tubes and plop into place.

There's Big Dave, shouting out the numbers as they land – twenty-three! thirty-seven! fifty-five! There's Jube, marking them off on each of their tickets with a texta. And there's Benny, gazing from his sister to his brother and back again; at the way the colours on the television – the blues, yellows and pinks – dance across their hopeful eyes like New Year's fireworks.

Out on the street, everything is closed and dark: the chicken shop, the surf shop, the bank. Even the pub, which overflows in January, is shut tonight for lack of customers. It's a dead little town, especially at this time of year, when the sea is cold and the colour of a five-cent piece. But the sky is clear and the stars are out, thousands of them.

Not that Benny, or Big Dave, or even Jube who goes nuts for stars, who lives by her daily horoscope, would know it. It was hours ago that they drew Gran Donna's curtains across the window. Hauling the rings along the rod as her sherry glasses – round-middled and short-stemmed, just like Gran Donna – chattered on the sideboard; before settling down onto Gran Donna's couch, three in a row.

The stars are up there all the same, though, even if no one's looking: stars like diamonds, like winking eyes. Stars like the stars on the cover of Gran Donna's Star Wars Trilogy box set.

Gran Donna herself is not in the room. She hasn't joined them for the weekly draw since Big Dave decreed the front half of the house a no-smoking zone. No matter that it's her house – if he catches her in the lounge room he goes wild.

"Either quit your filthy habit or stay out," he'd bellowed the last time she'd stuck her head through the door, waving his fists at her.

So while the rest of them watch for their numbers, she sits in the kitchen sucking at her tobacco pipe and blowing smoke into the fireplace.

The Powerball music tings; it's the sound of coins falling onto other coins. "Sixty-five!" shouts Big Dave as the last ball tumbles into place. Jube lines up the tickets and runs her finger across them, her french-polished nail with its painted white moon whispering over the little squares of paper.

"Well?" Big Dave asks, leaning over her.

Jube furrows her brow, and double-checks the numbers on the television. Her

eyes widen. "I don't believe it," she says, and it comes out more like breath than words.

"What is it?" Big Dave bellows.

"It's Benny's."

All three of them stare at the ticket.

"Benny's?" says Big Dave, grabbing the slip of paper.

On the screen, the studio lights glare off the row of coloured balls. Big Dave stares hard at them, then down at the ticket, mouthing the numbers to himself. When he looks up, his eyes are as wide as his sister's.

Benny looks at Jube. He looks at Big Dave. Could the numbers really be his? He waits for the room, and the coloured ball growing large inside him, to burst.

But nothing bursts. For a drawn-out moment, nothing happens at all. Nobody screams out, or cheers; nobody says a word. The heater hisses. The sherry glasses, with their cut-crystal sides like Gran Donna's argyle jumper, gaze emptily. Only the television sings, and now that the draw is over, its song is about flat-bottomed tacos.

Then Big Dave clears his throat.

"Benny has never won a thing in his life," he says. "Not a raffle. Not a spelling bee. Not even a game of Connect Four."

"It's true. He's a born loser," says Jube, and the way she says it it's as if he's out of the room, not sitting next to her with a warm bit of his thigh against hers.

"He's actually unlucky," says Big Dave. "Remember the holiday we had at the snow? When Benny got hit by that avalanche, and broke both his legs?"

Jube and Big Dave laugh.

When they have stopped laughing, the room falls quiet again. Quieter than it did last week after nobody won.

Jube grabs Benny's hand and slaps the winning ticket into it like she's never been so disappointed with him in all her life. Like he's back in high school and she's his teacher, not his younger sister, and the ticket is a detention slip for failing his exams. Like the windfall, which was descending so quickly a moment ago, so heavily that the air's seams strained to hold it, hasn't landed in his hands at all but whistled through his parted fingers.

Benny takes the ticket off his palm. His skin stings from where Jube slapped it. He turns the ticket over, stares at the blank white square of paper. He turns it back and brings it up close, an inch from his nose, to read the single sentence written in tiny font beneath the numbers. He has never noticed it before, so faint and small are the letters.

You could be a winner, it says.

It's the biggest jackpot they've ever had! It's the biggest ever because no one has won it in years! It's the largest amount ever won in Australia! That no one else in the whole country has chosen the same numbers as Benny is amazing in itself; but for it to happen this week, when the amount is enormous, is the most improbable thing to

occur in the history of Powerball!

The media are quoting startling figures now that Benny's won. They're referencing the cost of vast infrastructure projects, and the GDP of smaller nations. As if the digits lined up like that – stretched out across the front page of the Telegraph – don't speak for themselves.

On The Morning Show they devote an entire segment to what Benny could buy with the money. They make up lists of expensive things in interesting combinations

–  
a Mercedes Roadster and a Boeing 747,  
a Vanuatu island retreat and a Collette Dinnigan wardrobe,  
a Hilton Hotel and a lifetime's subscription to the Women's Weekly  
– things that also happen to be products of the companies that sponsor The Morning Show.

On The Evening Show they ask callers to ring in with lists of inexpensive things that Benny could buy a whole lot of. The phone lines are engaged for three hours. Twenty-five million Paddle Pops, is one suggestion. One million, two hundred thousand squeegee mops. Seven million, five hundred thousand caramel-flavoured cappuccinos.

In an empty phone room, Big Dave is spraying disinfectant onto a cloth. He squirts the cloth and the liquid foams and bubbles. He slaps the cloth onto a table and the bubbles burst.

It's Monday. Big Dave always works in the phone room on a Monday. Every Monday, before the other staff arrive to take calls from dissatisfied customers, he wipes down the headsets. When he has finished with the headsets, he wipes down the touch pads on the phones. He's always happy to do it – more than happy, in fact, to contribute to the hygiene of the office, even though he is Floor Manager and arguably above menial tasks like cleaning.

But this Monday he feels differently.

The phone on the desk rings. Big Dave wrenches it from its cradle. "It's not even nine o'clock," he shouts into the receiver.

And hangs up.

It's unusual for Big Dave to act this way at work. Rarely is he rude to a customer. At the phone room he makes a special effort to be pleasant and congenial. It's his pleasantness and congeniality and all-round commitment to company values, in fact, that got him promoted to Floor Manager.

Today, however, he's sick of being a good employee. For the first time since he started managing the phone room he feels he should not be disinfecting headsets and touch pads. He should not be working at all. He should be rolling up the highway in a new Ferrari: a red one, with alloy wheels and leather seats the colour of milk.

Big Dave pours some more disinfectant onto the cloth. Its fumes, which don't

usually bother him, sting the back of his throat. The taste is metallic and sharp, like a coin: like the money he should have won, which is right now sitting in his brother's bank account.

Big Dave grits his teeth. He thinks about the millions of dollars, piled up in a safe somewhere under Benny's name. Towers of it, sitting in bundles in the moisture-free dark.

He pounds a fist against the table, and the row of headsets rattle like dice.

It's been two weeks since the draw and still Big Dave can't believe it – that his lousy brother, Benny, is now on the nation's rich list. Benny, who's never had a dollar to his name! Whose most prized possession is a stupid toy car, a model DeLorean like the one in Back to the Future! When it comes to money, Benny is the most thick-headed person he knows. It's no surprise that in two weeks of being a multi-millionaire he hasn't made a single withdrawal.

Big Dave has a few ideas about how he'd spend the jackpot. And a decent share of his brother's winnings is not, he doesn't think, too much to ask for. Not from someone whose backside he covered for four long years at high school.

How many balls did he break in the schoolyard for Benny? How much flack did he cop on behalf of his brother? Benny the loser, who sat on the wall reading dumb science fiction books while everyone else played cricket – it's no wonder the other kids picked on him. Benny the layabout, who's never had a steady job in his life.

It's simple, really. Big Dave has not worked this hard to progress in the world, to have his useless brother trump him like this.

Which is why last night he and Benny had a little talk.

Big Dave sighs moodily, and scrubs a glob of unidentifiable facial excrement off the plastic. He doesn't like what he had to say or do last night, not at all. But Benny can only blame himself.

Of course if they'd bought their tickets as a syndicate none of this would have been necessary. He had wanted to do a syndicate but Jube, the selfish cow, had said:

“If I win a thousand bucks there's no way in hell I'm splitting it with you.”

He bets that she regrets it now.

If only Benny would hurry up and do as he's told.

Big Dave wipes down the final phone and screws the lid back on the bottle of disinfectant, not caring that he's spilt some of it on a chair and that the whole room now smells like a hospital corridor. He could be trout fishing in New Zealand. He could be high-rolling in Vegas. He could be drinking champagne on a yacht bound for the Maldives, his hair blowing giddily in the breeze.

A chilly wind has blown in from the water. The Hills hoist creaks as Benny takes the last piece of clothing off the line: a pair of tracksuit pants with a hole in the left buttock. He folds the pants in half and places them with the rest of the clothes in the basket. Cradling it against his chest, he peers out over the shrubs at the back of the garden to the sea.

The beach is deserted except for two people at the southern end near the rocks. One of them is lying on a deck chair while the other one crouches nearby. They must be crazy, thinks Benny, to be out there today, with the promise of rain in the air and the sand hissing up in clouds. The sky is a misty blur, although he can just make out the moon's skeleton, so pale that it's almost transparent, like a mint that's been well and truly sucked on. Everything else is covered in haze. There's no clear way of telling where the sea finishes and the sky begins.

No horizon: it makes Benny think about the man from Powerball who gave him his cheque. He wore a suit and a tie covered in colourful, numbered spheres. "The world is your oyster," he'd said, slapping him between the shoulder blades as if he'd known him forever. "Nothing is beyond you now."

Benny lowers the washing basket. He remembers Big Dave in the hallway last night – the heavy press of his arm as he held him to the wall. It was enough to make him lose his breath. Only when he'd started wheezing had his brother let him go.

Benny blinks, and looks up at the sky again, but the sliver of moon has disappeared.

Gran Donna is in the lounge room, watching *The Empire Strikes Back*.

"Washing's in," says Benny.

He sits down beside her. She reaches across and squeezes his hand. Her skin is dry and soft like flour. When did her skin get like that, Benny wonders – dry and soft and sort of loose on her bones, so that it shifts against his skin like jelly? One day, he thinks – perhaps one day soon – she'll be gone, and he'll be left alone with Jube and Big Dave.

The thought is terrifying.

She releases his hand slowly and picks up her pipe, which she lights with a match.

Benny likes the smell of her pipe. He likes the cinnamon and aniseed waft of the smoke, the way it drifts in whirls and loses itself in the folds of the curtains. He likes, too, the quiet of the house when, like today, Jube and Big Dave are out. He likes the whole town in fact: its seasonal rhythms, the way the sea changes colour with the weather. He couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

He wonders where Jube is. Big Dave is probably at work. Jube should be at home studying for her exams, but Benny hasn't seen her since breakfast.

On the screen a shuttle explodes, shattering into a million pieces and rocking the Millennium Falcon. The soundtrack dips and soars.

"You know, er, this money I've won?" Benny asks Gran Donna when the scene is over. "Well, I've been thinking. What would you say to a world cruise?"

Gran Donna looks at him blankly, and turns back to the television.

"You don't like boats? What about a regular holiday, then? In a five-star hotel like the one we saw on *Getaway*?"

She reaches for the remote and presses a button with a floury finger.

The soundtrack music grows louder.

Benny covers his ears. The empty sherry glasses rattle on the sideboard. The television hums with volume.

"Is this the right angle?"

"A bit to the left."

"Here?"

"Kind of push your hips up like...mmm, yes, more that way."

"How about now?" asks Jube.

"Perfect," says the photographer from Gentleman's Eye Magazine, giving her a slow-lidded wink.

Jube balances carefully on both elbows. A metal bit from the deck chair is sticking into her leg. She ignores it. There are goose bumps on her arms and legs from the cold, and her thighs are beginning to shiver, but she tries not to think about how she'd prefer to be wearing her sloppy joe zipped up to her neck instead of the zebra-skin bikini she's actually wearing. A professional model, thinks Jube, would not be put off by close-to-zero temperatures.

The photo shoot at the beach was the photographer's idea. His name is George.

"We'll have the water as the back drop," he'd said when he arrived. "And you in the foreground on this chair. You said your star sign's Aquarius, right, sweetheart?"

"That's right."

"Then a water back drop is perfect."

"I'm pretty sure Aquarius is an air sign," Jube had said.

But George had ignored her. Instead he'd begun to hum the tune that he is singing now, as he shoots her with an extended lens from every angle.

"When the moon is in the seventh house," he sings, "and Jupiter aligns with Mars."

Jube sucks in her cheeks like she's seen the models do on Project Runway. George is clearly an ignorant, over-the-hill hippy as well as being not very attractive, she notes, holding in her stomach and clenching her thighs and bottom; but this is probably a good sign. It probably means he is good at taking photos, since why else would he have the job? As long as the photo is good and she looks thinner than in real life and they photoshop out the birthmark on her shoulder, she'll be satisfied.

They have already told her what the article will look like. They even gave her a mock-up of the page before getting her to sign a wad of papers at the Gentleman's Eye Magazine office. After she'd seen the mock-up, Jube had signed the papers immediately.

Millionaire's Sister: This Lady Luck plans to spoil you rotten, the heading read.

Underneath the heading was a blank space for her photograph, and underneath that there was a fake interview, which went like this:

Q. What do you plan to do with your share of the winnings?

A. Pamper the man of my dreams in my new hot tub overlooking the Pacific.

The way Jube figures it, the article is a kind of insurance policy. She can use it to

guilt Benny into handing over her piece of the pie if Big Dave's little talk doesn't work. She doubts it will be necessary, though. He's probably learnt his lesson from the last 'little talk' he and Big Dave had, when he borrowed Big Dave's car without permission. She remembers the funny way his face had looked afterwards: his nose all lop-sided, like a squashed pear.

"Can you straighten out your legs for me, darling?" says George.

Jube straightens out her legs. She doesn't care that the interview is fake. She wouldn't mind having a man of her dreams, or a hot tub to pamper him in. When she gets the money she might well buy a place with a hot tub. Then she could move out of Gran Donna's house. The television isn't even a flatscreen! And Gran Donna is old, and she has strange habits that are not acceptable in the modern age, have probably never been acceptable at any point in history.

"Is your grandma still alive?" Jube had asked her friend, Kylie, the other week.

"Dunno. I guess," Kylie had said.

"Does she smoke?"

"Could do."

"Cigarettes?"

"What else would she smoke?"

"Like maybe, a pipe?" Jube had ventured.

"Who ever heard of an old lady smoking a pipe?" Kylie had said, and she'd laughed so hard that she'd choked on her gum and Jube had had to do the Heimlich manoeuvre on her twice.

Jube looks in the direction of George's camera and presses her lips into a pout.

"That's right, sweetheart," says George. "More of that right there."

Once she gets the money she will definitely move out. She will live in a penthouse in the city. She'll get room service every day, and have her hair done twice a week. And she will not feel guilty, not for a second, because she deserves it. If she were to, for example, sell herself on eBay – not for sex, she would never do that, but for friendship, say – then the amount of money Benny has won is how much she would get. She is definitely good company. She is a cack – that's what all her friends tell her.

Jube adjusts her bikini top so that more of her breasts are showing. People would pay what Benny has won just to be around her. Not just the share that's owed to her, but all of it.

When *The Empire Strikes Back* is over, Gran Donna puts on *Return of the Jedi*. The theme song begins to gallop; Benny and Gran Donna lean forward in their seats.

*Return of the Jedi* is their favourite of the trilogy. It's the one in which Luke Skywalker fights Darth Vader; the one in which the Empire is finally destroyed forever. Their favourite scene is at the start of the movie, when Han Solo, who has been frozen in carbonite by Jabba the Hut, is rescued by an anonymous bounty hunter.

Gran Donna's favourite part is when the bounty hunter takes off the helmet and it's Princess Leia, shaking out her hair like someone in a shampoo commercial. Benny's favourite part is just before that, when she presses the button that releases Han Solo. The hard shell covering his face disintegrates. His arms, raised in protest, slacken. His frozen rage melts. He is free.

Outside it is now dark and has begun to rain heavily. Benny hears the front door open. Someone squelches up the hallway.

It's Jube. She sticks her head through the lounge room door.

"I'm soaked right through," she wails, and begins to sneeze. "Better not let Big Dave catch you in here with that pipe," she adds with a sniffle, looking sternly at Gran Donna.

An hour later the Rebels are being captured by Imperial Forces and Big Dave returns from work. At the sound of his footsteps, Benny's heart gets racy in his chest. He snatches the pipe from Gran Donna's mouth.

But it's too late.

"I can smell smoke!" Big Dave roars from the hallway.

His footsteps draw nearer. Benny squeezes his grandmother's arm. "You've got to tell me," he urges in a whisper.

Gran Donna looks at him silently, carefully, with her watery eyes.

"Whatever you want, that's what I'll spend the money on. I don't care what the others say."

She plucks her pipe from Benny's fingers and tucks it carefully into her dressing gown pocket.

"Anything, Gran. It doesn't matter. It's your decision."

But she will not answer him.

That night benny has a dream. He dreams that his body is light, weightless. He dreams of distance and endless quiet, of days as empty as balloons. He dreams of a place where not even the sound of his own voice can break the silence.

And it's just him there, in that soundless paradise; just him and Gran Donna. He wakes up with the sun on his face and an ache in his chest. And Benny knows what to do.

He is dismantling the Hills hoist when Big Dave comes outside. "What's going on out here?"

"I'm making room," says Benny.

"What for?"

"A delivery."

Big Dave shoves his big hands into his pockets and looks around the garden. The garden furniture has been stacked neatly underneath the kitchen window. The garden gnomes have been lined up along the back wall. The few shrubs that had been growing in the middle of the lawn have been pared back to ground level with

a hacksaw.

"It's something big, I take it," says Big Dave. "This delivery of yours."

"You could say that," says Benny.

Big Dave kicks at the lawn and a clump of grass flies up in the air and smacks into the laundry wall. He narrows his eyes at his brother. "You remember what we agreed, don't you? A third to me and a third to Jube?"

Benny nods without meeting his eye.

"Because if you've spent all the money..."

Benny hauls the clothes line from its pole and lays it down next to the stacked-up furniture. He digs around the pole with a spade and lifts it out of the ground.

"What are you two doing out here?" It's Jube. She and Gran Donna are standing on the back step - Jube sniffing in her sloppy joe, Gran Donna in her dressing gown, dipping her floury fingers into a pouch of tobacco.

"Benny's having something delivered, apparently," growls Big Dave.

Jube screws up her face, which is a blotchy red. "What is it? And how much did it cost?"

Benny taps the pole of the Hills hoist with the edge of the spade so that the dirt comes loose, and stacks it with the rest of the furniture. Dave and Jube watch every movement. Now the garden is an empty, grassy square.

Jube has an idea. "Is he getting a house, do you think?" she asks Big Dave.

"A house!" Big Dave's eyes glimmer dimly. "That could be it. How much are houses?"

Jube shrugs. "Depends on the house, I s'pose," she says sniffing. "What's that noise?"

They cock their heads to listen. It is a funny sort of noise, like the grumble of the winter sea, or the roar of a wookie. As they listen it gets louder, so loud that Jube plugs her ears with her fingers, and that's when they see the road train back into the driveway.

A man with a clipboard jumps down from the cabin and walks towards them.

"Delivery for Benjamin?" he asks, glancing at his clipboard.

"That's me," says Benny.

The man turns his head in the direction of the truck and nods.

Two men get out. They unlock the doors at the back and open them wide. They unlock the rivets that hold the side panels in place and fold the panels back. Sitting on the tray of the truck is a rocket ship. It is a pale grey, the colour of Gran Donna's pipe smoke. Each of its fins is painted with a single red racing stripe. One of the men shifts a gear stick in the cabin and the tray begins to jolt upwards. It slides out over the lawn and descends.

"Sign here please," says the man with the clipboard when the rocket ship is settled in the middle of the lawn.

Benny takes a pen from the man and signs the clipboard. The man hands over a package, which is small and rectangular and wrapped in brown paper. He walks

back to the road train and climbs into the cabin and pulls out of the driveway.

Big Dave stares at the rocket ship open-mouthed. "What in the devil?" he says, his face growing as red as his sister's.

"This is a joke," scoffs Jube, and blows her nose derisively on a handkerchief. "It's a fake. It's got to be. You can't just buy a rocket ship." Benny puts down the brown paper package and walks towards the rocket ship. The door beneath the left wing is open. He climbs inside, into a room that is comfortable and warm. He looks around, and a smile begins to play at the corners of his mouth.

The floor is carpeted a deep, plush red. Soothing music wafts from a set of speakers in the roof. A row of mahogany cabinets makes a crescent-shape beneath the window. It is nothing like the Millennium Falcon, he thinks; it is ten times better.

He hears a scrabbling at the door: Big Dave and Jube are climbing inside. They stand up, Jube coughing and wheezing, and take in the view. Big Dave begins to open the cabinets and drawers, one at a time. Each one he opens is stacked with something different: crisp white linen, bottles of water, gleaming saucepans, tins of food. "You've been planning quite a trip I see, Benny," he says through a clenched jaw.

As Jube gazes around, her brow darkens. "You've done it, haven't you? You've spent every single goddam —" She stops suddenly, and her eyes light up. "Ha!" she says triumphantly.

"What?" says Big Dave.

She smiles, at Big Dave first, then menacingly at Benny. "I was right. It is a fake. This thing's going nowhere. There are no controls!"

Big Dave scans the interior again. He opens and closes every cupboard and drawer that he hasn't already explored. He begins to grin. "Dimwit Benny," he gloats. "Thinks he bought a real rocket ship."

Jube and Big Dave begin to laugh. Clutching their stomachs, they laugh until tears streak their cheeks.

"A rocket ship?" wheezes Jube.

"Of all the things!" roars Big Dave.

Benny climbs quietly down onto the lawn and walks over to the package the delivery man handed him. Gran Donna is still standing there, stuffing tobacco into her pipe. Standing beside her, Benny picks the package up and peels the tape off. Carefully he unfolds the paper.

Inside it is a box. He opens the lid and pulls out its contents: a black plastic panel covered in buttons. He turns it around so he can read the labels on the buttons. With the tip of his index finger, he presses one.

He watches as the door of the rocket ship slides closed.

"Hey!" shouts Jube, but it's hard to hear her from behind the reinforced metal door. A clanging noise accompanies her shouts: Big Dave must be bashing his fists against the inner walls.

Benny presses another button, and the motor begins to roar. The rocket ship shudders. Flames flicker from the hole at its base. Slowly, it lifts off the ground.

Benny watches as it ascends into the hazy sky, quickly gaining speed. Up it goes past the roof, past the tallest trees, past the misty clouds. Up past the last migrating birds, past the jumbo jet flight path, past the moon that looks as small, from here, as the painted white moons on the tip of Jube's fingernails.

In the middle of the lawn, smoke drifts from the charred circle of grass.

When at last the rocket ship is a tiny speck, a morsel, an eyelash in the sky, Benny crouches and swings back his arm. He tosses the remote control out beyond the garden and towards the sea. He turns to face his grandmother with his knees still bent, his whole body shaped like an inverted question mark: the crescent of his legs and torso, the oval of his head.

"Well?" he asks her.

It has started to rain again. Fat droplets sizzle on the burning grass. Gran Donna looks at Benny. She strikes a match cupped in her floury palm. She lights her pipe. She sucks at it deeply, and says not a single word.

# **The Modified B Plan**

*Adam Ford*

We spliced genes from different species to create the ultimate killer.  
I'm not just being hysterical. I'm doing the best that I can.  
The bastards fly. People are dead. We're on the modified B plan.

You've got to get to the mainland and tell them what you know.  
The things I told you about are here and they've killed people.  
We spliced genes from different species to create the ultimate killer.

This is what I wanted to show you to convince you these things exist.  
Four canisters of piranha eggs sank but only three were found.  
The bastards fly. People are dead. We're on the modified B plan.

I've seen them. Like the flying fish you see in the bays around here.  
When they come back I want you to call me on channel six.  
We spliced genes from different species to create the ultimate killer.

It could live in all environments. I'm not supposed to be here.  
People on the island aren't qualified enough. I've seen them.  
The bastards fly. People are dead. We're on the modified B plan.

Tonight dinner is a gift from the sea. We've got to tell someone right now.  
What they are, where they come from and how long ago they arrived.  
We spliced genes from different species to create the ultimate killer.  
The bastards fly. People are dead. We're on the modified B plan.



# the DISCONNECTED MAN

Z.B.  
2011



NO ONE DOES.

# The Fish

*Sandra Bernotaite*

*Translated by Albina Strunga*

IT'S A WHITE WINTER, icy, crunchy underfoot, a yellow bus; it pulls into the black bus stop at five-fifty-five in the morning; streetlights fade in the sky; fifteen minutes ago mother woke me up, spread some cheese on white bread, poured caraway-seed tea into a tall cup with a broken handle, and walked me to the bus stop; exactly seven minutes of silence; then she'll walk back home and make another two sandwiches, both with smoked sausage, for father who's still asleep, and see him off to the factory, while she'll clean supermarket windows, floors and walls; the freezing winter has penetrated deep into my bones, my eyes are still asleep, my nose is cold, and the bus driver recognises me by now; i'm always the first passenger; he doesn't even come to a complete stop anymore, only slows down and opens the centre doors for me to jump in

my stop will be the one after the factory where the blind work, where the footpath is always cleared of snow and there are signs warning the rest of us, round, black yoko ono glasses; i hate my stop, every morning i dream of forgetting to get off and missing my stop, going on to the bus depot another three stops ahead; there the driver would look around and laugh, having seen me, and we would have a smoke, i'd wait until he'd glance at his watch and set off again, we'd do the whole route once more, a trip round shiauliai, i'd go back home and read a book

there's a large yard at the factory where i work, it's empty apart from the other women i work with, they take their time, behind me, we quietly nod hello, still half-asleep we drift forward, only to fall behind; even though it's already six-thirty, the time before dawn feels like an atomic winter

freshly caught fish smells of water and sea, fish don't actually taste salty, unsalted fish tastes good only when it's fresh, and fish that has long since been dead has been brought in from far away, frozen in blocks of ice, left to thaw on the ground, rats gnawed on it during the night; fish lies filleted, spread out and gutted, no intestines, no eggs, no roe, no scales, no heads; fresh fish is red, white fish has been bleached / i stick my finger into 30% hydrogen peroxide solution and my skin goes white within 2 seconds / rollmops; white fish is marinated in vinegar with spices and rolled around soft pieces of gherkin, rollmops are pierced with two small skewers, every fifth jar is weighed to check it's ± 5 g

i'm eighteen, i didn't get into university despite taking the specialist maths class, i put fish into jars, but the teacher i run into on the street says that the smart ones don't bash their head against a wall, idiots do, your place should be at university – my place is at the end of the conveyor belt, i process fish; my parents' wisdom – what'll you study kid, better off getting a job – i don't know what i want to do, but i do know what i'm not, and that i'm not from this factory, and not from this town; no one bothers to ask why i talk less and less, why i gasp for air; my scarf comes all the way down to my eyelashes, i have gills behind my ears; the women i work with don't know about the crooked haircut my mother gave me, she took a whole chunk out with scissors just above my neck, when i go to the theatre i use an eye pencil to colour in the white patch; i don't need to worry about running into people from school in this town, they're all in vilnius; the women i work with don't recognise me in the street, and i ignore them, some are the same age as i, the pikes

during the lunch break i don't go for a smoke with the others; one of the factory supervisors is my uncle, and he invites me for lunch in the supervisors' room where he pours 200 ml of a viscous liqueur, i have never drunk this much liqueur, maybe only during our graduation party / one guy dreamed of jumping off the roof, and another didn't love me, he was only playing around / the supervisors don't eat fish, but i like it and can smell it in my hair at night, i can't help dreaming about it; i eat and hear the supervisors talk about the pikes, and they all look over at me in pity / when i quietly say that i plan to be an actress, in the theatre, in film – some time, in another life, they smile

jesus had two fish //

a woman working at the conveyor belt has one son and has just discovered that there are two living inside her, and broke into tears, stuffing three rollmops into one jar, no need to weigh it as she can tell that its ± 5 g – why has god punished me, why is god so cruel – the young and the old, the fat and the thin ones tried to console her; even one girl that had completely lost her voice; then they talked about raising children, and one who was older said – i don't help my daughter raise her children and i don't care, because no one cared about me either – they are all alone, each one frozen in her own block of ice, unable to turn their heads, or move their eyes; the pregnant one cried and cried, and then admitted that she had once had an abortion; turns out god is a mathematician of sorts afterall: 1 child – 1 child + 2 children = 3

the men's flesh is as red as red snappers from the smoke-house, their eyes are white, and they ruminate on their fish slowly, only one of them is a real, living amphibian man; but he doesn't see me, to him, i'm just like all the other fish; i watch him as i write him a poem, i could draw his profile even if i were blind; i draw on brown wrapping paper; i am on the shore

the forewoman's husband goes on drinking binges at home and hits her, and now

she's crying into the work register, tears roll down her plump cheeks, i thought she was forty, but she's only twenty five, she has a little boy, her eyes are very blue, like a crystal clear winter sky

if you can, work at night – i too can work one night, though my uncle isn't happy about it, because i could just go home as per usual, so that my parents wouldn't think he was being hard on me; my uncle actually loves me more than he should; he has a low hanging stomach and doesn't get along well with women; some of those who stay behind for the night shift either start to laugh or to cry, straight after midnight; one wishes she could go home to be with her child; my uncle is deaf, like someone deep under the water; behind his back, but in front of me, the women call him impotent – looking down, my uncle can't see his willy over his stomach; funny or not; i always call him sir

my father rarely goes fishing these days, but he used to hang little fish out to dry strung up under the roof, our cat would sit underneath and sniff them; too salty for her, and for me; only real men with moustaches skin their dried, salted fish, while drinking it down with guberniya zhigulinis beer, which smells of fish even on its own; my father's father fished until his death, he used to fumble around a lot until the fish were strung up in the balcony of their apartment; he used to work at the factory for the blind; even though he wasn't completely blind; all he left his twins was a messy apartment with lots of dried, salted fish

i fished the whole night long; in the morning, the sky was as purple as a king's robe

the lithuanian fish factory rolls up fish for the dutch, a young dutch fisherman arrives and lays his white hands on the boxes of packaged fish; we all received new uniforms and our lipstick is brighter coloured; the forewoman tells me – smile and try to make the dutchman notice you – afterall, everyone's goal is to get married – you are the most attractive one – the dutchman is already married, but he's not past it, he would be a fine catch – that eel

the evening shift ends after the theatre performance, but i can lie to my uncle and tell him i have a fever and leave early; jump into bus number five which will take me to the theatre where i'll see a girl who was born deaf, dumb and blind, a little deep water fish, emitting electric sparks as she swims; i'll find myself an empty seat in the corner of the balcony so that the other people won't smell my fish odour as much, and i won't cry when i see the little fish on the stage silently feel her way about her underwater world that never sees the light

and when they complained that there were but two fish he said it would be enough for the crowd and asked for the two fish to be brought to him in a basket and he lifted the basket up to heaven and lowered it with many fish inside and took two more and lifted them up and multiplied them again / god only knows how to

multiply and divide / were the fish in the basket fully grown or was it just roe at first

i cut my finger, but just like the others, i didn't wrap it up or put a rubber cover on it, as then you can't feel the fish and won't be able to roll it up fast enough, and won't be able to pierce it, and won't be able to weigh it quickly, and all you'll think about is the fish and your finger, and the pain, but there's no time to think at the conveyor belt, only listen to music, listen to the pike monologues, never-ending, about nothing in particular, with expletives; from time to time they all turn towards me, means they're talking about me; or singing about me

the forewoman gives me a nudge – be the first to the fish, run – why – because you have to, that's the way things are around here, if you don't run, you'll get the worst fish, too small or too large, that'll be too fiddly or too big for the jar, you'll only have to go through them again and won't earn anything; day in day out, one fish after another; my mother fished out all my salary, i only managed to buy myself a walkman, so at home i turn nirvana's bleach up loud

the forewoman mixed a tub of fish with a tub of detergent, instead of marinade, then someone found the unused tub of marinade and realised what had happened; they poured away the detergent, washed the fish, and mixed it properly, with the marinade; had i done this, i would have been bleached and salted; never buy fish made in shiauliai

jesus, imagine the world without fish

world, imagine fish without jesus

fish, imagine jesus without the world

my street clothes stay with the inspector who sits in a small room all day, except when she has lunch with the supervisors, she's everyone's friend, she laughs and cries with all of us, and as we leave she turns a blind eye before she goes through our bags and pats down our sides; beyond the factory gates we are stopped by two men in black and taken to the other side of the street, into the five storey blind building, and in a dark apartment we're asked to show them what we've stolen; my handful of smoked fish that are too large to pass as sprats and too small for rollmops, a drop in the ocean; the inspectors mockingly suggest i do better next time, another one beside me on the conveyor belt got away with 2 kg of salmon stuffed into her bra

the japanese brought some raw red salmon and placed a guard beside every thief;

nevertheless, the fish swims out through the open doors of the factory by the boatload; the japanese know of the soviet motto, why buy if you can get it at work; the japanese / whale lovers / dig harpoons into our backs

sometimes i don't eat lunch, in the inspector's room i read richard gavelis' vilnius jazz, i watch and wonder as two citizens walk down pilies street, turned towards the wall, sideways, and they're not crazy, vilnius is crazy, and i'm already there

it's spring, black hole sun, kurt cobain's dead, and a bleached student in nirvana with the whites of his eyes buried deep into his beer hears my smile and the ripples of vilnius jazz, life's contours gradually take shape / i love those who don't love me, i love to love, and i don't care if they don't love me, but i don't yet know how much pain that will bring / punkrock

you can't stand in two boats at the same time; so jesus walked on water

one last time i allow myself to miss the blind stop, the fish stop, and continue to the bus depot with the driver, and wait 'til he has his smoke; he is young, balding, he has sly fox eyes, he chats to me and suggests i don't rush to the train station just yet, because next week he will take over the intercity routes, and says i could get a job as the conductor; and i don't say no; my parents would be pleased – acting's not a profession, they say – but their will has come to an end, just like winter

fish on the ice, ice floats out into the sea, drunken fishermen and women with white scarves, white uniforms, long boots, black aprons down to the ice at their feet, cigarettes between their teeth; fishermen never notice when they get too far from land, and when they do, it's too late to shout, to wave, to call for help; all's left is to sing and dance, if someone plays the accordion; the sun shines brightly, my eyes narrow, vodka would help, or sunglasses, sweden's on the other side, or maybe greenland; only the fish on the ice looks up at the sky with one unblinking – eye

# Razors

*Libbie Chellew*

I TELL YOU WHAT. Razor scooters have an ironic name. That's right, ironic. You pick up a Razor and the bit the kids stand on swings around and slices the back of your ankle. Ironic. Right?

Every now and again I used to stop and look at the Razor and wonder how that little swing can get that much momentum. It hurt so bad. I don't quite know, but I think it's got something to do with the weight of the back wheel pulling it around. But then I don't know why it swings around. Every time the front wheel is off the ground the back one swings around. I swear to God, every goddamned time I wheeled those scooters up to the school and lifted them over a curb or a bit of raised footpath, bam, I copped it again. One day I noticed a scab on my ankle. I thought, shit where did that come from? And then I knew. The Razors.

So every morning I would try and think of a reason for the kids not to ride their Razors to school so I didn't have to wheel them home. I could hardly ever think of one good enough for my five-year-old. One morning the seven-year-old hadn't finished her homework and it took ages. We had to drive to school. Fucking fantastic. But the fall out, the fall out. The five-year-old didn't speak to me all morning.

I said, 'I'll bring your scooters up to school this afternoon. You'll be riding them home. What's the problem?'

'Yeah, it's not a big deal,' the seven-year-old said right in her brother's face. Not a big deal. Where had she picked that up? She said it in an American accent too and that really gave me the shits.

'That's enough out of you. You fucking complain all the time, too,' I said.

We were in the car. I was parking up near the school. I worried, for a moment, if I was having a long-term effect on their emotional development. Then I just enjoyed the silence. They got out of the car and started walking down the footpath to the school. I got their bags out of the passenger side. I threw them on the grass.

'Ey,' I said loudly. They trudged, and I mean trudged, back up to the car. I felt guilty, but seriously, these kids had nothing to carry. Their bags were practically empty except for the strawberries my wife had cut up for them with their lunch. They should be able to carry their food, right? And strawberries. Not only should they be able to carry their bags but they should be happy to carry their bags. Those goddamned strawberries cost me, or my wife I guess, four-ninety a punnet. And they had them every other day. We try and cut down meal costs by cutting out meat three times a week and they still get bloody strawberries.

I walked them down the road to the crossing.

'No scooters today?' the crossing lady said.

Oh, for fuck's sake. I smiled at her but she was an old bag. And that comment did not help my cause at all. Did every one expect me to organise these goddamned Razors every day? The seven-year-old walked off without saying goodbye but honestly, I don't think that was because of the scooters. She was just generally rude and uninterested. That was okay with me. She was easier to handle that way. At his classroom I took the five-year-old's face into my hands.

'I'll see you this afternoon,' I said.

I walked out of the school. I felt so free that morning. No Razors to collect and walk back to our house. No bloodied ankles. I didn't have to look stupid wheeling two up the road while all the mothers got in their cars to go home. All mothers might I add. I seemed to be the only bloke. So much for the new age or whatever they say.

That whole day, though, I couldn't get over the idea that I had to bring the Razors to school that afternoon. Why should I? Isn't that reinforcing negative behaviour or something? Shouldn't I only bring the scooters if they're nice little polite kids who don't whinge? I wish. That would pretty much guarantee driving every day. In my dreams, my wildest dreams. I tell you what, you realise things are bleak when your one desire turns out to be driving eight hundred metres up the road twice a day rather than walking.

Anyway, my wife sorted it out. She's good at that. That's probably why the bank took her back when I lost my job. She's a problem solver. She's logical. She gives me the shits.

My wife made a new rule that all homework was to be done the night before so there was no disappointment in the morning. I tried to explain, without sounding like an arsehole, that I wished they would realise I didn't have to do any of the things that I did for them. Why was it so paralysing to think that I should do what I want, not what they want? It's a hard thing to explain that without sounding like an arsehole, so I gave up. Arseholes don't get laid.

I remember when we bought the Razors the year before last. Back when it was my wife at home with the kids. Things were better then. We had got them for the kids as Christmas presents. Julie had seen the Razors in a catalogue while we were at breakfast and silently passed it over the table to me. I nodded at her, smiling. The kids didn't notice. They just kept at their Weet Bix. It was good to be able to afford a bigger present for them, to surprise them.

We had left them with their Nan, and my wife and I had gone shopping. Christmas shopping didn't fuss me much. We didn't have much to buy and I got to get one of those tuna pastry things that I love from the food court. It had been good to spend some time with Julie, too. We just had lunch and relaxed and talked about what we should eat on Christmas day. We decided on prawns. It had been a good year. I'd gotten heaps of overtime in October and November, which set us up real well for Christmas. I was able to get new pistons for the Norton I was rebuilding in the shed too. Also, I got Julie this watch; it was gold and pretty heavy so it was

decent. I knew I'd done well and she didn't know it was coming. I had noticed when her last watch broke and just filed the idea away in the back of my head.

It was only the kids, each other and Julie's mum we had to buy for. Christmas was small since we'd moved to Perth, but it was good. That year the kids had made decorations that hung all around the kitchen and living area. We'd got a real tree, too, and stocked up on tinsel. I remember on Christmas morning it was really hot. We opened up the back door so we could hear the parrots in the gum. The sun was only just coming through the window and it was a red colour and it reflected off everything. We had bacon and eggs for brekky and the house smelt good. Julie loved her watch.

I saw her take that watch off and wash her face as I sat on the toilet. The lid was down; I was clipping my toenails. I didn't plan it, it just came out.

I said, 'Those scooters are driving me up the wall.'

'What?'

She was rubbing an old towel under her eyes, trying to get all the black off that her make-up left every time.

'The scooters. I fucking hate the scooters,' I said.

'It's good that they want to be on them and outside,' she said through the towel, raising her eyebrows to smile. I thought about that and then I said, 'Na, I'm over it.'

She sighed. Her face looked white but it was probably just the light. Her hand shook a little as she put the towel back. I looked up at her. Maybe I held eye contact too long, who knows?

'You're over it?' she said and pointed at my face. 'Fuck you.'

'Hey, hey,' I said and followed her back into our bedroom. She was standing next to the bed. She chewed her bottom lip a little and looked at me, her eyes wet.

'It was just about the scooters. I'm just trying to tell you how much I hate them. I mean look at this,' I showed her my ankle. She looked down at my ankle and away from me. She took a deep breath in and out. She shook her head and then got under the covers. I stood there for a moment with my foot still up on the end of the bed like an idiot. She closed her eyes so I went and turned the light off and got into bed too. She didn't move. I went to say something, but what was I going to say? The streetlight shone through a crack in the curtains and it was right on my face. It gave me the shits but I didn't roll over.

In the morning she wrote a note that said, 'Morning. Vegemite Sandwiches in freezer, strawberries in fridge and maybe muesli bars or dried apricots. Scooters fold up. Use lever. Defrost chops. Thanks, J.'

I could never figure it out.

I kept trying to think of reasons for the kids not to ride the Razors to school. Or otherwise I'd think of somewhere we'd need to go straight after school. I thought the best thing that would happen for me was winter. I was certain. It would be too cold, too wet. But my five-year-old doesn't deal in the currency of reason. I was meant to know that already, right? I got that look off my wife talking about it on the couch when the kids were in bed. I'd told her how the five-year-old had stopped

talking to me that morning. He would not look at me and had completely ignored me because they couldn't ride their Razors to school.

'It was raining,' I said with my palms out. I couldn't believe it. I thought, how did our five-year-old get so dumb? What had my wife done before I got this gig? She'd given them answers that meant my five-year-old could not understand that I didn't control the rain. Then I started to think maybe the kids should have been going to church, to Sunday School, like my parents said. Maybe then I could tell him it was God. God controlled the bloody rain. Or maybe next time I should point out Livinia Nixon on the television and blame her. My five-year-old, who the week before had cried because I was leaving him at school, had completely ignored me and lined up for class.

'He's five,' my wife said like I didn't know, and then gave me that look.

'It was raining,' I said, as if she hadn't heard.

'He doesn't have the tools to deal with that kind of disappointment. He doesn't understand.' She looked annoyed then, and I hoped it was not about me but our five-year-old.

'Right,' I said, thinking he'd better get the tools to cope.

'You have to ask him, what can we do to make it better for you? Or what can we do instead to make it a fun morning?'

I looked at my wife. I thought, what could you do to make this better for me? What can you do to make it a fun night?

'Maybe I should quit the bank,' she said, but she didn't mean it. I didn't know that then.

'Yeah,' I said firmly. 'Either that or the scooters go.'

It was simple, I thought.

# The Grieving Breadbird

*Joan Kerr*

*LIVES IN UNINHABITED PLACES: the centre of a desert, the marshy swamps of a forest far from human habitation. A flightless bird with a hobbling gait reminiscent of a man with his trousers down around his knees. Utters a heartbreakin groan. The head, large in comparison to the body, is crowned with a stiff grey diadem much given to infestation by lice. For this reason the bird is often seen to clap its claw to its head as if remembering it left its umbrella in the bus. Appears to have the ability to calculate and to remember harms done to it.*

Dear doctor professor, my eyes are full of tears. How I'd like to have a laugh with someone. Magda has just come in with a cup of pale tea wobbling on its saucer, sloshing onto a biscuit she has perched there. "Good morning, Inshpector," she says, bobbing her head, the air whistling softly through the gap in her side teeth, her eyes slightly lowered as if I were one of her saints. The papers are full of one of them today, some fat woman who is said to have saved a child from drowning in a vat of treacle. I almost laughed then, thinking of that, of what you might have said to that. Magda will say when she goes back downstairs, "The Inshpector's writing a report," as if any sort of work sitting at a desk with a book open in front of you were "writing a report." I am not writing a report. For whom would I be writing it? Who would want to know about the Grieving Breadbird, the Cheddle Cat, or the Abacus Flypot?

My eyes are full of tears. How I'd like to laugh. Standing at the window with my watery tea, I can see far below the Jumblatts crossing the square at regular intervals, carrying important people to and from meetings, where no doubt they will prepare reports. I have been such an important person, still am, probably, in Magda's eyes and even in the ranks of the bureaucracy. My eyes water, not with sorrow now but with tedium when I think of all the years spent in meetings, and, yes, writing reports. I'm even sitting for my portrait. In the robes of a high official, I sit with one arm laid along the dark wood of a grandfather chair, staring back at the viewer. The look on my face is solemn but kindly, I like to think. The portrait will be hung in the Upper Gallery of the Parliament with judges, ministers, inshpectors.

I have been looking at your book for some time now. It was the Cheddle Cat I first came across, tucked into the pages between the cockatoo and the dog. A round, benign face with elaborate ears, fantastically curlicued, set on a solid body with silky hair like a spaniel's, and in the right paw a long gun.

The Cheddle Cat lives in mountainous terrain at the bottom of every suburban

street. Its curious whistling cry can be mistaken for the kettle boiling, but it is not clear whether this is intentional. It is of uncertain temper, sings rather sweetly when so inclined and uses twigs to pick its teeth. Much prized by hunters, though none have ever been caught.

I blinked, flipped the pages back and forward. The same spidery drawings, rich in anatomical details, the same solid type, on each page. The cockatoo, the dog, the bat, the horse, all present and correct. I closed the book and studied its impressive leather binding, stamped with the national coat of arms. This was definitely an authorised book. This was the book you had been commissioned to produce. Why was it that no one had ever spotted the Cheddle Cat? For a moment I wondered if there might really be such a thing. I thought of your dry little face under the wispy grey-brown hair, your scuttling walk, the way you cleared your throat before you spoke. No one could ever have suspected you of making a joke. Perhaps someone else then? A student, or a collaborator? But everywhere I went in your papers showed the same mind at work. There, in the middle of a scholarly treatise on hyenas, a passage on the underclothes they wore. At the end of a description of the bat, a laconic comment on the use of bat droppings in French polishing. I could indeed have written a report, by the time I had scoured your works. I went further and read works about your works. Never a mention of the, what should I call them? Aberrations? Anomalies? Jokes?

Jokes, jokes, that's what this is all about, Professor. How I would love to laugh out loud at a joke. How I'd love to meet the eyes of another person, streaming with tears of laughter. I pace up and down my room here in the tower thinking of a trap I could lay, some words I could spring on someone, watch the look of amazement, then light flashing into their eyes, our eyes meeting, both of us, yes, laughing. Laughing together. One day I even said to Magda, "Could you laugh, please, Magda?"

"Laugh, Inshpector?" she said, here yes widening in what looked like panic. Or perhaps it was just incomprehension. "Laugh?"

"Yes," I said, "like this," and I tried a hearty ho-ho-ho sort of laugh, modeled on what I'd read as a child about Father Christmas, before he was prohibited.

Magda was silent. She cleared her throat.

"Could you, Magda?" I said, almost in a pleading voice.

She went red. "I don't think I can, sir," she said. "I really don't think..."

Her hands were twisting, she looked embarrassed. I waved to her to go.

But why was it that nobody had ever mentioned these strange passages in all the scholarly research that had been done on your work? I've looked through all the official citations, the eulogies that had accompanied your prizes. Nothing but the most solid and bureaucratic compliments. Your entry in Who's Who makes you sound like the sort of man who would be death as a dinner companion. The official portraits show a rather mean face, the lips pursed in what looks like self-satisfaction. I tell you, Professor, there were times when I thought I was going

mad, that all these strange things existed only in my imagination. I am still not sure that they don't.

It's started to rain now, big flat drops that stick to the window pane, then reluctantly detach themselves and slide greasily down. In the square there's some sort of a parade, it looks like a parade of mothers, with their little round felt hats and their pleated skirts, the red insignia flashing on their right arms. Some older people are standing obediently along the side of the road watching. The clocks across the capital chime in unison and fall silent. The parade goes on. I can hear martial music floating up, and now an official-looking plane flies over playing the national anthem.

What seems to be the case is that in spite of your reputation, in spite of all the government funding you received to write them, no one has ever read your books. Has ever even flipped through the illustrations, or they must surely have seen the Grieving Breadbird snarling out between the gorilla and the hippo, the Hopeful Hatter Bee between the goat and the horse. I even went back to your printed lectures, but they are as innocent and as dull as any academic mouthings.

As soon as I decided to show your book to someone so that they could see what you had done, what you were up to, I didn't want to. I didn't want to let you out into the prim official air like a fart. I didn't want what my mother would have called "a performance", officials scurrying round retrieving the books, covering up. Most of all I didn't want the books destroyed. And who would I have shown you to, anyway? Who is there who would by anything but puzzled by your behaviour? Sometimes I think you would even have disapproved of it yourself, as if there were two of you, as if your Breadbird self were a rogue hand that flew up from your side and made obscene gestures, thumbed your nose, thrust itself up the skirts of passing women, without your sensible self knowing anything about it.

I did the opposite of showing you to the world. Here, in my tower, I have all your books, as many of the official copies of them as I can find. I've brought them in from the libraries where they were gathering dust. Other names have risen now to cover the memory of yours. Nobody consults you anymore, if they ever did. So here we are together in my tower – the secret you, my friend, and I. And it seems to me there are only the two of us.

Just once I saw someone down there in the square who made me think of you. A sober-looking man, grey suit, thinning hair brushed insecurely across his pate, scurrying along with his eye on the ground, on his way no doubt to one of the government offices. On he scurried through the orderly rows of other scurriers, then turned the corner into the street that runs up to the old cathedral. He raised his head. Just for a moment, he was the only person in the street. As he walked he suddenly skipped, flinging his front foot out, then his back foot out. He walked on. It happened again. A skip. On he went up the sloping street until he disappeared around the bulk of the cathedral, walking soberly, then flinging himself into a skip, walking, skipping. I ran downstairs, across the square, up the little street and round

the cathedral into the business district. No sign of him. The streets were full of men just like him, walking steadily, sensibly, disappearing in and out of the great glass buildings, holding their briefcases with an even grip. No sign of him.

I love these autumn days with the sky coming down in a dome above the earth, the flare of leaves and the sudden whisking showers. The feeling of flame at the heart of things, showing itself here and there. The feeling that everything hangs on a thread, like the leaves that one week are stout and sturdy, robustly inhabiting the branches, and the next fine and fiery, fragmenting round the edges, attenuating their grip until they sail down, away from the tree that grows barer and barer until it is just lines against the sky.

# **The Strange Feeling**

*Pip Smith*

WHEN THE FEELING ARRIVED, it was not met with handshakes. It was felt as a vague presence in people's toes, and because it was vague, and felt, it was not taken seriously. A woman stood up in a town meeting and tried to tell it as a story, or a prayer, or a song, or a poem, but her words slid down her chin when she opened her mouth and the townspeople laughed. "Show us what you mean, and then we'll listen!" they said. But she could only describe it as a creeping surely that had started in her toes, and now lapped behind her kneecaps. "It feels like my bones are made of honey, or oil," she said – "can't you feel it too?" Some of the men went red, embarrassed that she was trying to give words to feelings they hadn't even mentioned to their wives. Some called the feeling gout. Others took it out in the shower – with one hand pressed against the tiles, the other massaging, frantically, the one part of their bodies that knew how to find an end to such strange sensations. Eventually the feeling lifted, or dissolved, or sank back into the earth. The woman was left with mouthfuls of stories that slipped like fish around the memory of a city, now drowned and worn down to mud.

## **Biggles Goes Gay for Patrick White**

*Philip Ellis*

So I said to him, Patrick,  
old chap, that man has a blue  
tit on his head. And he said,  
I dare say that a spot of  
buggery would bring colour  
to his cheeks. And how we laughed  
at that: it was just spiffing!  
And, I remember well, that  
night we went back to his digs,  
where he blew me like a gale.

# **Unsettled Conditions**

*Patrick West*

YOU COULD SAY IT SERVES ME RIGHT for falling in love with the weatherman.

Not everything people tell me turns out to be true. All promises of advancement from the factory floor have wilted in the wind—most days are hurricanes of the heart. Due credit to Gerald therefore, latterly departed, for his efforts to prove himself trustworthy from the very beginning. I must have raised an eyebrow at some random observation when we'd only known each other for an hour. Confronted with my doubts, he quickly extended an invitation thought irresistible. I could see for myself his star turn at the studios of Channel Seven. "I'm the beef-cake in the sandwich between the news and the sport," he had joked. After the show we could go on the date that high school girls only dream of.

Wouldn't you agree, slumped on your couch before the screen, that Australia gives every impression during the weather report of hovering, near the meteorologist's right hand, visible perfectly to all? When he orientates himself to the continent's coastline, deferring to every serration of the nation, the presenter appears to be seeing precisely what his audience beholds. Very far from it. In truth the weatherman stands in front of nothing: TV personality accompaniment to a virtual country. An educated guess is all that Hobart can expect as to location. A stab in the dark finds Perth. Melbourne exists thereabouts.

I watched from the wings with open mouth. Gerald could be believed implicitly: he was only pretending to see! And his hair glowed like fool's gold. "Red sky at morning, shepherds take warning." Confronted with the image of the weatherman denied to all others was my opportunity to bid farewell to this wolf. If only I'd known it back then.

It was much later than I had expected, quite a shock to notice the time, when we sat down to dinner in a revolving restaurant many floors above the footpaths of Melbourne. The well-off don't eat at the same time as the rest of us. Gerald had taken the liberty of pre-ordering the lobster for two. "You don't mind, do you?" Creeping in a circle through space, he tapped the face of his Rolex. "Clockwise. One revolution every 45 minutes."

In the bird's-eye view of the streets and suburbs at night the narratives of our yet-to-be-completed lives could be traced. We looked down on ourselves. The progress of Gerald's career was eastwards from Footscray into fame and fortune across the West Gate Bridge. More ambivalently, my journey clustered around the inner-northern suburbs where I still lived in the old neighbourhood of my parents. My desk-mate at primary school now stood at the machine next to mine, wearing pink fluffy slippers

as if she were eternally at home.

Our paths—tales converging out of randomness—finally crossed at a railway station platform (the single landmark we shared) where the weatherman and I had missed the same train, the same Friday afternoon: that time of the week when loneliness is not its own reward. I showed him the factory rooftop like the beak of a saw-toothed shark. He pointed out the university that offered combined degrees in meteorology and public relations.

Port Phillip Bay crept into view. The weatherman thought he could see his ex-wife's cottage in St. Kilda, and we fell silent over water dotted with stars of a double twinkling. A waiter dived to adjust a spoon then leapt back in alarm.

Gerald asked for his compliments to be passed on to the chef responsible for the lobster. These creatures are said to mate for life. Cameras thin as knitting needles have been introduced into their underwater burrows for television documentaries. How do they ever find each other, I almost asked aloud, in the darkness and turmoil of the ocean at night?

Gerald interrupted my thoughts with the cracking of a claw.

Williamstown arrived, glittering with civic pride. The illuminated sliver of silver beach was where my brother and I had once abandoned our baby sister, intent on teasing a cat out of a tree. On the Beaufort scale: utterly still. My parents asleep on the sand. Tired of our teasing, we returned to find the string of my kite lying limply across our sister's playsuit. I had curled it twice around her tiny wrist, before pulling the granny knot tight.

The windsock at Laverton had never before torn to shreds. A hundred hats ascended around the cathedral spires. Unforecastably a tom blew out of a tree. My sister would not even have known the words by which to comfort herself that she was flying to heaven.

Gerald asked me why my hand had shaken just now.

Condemned to the rear of our father's jalopy, my brother and I had squeezed each other half to death, hearing our mother whisper her outpouring of thanks to God for the return of the little girl (the soaking bundle at her breast) who had taken her first steps on the water. We drove home through the wind's wreckage. Below, Williamstown slid out of view and once more into the past. "Your emotions," he said to me, "are like the weather in Melbourne."

A midnight northerly was getting up, as I fumbled in my handbag for the keys to my flat. Gerald brushed over the parting in my hair as he pushed the door in. (The next morning I could have cursed my indecision: chastely we had sipped our coffee.) My dinner partner went downstairs to get something out of his car. The weatherman was going to teach me how to play chess. . . . As I let Gerald back in, sounds of American conversation entered with him. I have a neighbour who never turns off her TV.

My tutorial lasted all of two minutes. "You need to think like a winner straight off," Gerald declared. Then he skittled me. Every victory was credited to the latest in a series of viciously brilliant openings by Grandmasters with increasingly ferocious

patronymics. As much as the moves, the names bullied me into submission, ganged up, pummelled me to a pulp. Kramnik, Kasparov, Karjakin. “Win from the start,” Gerald repeated. “Win from the start.” Chess Chaos Theory he called it. The end was in the beginning. An early bishop’s gambit can be the butterfly’s wing in the Amazon triggering a tsunami of pawns attacking the king. Checkmate before you know it.

I accepted his lessons with good grace, bore up under Gerald’s concerted attacks. He let me play white every time. On my cramped south-facing patio, under the constellations, we confronted each other: generals of plastic warriors that would never know peace. A breeze stroked my cheeks. The Southern Cross was rising above Gerald’s head, as if to admire his moves. The false cross, shining faintly, would siren-song you to destruction if you let it. It’s ten million degrees Fahrenheit on every star. Their weather is unchanging. Our coffee cooled. A candle in an old Vegemite container flickered and was still. Checkmate in seven.

But at least I had my bearings in the heavens. He pretended to care about the sky, this meteorological lover, but he didn’t really. Why then did I rearrange the pieces that lay before me, and offer to play yet another game? I’m older and wiser now. As my pawns advanced once more down the board to destruction, I took it as gospel—clasped the knowledge to my heart—that I held the power to initiate Gerald into the world of a more dangerous and passionate weather. There are blasts that have never been charted on maps, air that defies all description, places on the planet where the sun will bleach your hair white as a skeleton.

I arranged Gerald’s introduction to my parents for the following Tuesday, when dinner was served in the finest room of their house, under the scrutiny of the television’s unblinking eye. It had originally been our father’s idea to make the weekly repast with his children extend over three nights of the week. From Tuesdays to Thursdays, he could pretend that all the birds in his nest still agreed. (Mother’s strategies for enduring were no doubt more subtle.) My brother came on Wednesdays, when he was able to get away. Thursdays were reserved for Thursday’s child, the infant with far to go, the baby of our family who tried never to be bad. I think she’ll be forty in the fast approaching winter although mother insists forty-one.

The table and chairs are always arranged the same way when I arrive. Am I the only one to sit in my old spot? The empty places to left and right torture me more than any sibling barb or wounding word ever could. Sending my sister into the sky was the least of what the three of us did to each other, over the years, while we lived in this house with an acre of nettles between us and the soccer fields.

A Lygon Street restaurateur might think it too common for words, but for a regular communicant like my mother it was one of the few expressions of love she felt it decent to reveal: moments after I came through the door we were at the table with deathly lamb chops on our plates. There are always wine glasses made in Bristol filled halfway. Tonight it is unfermented cider. In Lent my father pours chilled water from a jug.

I timed the course of the conversation perfectly from the start. The news began on Channel Seven. As the items ranged widely from Iraq to Sydney to the Vatican City, I dropped hints of some greater revelation to come. I know how to pace a narrative. At a quarter past the hour, I used his name for the first time. My mother was more direct than I had expected she would be. Had I overplayed my hand? I stalled brilliantly during a report from the Barossa Valley about a million litres of spoiled cabernet sauvignon (a former employee with half a pint of turpentine and a grudge). My father sipped his cider contentedly.

It was a breeze getting through the commercials. The mute button on the remote control, jealously guarded possession of my father's, shields the domestic sanctum from a certain measure of vulgarity. But the images of toilet deodorizers and cat food retain a fascination that cannot be fathomed. All conversation was stilled. We tut-tutted over the station promo. Then the head of the table once more let there be sound.

My parents had always wanted to meet someone famous from the telly.

"You mean to say . . ."

"Have I ever lied to you Dad?"

My mother interrupted. "You're still quite pretty, you know . . ." Her knife flipped over a bone.

"Why didn't you invite him for dinner tonight?" That was father.

Obliviously mother continued: ". . . for a woman your age." The clasp of the lock shut fast and I paled.

Ever since the last child had left home, the senile crotchets that her husband sometimes came out with were no longer any concern of my mother's. The weatherman had a standing invitation to thousands of tables every night of the week. My father recovered himself sufficiently to venture a new observation. No-one else would ever come close. Storm warnings in future would only be accepted from Gerald.

Now to the sport. My paramour had disappeared for the night. As my mother prepared bowls of ice cream and berries, however, I could tell that she was still gloating over the weatherman's final words: perfect beach weather until the end of the week. (It was as if he were God and responsible for it.) Far into the night, my family entertained hopes for what might be. Forecast happiness. Perhaps Gerald and I would honeymoon together somewhere on the season-less equator.

Early the next morning, during smoko and instant coffee, my famous boyfriend rang with a confession. The evening before, live to air, he'd added a degree to Swan Hill's predicted maximum for today. A private joke on country folk. "No harm done," he said. "Even if it were true it wouldn't change a thing. I'll freeze the Alps this evening if you want me to." It wasn't possible to say just what he'd done wrong. I hurried on to other things.

"Would you like to meet my parents for real on the weekend?"

"I do not not want to meet your parents," he replied. "How did it go last night?"

For a year we persisted at chess, made war on sixty-four squares. At night on my patio after work, the weatherman's complexion glowed in starlight even more ancient than the invention of the game over which we slaved. We rugged up in winter. We talked to each other. An hour could pass between the one-square advances of opposing pawns. According to Gerald, the queen was not always the most powerful piece on the board. Did I know that the inventor of chess was executed for his trouble? Illiterate peasant soldiers play games on the Korean peninsula across boards split in half by the border that separates north from south: a bullet to the head is the stake. Regularly the weatherman made fun of the weathergirls on the regional stations. I pretended it didn't worry me that my lover played Chinese chequers every Friday lunchtime with his ex. Everyone he met, Gerald impressed. My father put a windsock on the roof of the house. My mother was a constant Cheshire cat. People smiled at us in the street after the weatherman had taken me shopping.

There wasn't just one thing that made me end it in the end. Perhaps that extra degree for Swan Hill rankled more than I knew. It doesn't pay anyone to fool people like that. Leaving the factory one night after twelve hours straight, I happened to glance inside the deserted canteen, at the TV with a coat hanger for an aerial. Beaming Gerald was on it. This foul weather was never going to break.

In chess, the highly unusual situation of being disadvantaged by having the next move is known as "move compulsion", from the German "zugzwang". I had to do something whatever the cost. It fell to me to tell Gerald he was checkmated. Puzzled, he searched the board for the threat. "I genuinely thought I was winning," he said. Then, pocketing his tie clasp, he walked out my door without another word. What eavesdropper could make anything of a so-very-nearly silent lovers' parting? Ever so casually, en passant, Gerald had taken me for a spin.

Certainly I could see his face whenever I wanted to, come rain, hail or shine, but the weatherman was now only flickering pixels. Never again would he offer to freeze the Alps for me. I sweltered at the Repco factory for weeks afterwards, in the pre-Christmas heatwave that, to my frenzied imagination, was Gerald's revenge on a windswept and suffering heart.

Almost every morning a raven flies from directly out of the sun. Honeyeaters and sparrows are joyfully alive as I spread marmalade on thin slices of toast. They sing the joy of not knowing love.

At night I pray for the weather to send me like Dorothy spinning into Oz. Then I sleep soundly, head resting on clouds.

Over and over Bob Dylan plays soft on my turntable. "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows."

One day my prayers must be answered.

Not every evening finds me sitting at my kitchen table with the swirling surface of green. Only this evening, the weatherman has promised me thunder and lightning around midnight. And God knows I expect him to deliver this time. Bureau of Meteorology advice indicates a summer storm to end all summer storms. There will be trouble otherwise. Batten down the hatches. Don't tie your baby sister to the tail of a kite.

I never arranged for Gerald to retrieve his chess set after our parting of ways. Now I have set the board up for a new game. Just the players are absent. White confronts black across the table on my south-facing patio on which nobody sits. The disturbed air is making noises in the trees. My pulse is playing tricks beneath the skin of my wrist, appearing and disappearing amidst the delta of arteries that flood into my palm. The wind rises. I can see everything from where I am. Already a pawn has advanced half a square.

Midnight makes its stealthy way across the surface of the globe.

The hands of my clock close together in prayer, pointing to the heavens, and the wind picks up with exquisite timing at the twelfth stroke of the hour sounding from The Church of Our Blessed Lady, whose construction reveals faintly against the sky a wind-vane sacrilegiously higher than the cross. The wind comes in from the bay.

I am white. He is black. Silently in the darkness, I wait for the gale to blow my opponent into check. Let nature decide how things should turn out.

Our pawns go forward to their fates.

## **Wordlessness And The Woods**

*Jodie Mateare*

I do not speak for conquest:  
today, again, I am unarmed –  
eyes trained on the Pacific.  
I am not here to demystify this encounter.  
Signposts hung on air  
direct breath among breath.  
I will take the wind home with me,  
hold it beneath my tongue.



unicorns and lungfish  
CLS 10

# **Reason**

*Ruby Murray*

AFTERWARDS, IN A CAFÉ, he put his hands flat on the table and said that he could explain it all, if he just had a moment. His knuckles were red.

He said that when he was eight his father took him to the Royal Melbourne Show.

It was raining, and they went on the Ghost Train. Waiting in line under a corrugated iron covering, the speakers spat distorted howls onto the empty concrete of the sideshow alley.

He said that his father held his hand in the line. But that when they stepped through the gate and into the carriage that would take them inside, his father let go. There was a screaming face painted on the wooden doors, split down its centre by a thin dark line, and a cold metal rail that held them in their seats.

The lady attendant, who had pink lipstick on her teeth, told them never to stand up, never to leave their seat, and not to touch the ghosts. Then the carriage jerked, and they went slamming through the face.

There was nothing on the other side. No noise. In the absolute black, the carriage went faster than anything he'd ever felt, spinning through space. The only thing he knew were his hands on the rail; there were no cardinal points, no east, no west, just emptiness and the hungry air.

The waitress spilt their coffees as she put them down. Small oceans of milk shifted between them as they lifted their glasses.

# **Yia Yia on Papou**

*Zoe Norton Lodge*

IF MY NAME IS KOULA and your name is Mick and we shall be met and we shall be married under the auspices of the father in the Greek Orthodox Parish & Community of Saints Raphael, Nicholas & Irene, then you shall remember this, you shall remember this forever, and if you shall remember this, then you may begin to understand my eternal contempt.

If my name is Koula and your name is Mick and we shall be met and we shall be married and we shall cohabit in a house-familius in Suburbingford with our two children and our patio and our various shih tzus named Dadie and Sadie and similar and our Carltonware, our plastic covered couches, our china horses, cups of tea, brass statuette of the harbour bridge, our security blinds and tobacco, our flannelettes and mouthwash. If one day in this situation unto which we have found ourselves you shall ask unto me:

Koula, pou ine tou alago thacktilithi mou favourite? I will say: How the fuck should I know Mick. If it's not on your butso-glifti finger, then pous thialo would I know where your stupid favourite ring with the horseshoe is? If you shall suggest that blame for this ring misplacement lies outside the gelatinous boundaries of yourself, perhaps with me or our children or our shih tzus and you shall make us search the house. If one day, two weeks after you have lost the ring, and we have searched the house, you shall cry out unto me from your seat on the toilet, whilst peering southward, with a repulsive strain over your gut, down to your knee-ward underpants: Koula! Do echo vriso. Ine sta y front vrakya mou!

If you shall find, sitting there in your underpants your favourite horseshoe ring, understand that I shall know you have not changed your underpants for two weeks. Understand that the fact that you did not notice a ring with a jagged horseshoe setting burring into your buttocks for two weeks suggests a disturbing deficit in observation and a medically significant lack of somatic response in your fat arse. You should see several kinds of doctors.

Furthermore, understand Mick, understand that I have never lost anything. Understand that I have no sympathy for you. Understand this and you shall begin to understand the emergence of my eternal contempt.

If my name is Koula and your name is Mick and we have been met and we have been married and you have no feeling in your arse and one day you tell me you are taking our seven-year-old son to the Maritime Museum. If, instead of taking him to the museum, you leave him in the car for four hours while you drink at the RSL with other arseholes like you, who you are friends with because you all share ninety percent of your genes with elephant seals. If you do this Mick, our son will

remember forever, and I will never forget. And when you are old and vague and I am old, I shall carry my blackened memories of you forever in my mouth ulcers.

If my name is Koula and your name is Mick and we have been married and you have no feeling in your arse and you have previously left our son in a car for four hours and you are sixty-eight and you are not dead and I have not forgotten and we are flatting together for apathy and convenience. If one day in this situation unto which we have delivered ourselves, you shall suppose to comment on my cooking. If one day you shall squint and wheeze as the pencil shavings and hairy sodden bath plugs comprising your brain attempt to inhale, interpret and re-release information back into the ether. If your brain shall miraculously evade electrocution through unprecedented usage, and you manage to sneeze out of your teeth bucket the premature stillborn of a would-be verbalised thought. Should this premi-thought call into the arena of question an aspect of my cooking. Understand this. Understand that everyday for fifty years, I have, in spite of the emergence and subsequent exponential growth of my eternal contempt cooked you three perfect meals everyday. Understand that perfection is my only weakness. Understand that my kitchen has a fucking chef's hat. And understand that in order to ensure that nothing of this sort recurs I shall beat you repeatedly over the head with a Christmas placemat.

If my name is Koula and your name is Mick and we have been met and we have been married and you have no feeling in your arse and you once left our seven-year-old son in the car and I have beaten almost every last drop of your ambition to engage with the world out of your head with a Christmas placemat and you are seventy-five and you are not dead and I have not forgotten. If one morning before dawn, in this situation unto which we have found ourselves, I encounter you in our driveway, with a garbage bag full of tissues and ornaments, wearing nothing but a pair of white stubbies, waiting for your eight-year-old grandson to drive you to your lacrosse game. Understand that you seem to have gone completely mad. Understand that the only upsetting part of this situation for me is that I briefly had to look at you without a shirt on.

If my name is Koula and your name is Mick and we have been met and we have been married and you have no feeling in your arse and one day you left our son in the car and I have beaten your churlishness with a Christmas placemat and you have gone mad and you have disappointingly recovered quickly and we have moved to stou thiavolou ti manna retirement villa and one day you shall sit at your windowsill, staring at the happenstance in your visual field, and you shall say: Koula, you have to come and see this. There is a little white dog, just sitting there on the grass. It's so still. I wonder if it's lonely. It's so beautiful. Parakalo Koula.

And I will refuse.

Parakalo.

No.

Parakalo, just one little look.

No.

Koula...

Fine...

Mick, I will say as I disgust myself by eventually humouring you, Mick that is a FUCKING MAILBOX.

Understand that if you mention how low your cholesterol is in spite of 80 years of treating your body like a hospital-grade bag of infected rubbish, understand that if Lady Life renews her lease on you, and you develop a penchant for 'walks', understand that in bitterness, in unbridled bitterness, I shall have a segment of my lower bowel removed.

If my name is Koula and your name is Mick and one day having served you lunch I shall ask for a sip of your beer. If I shall ask for but one sip of your beer and you shall look me in the eyes, you shall look me in the eyes with 65 years of hatred, you shall look me in the eyes and I shall meet your eyes, and without taking your eyes off me you shall pick up the beer in your pig hand and take it to your pink and crusty discarded-by-the-butcher-and-left-in-the-sun poisoned ham lips. And you shall swig from it. If you shall swig from it and then exhale beer, particles of lunch, and air all at once. If then, after this brothel performance you shall offer unto me your beer, I will put a curse on you.

If after I put a curse on you, you shall summon, from within your gingivitis cavernous death-pot mouth, a phlegmatic viscous. If you shall spit this phlegmatic viscous and chart it on a course toward my face. If you shall do this Mick, then understand you shall have regrets.

If my name is Koula and your name is Mick and one day you spit in my face. Understand that with all my will I will reach behind me for a knife. Understand that if all I can place my hands upon without looking, without unlocking our hating eyes, understand that if I cannot reach a knife, if all I can reach is a colander, understand that I shall use the colander like a sort of knife-hat. And I shall drive it onto your head.

And there you shall be, drunk and vague with nothing but your colander-hat and what remains of your beer and the dishrag of your soul.

Mick, if you understand these things, if you understand them, then you shall begin to understand me and my eternal contempt.

*'Swimming Fixations' is Going Down Swinging's inaugural non-fiction commissioned work. For an annotated version of this essay, please refer to our website.*

**Rebecca Giggs** is an equally adept writer of essays, fiction and poetry. She took up our non-fiction challenge in the masterful and almost incantatory essay that follows this page. She grew up in Western Australia, in what geologists refer to as the passive margin that runs between the Yilgarn Craton and the sea. In 2010 she wrote her PhD thesis on the psychology of climate change. From those ruminations about the human view of our surroundings, and from the harsh strangeness of her native state, this piece on the nature and place of the swimming pool in Australian consciousness was born.

# Swimming Fixations

*Rebecca Giggs*

too drained to dissemble, things verge  
on being themselves, larger than life  
– Alison Clark, Ananke (1987).

IT IS HARD NOT TO BE PREOCCUPIED with the swimming pools. As the plane descends into Perth at daybreak, passing over corrugated roofs and tracts of *gris clair* bushland, the pools flash like shards of a mirror smashed in an overgrown lawn. Here the dawn is taken into physical custody. Step out in that thin hour to see stars drowning in the gardens – every waterbody brims with sky. Once an American astronaut called Perth “The City of Lights” but seen from this intermediate altitude, a different elemental mean dominates the landscape. What Rachel Carson described as that “dark, subsurface sea, rising under hills, sinking under valleys.” As if the pools were in fact all connected to some great undergirding reservoir, a fluid scaffolding revealing itself. Here and there a pupil-less eye stares out of the topography, bright and blind, fringed with scrub. The plane banks. A seam of sunlight blinks across their surfaces.

The aerial view of my home city is pockmarked with water. More specifically, it is shaped by the desire to demonstrate *control* over water: a symbol of affluence and leisure, and an affront to the climate. From this height it is possible to discern how much of the city’s infrastructure – highways, railways, pumping stations and powerlines – follow courses laid down by waterways, many of which still run in subterranean channels that rise to soften the land with infrequent spots of enchainment bog. Occasionally you hear that one of these chthonic rivers has attempted to recoup a post office or the quadrangle of a primary school, keeling the bitumen inward as if something heavy had alighted there, and taken off again, during the night.

Leaving the Earth’s surface it is strange to note how the forces that hold you there become more, not less apparent. At this elevation the normally imperceptible haul of gravity shows up in the land as one topography falling constantly down on top of another one, ever slowly. Splitting at the joins to reveal a familiar but distant register of time. The landscape that I am flying over today, pushed onwards at an inconceivable ground-speed, is as dry as parchment and has appeared so since the earliest days of settlement (when far fewer people had the chance to see it laid out from above). What has been built around the water here hasn’t sought it out to suppress it, but to draw from it as vegetation does a lake. Now those gulches are set with the loose crockery of dried clay, clotted with rushes, or impoverished soil

deposited by runoff. Water shapes the city by its absence – histories of evaporation, and evaporating histories. This is the country that inspired “Born Sandy Devotional,” not the fecund substrate of the American nature writing classic *Sand County Almanac*. Roads part and rejoin around wetlands that have become no more than waterless pans, ringed with the type of stains that mottle a damp ceiling. Some of these places have been built over with parking lots and discount supermarkets, named for their watery palimpsest: Dog Swamp and Champion Lakes. Swathes of dead trees in the distance show where salt has struck up to meet the root boluses, so that the canopy colours seen from overhead read as a translation of the biotic story playing out beneath the topsoil. It is the striking *lack* of surface water that makes these backyard swimming pools stand out so much.

In a 1977 essay entitled “Holy Water,” Joan Didion wrote that “some of us who live in arid parts of the world might think about water with a reverence others find excessive.” In Western Australia that reverence verges on obsession. When water restrictions are enforced during the summer months, well-heeled residents pay thousands of dollars for cartage firms to transport truckloads of treated groundwater from regional bores to their backyards, to keep their pools legally topped up. Nightly the news-shows broadcast reservoir levels, while over the airwaves the state Water Corporation entreats us all – bathers, growers, drinkers – to “think of the dams” that are boiling off by the bucketful under the midday sun. In 2004, the noted environmental scientist and palaeontologist Tim Flannery declared that Perth could shortly become “the 21st Century’s first ghost metropolis” because of water shortages. Almost overnight hundreds of suburban lawns yellowed and then blew away in billowing clouds of topsoil and desiccated grass, as people abandoned their sprinkler systems to rust. We are a city saturated with water consciousness (and so too contentiousness) much as San Franciscans live with earthquake, or Beijing residents know smog.

These pools then, exist within matrices of meaning that go deeper than their superficial codes divulge; they exceed their function as designators of class status and privileged regimes of the body. I want to suggest, almost intuitively, that there is something going on in Perth regarding the pools, that has to do with the territorialisation of a perceived environmental threat. The pools as apotropaic objects, set up outside to ward off the anxiety of a life lived under water-stress in a domicile that is ostensibly waterless. Like those octagonal bagua mirrors that are sometimes hung above doorways to deflect negative *sha qi* flowing in off the street, the pools are an inverse manifestation of an ambient unease. See how *much* water we can afford to just “leave out” in the natatorium or the garden; unworking, untroubling, crystal clear. The pools are available at any time to capture our reflection, or deflect our attention.

Eco-criticism has typically avoided getting wet in the pool, preferring to seek out Big Nature over the back fence (mountain peaks, unmanned forests and other expansive

territories lit with the rose-glow of the Romantics) rather than to peer in through the smaller, dimmer aperture of the garden. Several antitheses are irrevocably fused here – culture to nature, labour to contemplation, the man-made to the environmental – a dizzying hybridisation that confounds traditional modes of nature. Nothing of drama or grandeur has ever burst forth spontaneously from the backyard, or if it has, we have always been too close to contend a reaction that provides the kind of rich mental mulch that eco-criticism considers worthy of interrogation. In the garden we are too busy *acting* to stop and consider how we should be *feeling* about the nature around us. If you water the squash daily, as you must, it will never take on the proportions of a miracle vegetable, no matter how large it grows. All miracles must strike from themselves, and likely manifest by moonlight.

The “sublime” has historically been the predominant philosophical temperament of aesthetics utilised by eco-criticism, and it is useful to be reminded upfront of its etymology. Inset with a spatial understanding, the sublime has connotations of looking up from under, as in the Latin *sublimis*, “sloping up to the lintel.” There is something *eclipsing* about the sublime – the cognitive dissonance of registering our incapacity to perceive a thing in its fullness. An inferior gaze taken from the root-standpoint of an overwhelming phenomenon, as when one is looking up into the sun. A pool, as a tabular, low-lying field – bounded, private, and however deep, not infinite – has little hope of engendering this kind of sublimity. Besides which, this is simply not the altimetric perspective I have begun to speak of, looking out from the plane.

We are always thinking about the pool from a position *above* the pool, always approaching its edge, where, upon stopping, the pool invites us to remember back to distant recollections or to look into the glimmering beyond. This, at least, may be said of our orientation up until we dive, when we must descend from the rooms of cognitive rumination down into the body in order to stay afloat (although it does not follow that all creative mindsets are dissolved upon becoming a swimmer). Once in the pool, by necessity we’re *doing* first, especially the bad swimmers amongst us – those who consider the vernacular “things went swimmingly” to imply an ironic circumflex. Suddenly cold, we’re kicking, pulling, breathing, then not breathing, breathing again – finding a rhythm. Imagining becomes a second-order pursuit.

Sitting next to me in the plane is an older man wearing a Gore-Tex jacket with numerous variably sized pockets evidently meant for numerous specifically sized objects. He looks up from the roadmap he has been annotating throughout the journey and drums his fingers on the tray table. I motion an encouragement for him to lean in and see the suburbs unfurling through the doubled oval of the window, but he waives the gesture; uninterested, only impatient to arrive. If his map shows the Darling Scarp then the view through the window may well be the original palimpsest from which the image has been extracted: the plane is now coasting at what I would estimate to be the height of the cartographer’s aspect. I would be keen

to hold the map up to the glass, if he would allow it, to see whether I could orient the major intersections and work out what the image withholds. To speculate why the map depicts some things and not others. But the view below is made dull to my fellow traveller by all its excessive intricacy, its meagre palette, fuzzed lines and irrelevant details. He wants a narrative with implicit *direction* – which is what the map provides, over-traced with an orange highlighter.

I will see this man again after we land, in the airport car-park struggling to defend himself against what looks to be a pelican. He will be thrashing his arms with the bird at his throat, appearing to throttle it, or it him. Dropping my bags in alarm I will take a few jogging steps towards him before I realise that it is only the map he is endeavouring to refold against the strong wind. For the time being though, I return to watching the pools wink in the early light. Why is it that these pools lead me into thinking about environmental *anxiety*, when they are of themselves designed to be places of repose, tranquillity and even beauty? I am a good swimmer; it is not a fear of drowning that motivates this response. Is it simply the case that everyone thinks about water differently these days – finds water to be more *complicated* than it should be, as the sea levels rise and the central lakes transform to parched playas? Or is it more personal than that, for the pools are also visual tokens of home-coming. They carry me back to long hours spent as a teenager lapping the black-tiled line, the sound of the starter's whistle, the jack-knife airborne moment, the lung-burning race. Chlorine is my most potent madeleine. But as Proust himself recognised, the reason beautiful places so often disappoint us in reality is that the imagination can only lay hold of that which is now absent.

But allow me to hesitate for a moment at an even earlier question: is a pool really *nature*? How does a pool, that ubiquitous, almost banal icon of landscape architecture in Australia, speak to nature and its state of uncertainty in a world that, according to our best science, is warming? Examined individually, these pools exhibit no sign of distress. They appear isolated from the supra-national, supra-national phenomena of globally increasing C02 levels. There is surely a scarcity of scale here, for the pools are inadequately sized; too local, and too *human* to graft a discussion of the type of meta-seizure in the natural that climate change represents. If anything, the pools *hide* what is going on in nature now by providing an idealised, indifferent version of other types of water-bodies beyond the garden fence.

A waterhole would be considered “nature” certainly, as could a swamp, a lake, the Swan River that winds a steely road away in the distance. Even an ornamental fishpond set with imported lilies might, debatably, be nature. After all, water, as one of the classical Platonic elements and a phase of matter omnipresent the world over, is *archetypal* nature. But does a pool deserve to be considered in concert with these “wilder” (I use the term provisionally) waters? Plainly a pool could not “happen” without human intervention – hands to dig and pour – but there are plenty of things about which that could also be said, that might still be considered natural.

I am not talking here of a quality of “cultivation,” but of basic *naturalness*, close to *organicism*, as of lemons growing on backyard trees that might also be rushing past below me, but are too small to be seen from this altitude.

The answer to this question, whether a pool can be considered natural, is more tortuous than a cursory opinion supposes. Despite the fact that a pool is made up of *all water*, it clearly marks an elision of nature – its erasure by augmentation, as when an upgraded version of an original ideal strives to be extra-natural, “nature-plus,” and in doing so inadvertently slips towards *nature-mort*e (the *supernatural* of life mixed in with death). This is a strange effect, because even when we look very closely, dip in, the additional “part” remains invisible. It’s just water, bright water. The pool-water doesn’t look any more artificial than rainwater (and in fact, isn’t it likely that at least some of it *is* rainwater?). It cannot be said that the pool is not natural merely because it’s *clean*, having been sifted of the protozoans and filamentous microplants that make pond-water turbid. How can the pool be considered *extra-natural*, when it has only been changed to *exclude* such small scraps of life as would normally require a microscope to perceive? Surely, if anything, a pool is a type of sub-nature, baseline nature? When we go swimming this is one of the ideas that buoys our enjoyment – physical submersion in a sanitised realm and a refreshing encounter with the disinfected non-human (though we ourselves are made of such fluid stuff). If the pool was in fact substantively made out of human matter, our experience of swimming would be diminished. No one wants do the hundred metres in spit.

Although the pool first looks to be a minimalist reconstitution of nature, it is like one of Mark Rothko’s colour-field canvases in that the more that you meditate on its minimalism, the more you come to see it contains further dimensions and a deeper kind of electricity. A pool is designed to display *additional* nature even as it pares back the content of nature; it is water made bluer and clearer and stiller (but not too still) than in wild water-bodies. Many pools here are brinked by plastic ferns, because the splash of “artificial” water kills or bleaches real plants. In emulating only the purified excesses of the pond – *sans* leeches, waterweed and murky bottom – the pool loses something definitionally pond-ish, namely its cohabitation with, and formation by, interacting lifeforms. The pool stops being natural when it stops admitting a porous interconnection with the contiguous systems that frame it (which is part of the pool’s slick trick, because of course, it continues to slowly vaporise and gather leaves – it cannot actually be closed, despite best attempts at that illusion). The borders of the pond are a configuration of all the teeming littoral organisms that entangle one another there – within and without – as we are told in the last paragraph of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*. Indeed, the pond is shaped not just by the physical influence of those multiple “anatomies” (fish, insects, aquatic plants) but by the very phenotypes that express the life that intermeshes it.

Strangers, however, are not permitted in the pool. Other bodies (capital “O”ther) are prohibited; no corpses, no organelles (watch out, anaerobic meningitis!) and especially no non-human animate creatures. Therefore the pool is filled up with dead

water, *more dead* than what might flow into a peat sexpool, or even the water that gathers in the viscid drainage channels underneath a city, bobbing with drowned dogs and excrescences – for there are found a bouquet of parasites, saprophytes, bacteria and viruses. The water in the pool, on the other hand, is “dead” because it is toxic to most things that are desirous to live in it – those frogs that turn up asphyxiated in the filter-box, and the algae that would otherwise bloom a florid carpet along the pool’s floor.

But in writing this, the distinction between dead and living water immediately becomes impossible to define. “Live water heals memories,” proposes Annie Dillard, implying further into this quotation that motion, the act of facing upstream, is the distinguishing attribute of living water. But water that flows can be “dead” too, as in the Dead Sea which, despite its torpid currents and stratified, rasping layers, is hypersaline and supports only basic lifeforms. Is heavy water, with its isotopic reconfiguration, still living? Is boiled or distilled water dead? Scientifically, the “Vienna Standard Mean Ocean Water,” (perplexingly named because it doesn’t deal with seawater specifically) administered by the United States National Bureau of Standards, sets a physical criterion for water composition. And there are legal definitions of water that, for instance, draw a distinction between what amounts to water for drinking vis-à-vis water for agricultural use. Yet these are questions – are the pools living, are the pools nature – that are more *poetic* than they are scientific or legal. As D. H. Lawrence observed: “water is H<sub>2</sub>O, hydrogen two parts, oxygen one, but there is also a third thing that makes it water, and nobody knows what it is.” Natural things can be living or dead but never both, for being both asymptotically approaches being neither. Water, confoundingly, floods that divide. A pond can be amniotic fluid *and* malarial reservoir simultaneously, depending on whether you take the point of view of the mosquitos, or their animal quarry. In mainland Australia we are perhaps more accustomed to this kind of ambiguity – aware of the rivers which, whilst depicted as a thick navy veins on our maps, are three seasons out of four no more than a broken necklace of shallow billabongs.

Anyone who has been responsible for maintaining a swimming pool knows how easy it is to misestimate chemical quotients, so as to accidentally render the water uninhabitable even for humans. This is an important point to draw out, for even though the pool contains “cleaner” water, perhaps even cleaner than the sea (*achieve the pH of human tears*, as it says on the side of a barrel of muriatic acid), the pool’s serenity hides a toil with substances that are intensely more noxious than dirty water. These are chemicals which, if allowed to overspill their containments, would do great damage to their surrounding ecosystems and to the ill-advised person handling them. The pool is thoroughly anti-natural then, reliant on synthetic toxins that would harm nature if released, even as the pool affects the artifice of nature enhanced. Gazing down now it is remarkably easy to read the pellucid glow of the pools as repositories of pollution, rather than spaces of cleanliness. They suddenly seem *too blue*.

Cease to dose the pool though, and see how it rapidly accumulates nature. In essence: how can we tell what is a pool and what is a pond? If I scoop up a jar and bring it inside to show to you, will you be able to know for certain if what is in the jar is pond-water or pool-water? Some pools are cloudy, some ponds are clear. Perhaps the thing that makes a pool a pool and not a pond, you might suggest, is not *what it fundamentally is* (a water-body for swimming in) but what surrounds it (*what it fundamentally isn't*); its concrete or fibreglass shell. That is to say, concrete is not what constitutes the experience of the pool; it is not its *raison d'être*, to borrow an appropriate, if overworked, French expression. When we get in the pool, we get *in* water, not *in* concrete. A pool stops being a pool when it is drained, because then you can't swim in it, even though the pool's shell might remain (usually it becomes a dump, or a terrarium for ruderal plant life). But a pool that is left to eutrophicate – even, we can imagine, a commercial aqua-park pool hermetically sealed from the ground by the latest stainless-steel shell and sheathed in waterproof vinyl – even *that* kind of pool stops being a pool if it becomes un-swimmable. If the pool doesn't quite fit the description of a pond after it is permitted to fall into disuse, it alternately becomes some parallel project in aquaculture and accompanying miasma. Later the counter-cultures move in – skateboarders coasting the dry bowl, then naïf graffiti, abandoned sofas and broken glass.

So in fact, it is not the concrete rim that makes a pool a pool, but what that concrete represents – *regulation*, and with regulation *predictability* and *familiarity*. Look along the length of the pool and you will likely be able to see the tiles glistening underneath the water. When you plunge in, the expectation carried is that you will eventually touch a hard, smooth floor, not find your hands buried wrist-deep in a pouchy interzone of silt and eels. Knowing what is on the bottom of the pool is part of what defines it as a homely space. The pool, as opposed to the pond, delimits the range of the swimmer's horrific imagination so that they are not made busy filling the space beneath them with a fantasy of grabbing mouths and stake-set tree roots while they lap above. Homeliness equates to transparency, and so to knowability. Where things appear interstitial – neither water nor ground for instance as in the case of the pond-bed – they cease to be easily knowable and become troubling, even nightmarish. (Am I underground or underwater, you might ask; how should I know the substances surrounding me?). We have a word for this uncertainty, the blurring of the homely and the unhomely; that word is “uncanny.”

A pool is designed to be a rigorously human place, an area that remains familiar and controlled despite the fact that it is located *outside* the house. How much this is a deception becomes clear when we learn that many more people drown in pools, bathtubs and buckets every year than in the sea. Indeed the person who drowns in a pool is far *less likely* to be resuscitated than the person who drowns in the ocean. The salinity of blood is nearer to saltwater than to fresh, so that once pool-water enters the body it creates a hypertonic solution, causing the red bloodcells to burst under osmotic pressure. Unless it comes to us through drinking, fresh water can in fact be

far more “toxic” to the human body than salt.

In Australian coastal properties there is a fashion now for “infinity pools” that affect a kind of trompe-l’œil whereby the pool overspills its boundary to join with the sea or the sky. These are also called “negative edge pools,” which is a term that almost contains its own recursion because what is a pool that is edgeless, but in fact not a pool and some other type of water body, likely a bog or a marsh? But I cannot deny that the idea appeals to me. Who would not want to claim ownership to an infinite, vanishing edge?

In the sense that a pool is what it is not (water), we might think of a pool as a silence, a space that place skips over, and an absence that is at once a presence. This characterisation is appropriately met by the pool’s omission in eco-criticism and also in nature writing, where the dark sweeps of the ocean are the prevailing waterscape motif. Stamp-sized absences are similarly how the pools appear from this aerial prospect: geometric blanks, like a deck of unmarked cards, dropped from a great height into the hills by a numinous hand.

We should be wary of objects that are silent in some way, as the pools are, for silence, like its polarity, noise, manifests not an unproblematic singularity but a *surfeit of complexity*. Too much information. During silence, normally imperceptible, ambient reverberations rush to inundate our attention and their medial effect effaces the difference between the subject and the object, the figure and the ground (the act of swimming could be said to perfectly enact this collapse for it is literally the figure *in* the “ground”). Herein is also the reason that it is easier, by which I mean less demanding, to listen to a sine tone than to listen to nothing (although easy-listening compositions – “soft adult contemporary” as the genre is now called – might be doubly hard to listen to when brought into honed focus). Silence is never a subtractive conceit, but a layered one. The pools are cages for complex thought, even as they are mute.

An airborne vision rises in me, fed by the fatigue that jogs my head in the sibilant atmosphere of the aeroplane. How my face might suddenly appear there on the ground, scaled-up by the landscape and disarticulated in the pools. A giant brow in the circle of a backyard above-ground, a dark nostril flaring in someone’s unoccupied spa – just as a child hovers over puddles in the street after a rainstorm. I feel myself collapsed into the field, and disconnected; at once up here, and simultaneously down there, down there in many pieces. There are just *so many* pools down there; little islands of psychic relief from anxiety, and yet they show us to be so disconnected from each other. Two people splash alone in two identical pools, separated by a fibro fence – and so it is all the way down the street. The suburbs quarter space into pockets of loneliness.

There are nearly 500,000 of us airborne at any one time – a drifting, winged city, about the size of Helsinki, just a few meters tall and threaded around the globe.

See the earth laid out like a faultless toyscape below. All the infinitesimal features appear precise, even designed – a kind of *mise en abyme* where the landscape seen from ten thousand feet imitates its mineral elements viewed in a field only a few micrometres wide. Rivers that correspond with minuscule veins of sediment, and cities that resemble cells. Localised cataclysm – places dumped, dredged, dense with pollutants – can no longer be viewed as wounded regions in an otherwise vigorous system. Even spaces that are conspicuously *uncatastrophic*, like the pools, are set with latent threat, and show us ourselves in excess.

When I get home I will begin again the writing that I left there, laid out on a desk in a room without aspect. I will struggle with that piece of work for many more months, trying to get above a series of interlinked ideas about nature and philosophy. But before that, jet-lagged and ruminative, I will drive for half an hour to pay three dollars eighty to a reticent cashier at the local pool. There will be squads and coaches at that hour – kids watching the red-hand sweep the minute mark on the large wall clock, applying talcum powder to their silicon caps. All elbows and knees. All muscle and pulse.

I will climb down from the atrium of my mind then. Unbutton, toe the edge. And take a breath.

## Tupperware Sonnets

*Fiona Wright*

I just love my Happy Chopper. It's just brilliant.  
I don't know where I'd be now without it, without my Happy Chopper. I love it.  
I have two. I have two Happy Choppers.  
That way I always have a clean Happy Chopper. Even when I haven't done the dishes.  
Can I demonstrate the Happy Chopper? It's so easy.  
You just snap on the lid, and twist, and chop.  
Look, you can even use your Happy Chopper while you're holding the baby.  
One-handed. Just like this. I love my Happy Chopper.  
I use it for moshing up Billie's food. When it's not small enough.  
You know how some of them have really big chunks?  
I don't like to give her chunks.  
I use my Happy Chopper on raw chicken. I just hate touching raw chicken.  
It's great for guacamole too – you don't get slimys on your fingers.  
I use mine to make nice little portions of chocolate. Happy chocolate. Guilt-free.  
And it means you don't cry over onions.

Now who can tell me what this little lime set is, which page of the catalogue it's on?  
The lime set? It doesn't just come in lime, of course.  
You also have a choice of fuchsia or electric blue but I brought the lime along.  
Because I'm sure you've all got little boys as well as daughters. Which page?'  
Oh, it's the Funny Munch Pack! Page ten. The Funny Munch Pack, I think it's great.  
Both of my littlies have a Funny Munch Pack for school. Who wants to demonstrate?  
The Funny Munch Pack has quite a lot of features, but don't let that put you off.  
I know some of you have Funny Munch Packs already.'  
I bought another Funny Munch Pack at the last party. I had them for the boys,  
but Maddie wanted one as well. They're great for school, just great.  
There are straps that flip out here, so they can wear them on their backs. Like backpacks.  
And the colours are so nice and bright,  
you can see them when they run ahead on the way home.  
The whole way down the road. They love their Funny Munch Packs.

Now I remembered, I owe you a Breathables magnet from last week, right?  
Oh terrific! I've been too terrified to use my Breathables without it. That's great.  
Why don't you demonstrate the Breathables set? Now that you've got the magnet,  
you should demonstrate the Breathables.  
The Breathables, you see all fruits and veg have different rates of breathing in the fridge.  
So the Breathables, they have these little vents at the front,  
and you look up the breathing rate on the magnet here, see.  
And it tells you how many vents to have open and closed  
so your veg can breathe at the right rate, and stay fresh and crisp and clean,  
and you can see which ones are Breathable Buddies, and store them together.  
Like, celery and asparagus and strawberries all go together. Apples with lettuce and beans.  
I've kept strawberries fresh for three days in my Breathables.  
That's right. And once you realise the differences in breathing rates,  
you'll be amazed at how long things last. And what does that mean? Less waste.  
And fewer supermarket trips.

What about the Munchettes? Tell the ladies about those.  
Oh, the little Munchettes, the Munchette containers are great.  
See, they've got nice big tops, so the kids can get their little hands in.  
And a line here, so you know how far to fill them, how many sultanas they should eat  
And they're airtight, water-tight, yes. You don't need plastic.  
No plastic? But what about their sandwiches?  
No, you don't need plastic on their sandwiches.  
But don't they go yuck? I mean, I hate using plastic, but I'm always worried,  
won't their sandwiches go yuck? They won't eat their sandwiches if they go yuck.  
And they're in the bag all day, they must go yuck without plastic. Especially in Summer.  
The Munchette keeps everything crisp and fresh and clean. I never use plastic any more.  
Even tomato? What about tomato sauce? My Kylie loves devon and tomato sauce.  
Or cottage cheese and lettuce. Surely they'd go yuck. Without the plastic.  
No, that's the great thing about this whole range, you see.  
You don't need any plastic. And so you're saving the environment as well.

## **Autumn in the Townhouse**

*Bronwen Manger*

The first thing you noticed was  
how his walls were so white, so clean, how  
his hallway had the austerity of a loftily-arched eyebrow,  
smelt of paint, and was narrow as  
the thin veins on his hands. You met him

drunk, in warm music and dark deliverance, every moment  
since has been sober and muted.

You have sat, demure as frost beneath the fluorescence  
of his friends' eyes at parties. His family  
remain theoretical, names only. Not yet, he says.  
You will meet them, but not yet. You paint

the baby's room while he  
is away, buy rugs and mats to stifle the echo  
that ricochets from his mahogany floors. See friends  
who should be envious but aren't. You sleep  
deeply as the trees shrug away their leaves in  
the afternoon sunlight.

And certainly  
he is a marvel, certainly, just as he marvels  
at you, just as his shirts are silver skyscrapers and his eyes  
are amphitheatres and sometimes,  
sometimes there is still  
scarlet  
in his voice.

But autumn in the townhouse grew cold faster  
than you planned. Sometimes all that holds you  
is the gentle curve of a tiny ear, the gathering cloudburst  
and promises and splendour of a new ally  
waiting within.

# In The Heat, The Minotaur

*By Adam Norris*

*For Eddie Maguire Brauer*

HE WAS EIGHT OR NINE when Cuthbert drove them to shoot the bull. They had followed the silt-slowed course of Blackfella's, bled almost dry from the August heat and the supping of kangaroos bounding frantic with the sun as it slaked its own thirst beneath the horizon. The heat and the carcasses of joeys flashing by on the side of the road, this is what he remembered most.

- Uncle Cutty?
- Mm?
- Sure are a lot of dead kangaroos out here.

Cuthbert clucked his tongue in answer indecipherable and squinted in the river glare. He scratched his beard absently.

- Reach back there and grab us a smoke can you.

The boy fumbled around the backseat. The air not stale, not ripe; years later he would recognise the smell as yet another hallmark in the methods of identifying a man who lives alone. The smell of absence that masquerades as clutter. Grease-spattered football jerseys, a cool-bag creased with sand, Burger King wrappers, a pink hair curler, old Trading Posts and muddled blundstones. The shotgun sat breached atop like a buzzard poised over some unrecognised junkyard carcass.

- Might be under the jerseys.

The boy retrieved the cigarettes, lit one with the dashboard lighter, coughed obligatorily and handed it across. His uncle dragged deeply.

- Cancer sticks, mum says.
- Your mum used to smoke too, you know.
- I know.
- Still, she's right. Cancer sticks. Coffin nails. Ashtray breath.
- Ashtray breath?
- Ashtray breath. Never kiss a girl who smokes more than two cigarettes on the first date.
- She can smoke a hundred cigarettes, I don't care. Who wants to kiss? Have you ever run over a kangaroo before?

- Ran over a horse once. Driving back to your place along that stretch of road through all the corn.

- Mount Brown Road.
- Mmm. No moon out and suddenly this horse, looked like a piece of night just stepped out of the sky and came at me. Hit it and it smashed up against the windscreen, rolled over the roof. Know what's funny?
- What?

- Thought it was a moose at first. Don't know why. Never saw a moose in the flesh. Something to do with the legs when they flipped up over the hood, all long and knobbly. Scared the hell out of me but. Got the car off the road though, front end all crumpled up and the windscreen lying in big chunks across the road, all over the front seats. Looked like great big tears. Windscreens are designed to shatter like that, I reckon.

- How was the horse?

Cuthbert had glanced across at the boy, then flicked his eyes back to the road.

- Died instant. Shame. Someone's racehorse, I heard.

He had noted Cuthbert's pause. His uncle had a way of speaking that seemed almost reluctant. The intention to talk was there, but the words themselves seemed wary to leave his throat and sentences would come out in long sighs, his thoughts interrupted by hesitant tongue. This conversation had seemed different in a way the boy could not identify, as though something had been unlatched in his uncle's voice. He wondered if a moose and a horse would get along in the wild.

His uncle finished his cigarette and flicked it out the window. Ahead of them a flock of startled cockatoos took off from the side of the road in a rush of mad, awkward ascension and the boy craned to watch them lumber overhead as if scrabbling for purchase in the slick of the sky. Telephone wires loped across the vast brown of burnt lucerne and cotton fields like threads left by anxious giants to follow home to the shore, or perhaps it was the river who laid these trails from some dimly remembered point beyond the flatlands, attached still across the dust and drought to some sibling stream drying out in its own rapid time.

They drove. Another dead joey passed by outside, its back legs stiff and jutting like the limbs of a remarkable tree. Fruit shrunken and blood-dappled. Gradually the farmsteads began to huddle and driveways appeared, dirt or crushed-oyster-dusted, adorned with titles carved in treated oaks and eucalypts whose craftsmanship belied the earth from which they rose, tottering, like edifices to an early inhospitable god – Pineview, Stormleigh, Billabong, Shahdaroba, The Retreat – until finally the houses crept so close together names grew ostentatious. The weeds of the open country gave way to bracken fern and patches of Patterson's Curse dotting the causeway like the remains of a cloak laid upon the mud for noble passage long adjourned. The river held tightly to their right, the twists and divergences that had studded its path ironed out to a long, needle-thin vein from which the approaching town seemed to have seeped before clotting.

- Have to stop for petrol, but we're close now. Taylor's farm is just a few miles the other side of town.

- Where are we?

- Mittagurri. Used to be part of the drover trail, n'before that the camel caravans. Back in the day. Can't imagine it would've been much to look at then either.

- It looks pretty crappy.

- Pretty crappy alright. Blackfella's isn't strong enough to save this place. River's

tapped in too many places, can't go a mile without seeing another bloody pump. Give it ten years and we'll be looking at a ghost town.

A cobbled promenade followed the road into town, marked by tired willows and park benches. It seemed so out of place to the boy, that somehow quaint path running along the river, trafficked solely by overcast-plumed cranes and sickle-beaked ibises stalking between the willow's mottled shadows with long, mincing strides, more like the movements of shadow puppets than creatures of feather and flesh. Out of place, and somehow sad. It was the benches, he decided. Sitting with their view of a dwindling river and the failing fields beyond, still charmed by the civic pride that had seen them installed years before, backs turned to the town drying behind them from which they still might expect some sunset patronage while the bird droppings caked to their slats. The boy could hear a dog barking somewhere, and for a moment could believe this was already a ghost town, that the population had left at the first sight of dust rising miles away as their car approached, unwilling to meet the eye of one more traveller passing through to greener futures, and so they left, stepped back in the shadows not to return, or struck out across the river to be disassembled amongst the cotton thorns, no testament left save the cry of a single dog chained to a fence, forgotten.

The image was dashed as they reached the intersection and turned into town. A motorcycle veered onto the road ahead and sputtered past, the rider helmetless. It felt like the first traffic the boy had seen in hours. Cuthbert pulled in at a Shell Station alongside a Dodge Pickup the faded colour of denim. An old man wearing a straw hat and sporting a snow-white handlebar moustache was climbing into the cab, and the boy caught himself wondering, not for the first time, if this old man looked anything like his own grandfather. Cuthbert cut the ignition and nodded his head to the man, who returned it stiffly and pulled out of the lot.

- That fella was the spitting image of Sam Eliot. Or maybe Hulk Hogan, never noticed before how similar they look. Check out across the road.

A fire-gutted building sat directly opposite the pumps, sunlight shining through the partially collapsed roof in shafts that lost their vibrancy as they pierced the crumbling walls and floors, meandering through collapsed landings and bowed doorways til they reached the ground muted from their exploration.

- Arson, I heard. S'been a few of them lately. Don't much see the point here in town. Fire looks better when you're in the middle of nowhere. Grab a cloth and wipe the windscreen, you'd think we'd been driving through every insect in the country.

The boy grabbed the bucket by the pumps while Cuthbert walked inside the service station, relishing the wet sponge in his fist despite the scummy water. He had seen days this hot before, but not since several summers passed when he had the luxury of cooling off in the creek on his uncle's farm. It had flowed past the old dairy by the north boundary fence, its course graced with a crumbling wooden windmill sinking into its southern banks. The axis that allowed its sails to turn had rusted through, his uncle said, and now whenever a strong gust blew the windmill

stood stationary, groaning like a sleeping dog and casting off loose planks into the creek bed. The water at its base was treacherous and there one swam in fear of errant nails and mud-spattered splinters. Yet that was now drought country and the creek had withdrawn to some invisible asylum within the rushes and cracked orange clay, just as Blackfella's seemed intent to recede into the Ordovician earth it had so briefly delighted, just as the present heat lay about Mittagurri in a slow and hazy torpor, unsure of its agency or delineation, smothering the township and drying the eyes, making the stretch of thoroughfare shimmer resentfully and the water running down the windscreen very cool on the boy's arm.

He stood there, savouring the damp and dirty rivulets, when movement caught the corner of his eye. He turned to face the gutted building, one hand raised to shield his gaze; three storeys of blackened timber protruding from clusters of shattered brick, pieces of ruined furniture near indistinguishable from the rubble, the walls coated in a grey substance the boy could not identify. The whole building had the appearance of an overcooked dessert, the charcoal beams like elegant candles, ochre bricks a dried and chalky frosting, the collapsed furniture some rare, inedible fruit. The building's awning had been salvaged and propped against the front landing – Mittagurri Hotel – and the boy thought back to the river giants, what they would think of this banquet when they finally summoned the courage to leave the water, to gorge themselves on stairwells and masonry, pick teeth with roof tiles or faucets ... Movement again, something had shifted in one of the ground floor's rear rooms. Through walls either crumbling or altogether collapsed the boy could see to the very rear of the building, but the darkness inside, the mounds of debris prevented him from seeing clearly. A dog started barking again, and for a second he thought he saw something pass an open doorway, the fleeting movement of a waving hand, until the car door slammed behind him and the boy jumped. Cuthbert was lighting a cigarette and gazing at the boy.

- What did I tell you. Ghost town already.

- They're not gonna rebuild it?

- Don't see much of a point. Might've been put on a heritage list if it lasted a few more years, but there's not enough people visiting to make it worthwhile now. Hop in. Might still make lunch if we're lucky.

- I think it's kinda sad. People who live here and walk past it every day, knowing no one's gonna come and fix it. Can we go inside?

Cuthbert smiled and shook his head. Soon the town was behind them, not trickling away as the boy had expected but simply ending; a caryard filled with rusted motor blocks and mounds of old tyres towering above the corrugated-iron fences, and then the sudden russet of open country. Even the willow trees seemed to have forsaken the north end of town, though the bracken was in abundance; the boy could see patches of it spreading through the cotton fields on the opposite bank.

They drove on unspeaking, the boy distracting himself from his nervousness by thoughts of the forsaken hotel behind them, staring out at the static landscape;

cotton, river, lucerne. At one point Cuthbert drifted over into the oncoming lane and ran over a snake curled for warmth upon the tar. Though the boy readied himself to feel a bump, some shift however slight in the car's momentum, there was no indication of the snake beneath the wheel as the car rolled on. Roadkill began to slowly reappear; at first just dark patches upon the ground like small oil spills, irregular islands dotting the peripus of the highway, but soon clumps of rotting fur and bone emerged, and that most telling feature, the tail, split and seething hosts of flies; the brief sour smell of death, and then all of it vanishing in the rear-vision mirror. Cuthbert lit another cigarette as the road curved sharply, and the last of the day's benign magic was revealed.

Field after field of sunflowers stretching for who knew, further than the boy could spy, contained by no boundary appreciable by farmhand or passer-by, for even on the neighbouring bank – the Maguire Orchards, so the turn to the driveway indicated – long stalks teetered over the hen-and-chicken fern and withered ornament grasses, the sagging yellow heads slightly cocked as though bemused to find themselves thriving in such terrain.

- Like a weed around here. Your mother would probably like it, though.

The boy agreed, though said nothing. What was perhaps just another eccentric landmark for his uncle here in country marked on the whole by conformity – just as the roadkill, so strange and disquieting a sight for the boy, seemed as unremarkable as traffic posts to Cuthbert – became something filled with promise, or change, or treachery, or a sum of these. They were almost at the ranch at last. No breeze moved the flowers but their scent was everywhere. His uncle did not indicate as they turned off the highway.

The Taylor house was perched at the crest of a hill, off-white and squat like the nub of a guttered candle, protected from wind by a small copse of apricot and apple. A pear tree dwarfed the house on its northern flank, the limbs so thick-twisted and umber-barked it seemed derelict, a thing lightning-glanced and inelegant were it not for boughs still laden with fruit. A cluster of cars were parked on the driveway and lawn, several cattle dogs coasting from wheel to wheel and cocking legs. They began barking as soon as the sound of crunching gravel reached their ears, stood between the vehicles and nipped the passing tires. Cuthbert pulled up in the shadow of the pear tree and killed the engine as a screen door banged open and the dogs fell silent. He pocketed his cigarettes and turned to the boy.

- It's all right. They won't bite. Trained to round up livestock. They won't bite.

A short bespectacled man was approaching them from the house. He was dressed in what his mother styled Country Company Clothes; blue jeans, work boots and sensible chequered shirts in no specific yet inevitably muted colour. The boy was no judge of age, though he put the man to be older than his uncle, older still than his father. Sixty perhaps, or more. Hair grey and thinning. The dogs sniffed frantically around his ankles as he stepped from the car. The man smiled slightly and held his hand out to Cuthbert, a slight nod of the head.

- Took your time.
  - Hmph. Blame the boy.
  - What? Why blame me?
  - Don't pay any attention to him. You're uncle's always trying to shift the blame.
- He's a bugger like that. Keep asking him back here though, more fool me.
- Someone's gotta keep this place from going under. How are you, Ray?
  - Getting there. Long time since I seen you, lad. Bet you don't remember me.
  - You would've seen Ray back when you first moved here.
  - No, sorry.
  - S'alright. Least I'm still here for you to see me now. Well, come in. Janice made some kind of casserole, got her brother's family down before they push on back to Grafton. You eaten?

The house was smaller than the boy expected. The door they entered led through a cluttered laundry and down a short hall with several closed doors. Mounted on the walls were framed black-and-white photographs, men with shadow-smeared faces standing on landings, women smiling in wide dresses. Each photograph in some degree of fading, the tones losing definition as though dissolving into the beige walls, or perhaps a process more proleptic, an archipelago seesawing between sight and surf. New prints gaining definition as they were expelled.

- Uncle Cuttie?

The boy had stopped before a charcoal landscape, a wide river and willows that seemed fragile under pencil-stroke, some clapboard houses on the opposite bank, a couple on a blanket by the shore. The base of the sketch read Mittagurri, 1907.

- Told you it hasn't changed much. Come on and have some lunch.

They ate quickly, and after Cuthbert and Ray ventured out into the orchard to smoke the boy was left to his own devices. Men and women he did not recognise bustled throughout the house ferrying foodstuffs and blankets, and after another examination of the hallway sketch – nose almost pressed to the glass as though attempting to identify the faceless couple seated by the water; what was perhaps the roof of the hotel; what may be a dog tied solemnly to a fencepost – he wandered back outside.

The day's heat had begun to ease yet still the farm's activity seemed limited to places of shade. The dogs were camped beneath cars, chickens squatted and foraged in the shadow of the house. He spied Ray and his uncle ambling through the orchard and dropping ripe fruit into old ice-cream containers, noted how brown and withered the ground became as it progressed from trough and water tank to stretches of earth that had not felt rain for months. He wondered if they had already decided which bull he was to kill. The boy stood with his back to the house, the sun on the back of his neck not yet uncomfortable, and tried to imagine his face a camera, to preserve a single scene and take his mind from his anxiousness. Petrified animal droppings, a flying fox dried to papier-mâché hanging from a low branch, bones jutting and spindly like thistle. Weather-bleached garden gnomes, a broken

yard sprinkler. The smell of dry wheat and something sweeter. A group of children were playing cricket beside a corrugated iron shed housing a tractor and slasher, and beyond these bales of musty hay that tottered like a city skyline, home to unseen field mice and redbacks busying themselves between twine. As he approached, a tennis ball came skimming across the ground, bouncing haphazard on the tufts of lovegrass. A small redhead boy, fielding at left-right-out, came skidding after, eyes grimly fixed on the ball. The fielders stopped to mark his progress, and the boy had the strange impression of suddenly finding himself witness to something illicit or shamed. The batsman, a redhead teen the boy took to be an older brother, laughed derisively and motioned for the bowler to deliver again. The second ball went sailing across the yard just as the younger boy stooped to retrieve the first, and off he ran again, prisoner to its passage, without a hope of catching it in its descent and surely too weak to throw it back. The boy walked on before the other players could catch his eye and invite him to join.

From the impromptu pitch the ground sloped away slightly, leading to a long elevated building some two hundred metres away. A labyrinth of iron cattle runs surrounded the approach, where Herefords swayed drunkenly against the rails and casually cruel farmhands slapped hides and prodded reluctant steers forward. A minotaur devolved to humbler parts. A woman crouched by the side of the building washing blood from her hands.

The men from the slaughterhouse were marching towards the homestead for lunch, drenched in sweat and smoking to a man. Behind them the boy could see the door to the killing floor standing open and a row of green aprons hanging from hooks. Beyond this he could spy cambrels suspended from a grid mounted on the ceiling, dangling like Christmas baubles, and lengths of chain swaying slightly as though stirred by phantom hands, and shadow all whitewashed from electric lights. So this is the house Uncle Cuttie wants me to see. The snort and bellow of the cows was a constant rabble as those herded to one side of the slaughterhouse moaned in dull response to those unseen on the other. Passing advice. Be sure to take the run on the far right. Loll your tongue and favour one leg. Failing that avoid the middle gate, five stalls down, the blade is too dull. If I were a cow, the boy thought.

Compelled to further explore the slaughterhouse and in equal measure fearful of what he might find, the boy skirted the building, the sounds of cattle lost in the whine of refrigerator motors. At the rear two cattle-gridded ramps descended, one for human traffic, the other for the ferrying of carcasses. Another cattle yard was located here, an acre sloping south towards the highway enclosed by six-foot-tall metal rails. A long-neglected sheep shelter had been erected in the yard, a large concrete pipe with a corrugated iron roof. Nearby an artificial dam beshitton and muddled, cracked concrete along its banks. An Angus bull had wallowed in up to its knees and now looked about, shaking its head as though emerging from a trance. A dozen other bulls were clustered about the water or standing beneath the slight shade afforded by a second pear tree towering in the corner of the pen, less impressive

than where they had parked the car yet still as knobbled and unlikely as anything he had seen in tales of poisoned fruit and enchanted forests. He watched the bulls blinking through great clouds of flies that supped the moisture of their eyes, a constant flickering film distorting the world throughout their long and lumbering days. Back towards the house voices were raised as someone was dismissed on the cricket pitch – the older brother, the boy assumed – and his uncle and Ray appeared at the top of the ramp holding containers now filled with apples. Ray smiled and leant against the fence rails.

- Picked your favourite? They've all gotta go. Be doing one a favour, in a way. Reckon'd be a bit quicker than how we usually get rid of 'em.

He pulled a startled face and drew a finger across his neck and his uncle laughed. From the front of the building came a sharp bang and the bulls closest to the slaughterhouse started, leaping back with a nimbleness the boy had not expected. Beasts that weighed almost a tonne, bounding in fright like lambs. Ray threw up his hands.

- Little mongrels. Told'm to stick to the tennis balls or they're likely to smash a bloody window.

- Might teach them a lesson.

- Teach me a lesson for ever having'm in the first place. Told Mike this morning not to bring the damn cricket ball with 'em. Too soft on those kids.

- Are they the red-haired boys?

- Them's the ones. Not giving you and grief, are they?

- Mum told me never to marry a red-haired girl because they have evil children.

Ray looked surprised and then burst out laughing.

- Evil children? Yep, I reckon she's right, but don't tell Janice I said so.

- Mr Taylor?

- Ray'll do fine, son.

- Did you plant all the sunflowers yourself?

- God no. Half tempted to poison the damn things off. M'daughter planted the first ones years back. Thought we might be able to turn a bit of a profit off 'em, put 'em by the highway with an honesty box, but Sally was never interested in selling. Came a bit of a family thing, something to remember by. Now you two hang on while I go tell off the grandkids.

Ray walked back inside the slaughterhouse. Cuthbert lifted the metal brace on the fence so he could cross to the boy, shaking the ice cream pail as he did.

The bulls, fear dispelled in the promise of food, began to shamble forward, massive black beasts bobbing heads and breathing heavily. Snot trickled and was lapped away by coarse grey tongues probing deep into nostrils. As they neared the fence they drew still, so that to the boy it looked as though they were locked in place, heads lowered and staring at his uncle, grunting, tamping down the earth.

Without taking his eyes from the nearest bull, a slightly smaller Angus standing side-on to the rails, the boy hoisted himself up the railing, the metal warm and

slightly greasy.

From this vantage the boy could see the ground beyond the pens slope away sharply to the southwest, the view to the right obscured by the building and the branches. Alongside the pen a disused run weaved uneasily, the wooden slats warped and splintered. At the end nearest to his uncle a heavy wooden collar stood open, like a toothless guillotine; a length of rope ran from its uppermost plank, trailed over the railings and wound round a winch; here the ranchers could operate the collar to hold the cattle in place while they were drenched or ear-tagged.

Though standing still the bulls seemed ill at ease; anxiousness rose like the ripples of heat from the highway. Something in the eyes. In the working of their jaws. Each bull may not have known what the future had in store, the boy thought, but the proximity to that building of bloodscent and death-loosened bowels must trigger something inside, some flame of instinct and fear that made them keep their silence. From the south a breeze carried scents unidentifiable but pleasant, something crisp and cooling. The boy thought again of Mittagurri, of the street of heat and dust that no breeze stirred.

A family thing, Ray had said, and that was just how his property seemed; a coat-of-arms, stretching for miles beneath the crown of the homestead, ram-harrid sheep cornered and quivering beneath boughs heavy with fruit, dusty grey cattle runs and foul-smelling dips interlacing the fields like crude splints holding a brittle earth in place, the sunflowers elegantly curving from the house to the bottom of the hill in a bright heraldic sash, unravelling as it met the Maguire Orchard to the south like loose threads in the Creator's leftover yarn. Even there the sunflowers were not contained, trickling through the neighbouring farm. The boy began to lower himself down.

- Stay up there, you can toss these to the ones at the back.

Cuthbert handed over some apples and they began to toss them gently towards the bulls. The boy found himself slightly in awe; no sooner had the fruit touched the ground it was scooped up and crushed in a single bite, swallowed whole and forgotten as the next apple tumbled forward.

They had almost emptied the pail when the tennis ball rolled down past the side of the building and came to rest in the grass. The boy and Cuthbert both turned to watch as the young redheaded child came running down the hill, his face set in disappointment. He knew he could not please the older boys but could not bring himself to quit. Once more the boy was glad he was not asked to join. The child grabbed the ball and dashed back towards the house when another tennis ball came rolling off the roof of the slaughterhouse, landing squarely between the two ramps. Cries of You forgot one! carried from the pitch.

- They're picking on that kid.

- It's because he's the youngest. Makes the others feel stronger if they have someone to boss around, you know. Good thing you're not like that, right?

- Mm hm. Hey, Uncle Cuttie, how about if I had a cigarette now? Nobody'll see.

- Kiddo, if your mother ever found out I'd be the one with a bullet in his head.
- Uncle Cuttie -
- No. Picked one yet? It's your decision. Reminds me, left the smokes up at the house, I'll grab Ray's rifle while I'm up there. Don't give them all of the apples yet, and try not to scare them. Want to try and keep them in this area of the yard.

The smell of fresh cow droppings was ripe and not unpleasant and the bulls swayed against each other, scraping horns and grunting expectantly. Strange to think such a thing may find him frightening. He found he wasn't scared himself, at least not in the way he had come to understand fear. He had fired the rifle before, had even shot a rabbit once with a .24 gauge shotgun his father had kept beside the bed. His hands had shaken badly, but there was little fear. It was the way they just stood there, he thought, patient, as though awaiting a prize. As though they were waiting together like friends to see what happens next.

Slowly he reached out and pulled himself up to the top railing, yet even so the bulls scuttled several steps away, a sharp sideways gait that again dispelled any notion the boy had of how cows actually move. He cautiously swung one leg over the rail, as mindful of making too sudden a move as he was of somehow making himself a target, and slowly stood, balancing himself at his zenith by leaning against a branch of the pear tree. He hoisted himself up onto the limb, gauging its strength by the appearance of those more fragile or rotted through completely. Another branch above seemed sturdy enough to take his weight and so he climbed, the surrounding leaves enough perhaps to camouflage him from the ground. He will say he wanted to see the view, he thought. You can see for miles, Uncle Cuttie. You can see the road from here. You can see the river.

He stood there, watching the world through shrivelled pear husks, when he spotted the young red-haired boy emerge at the top of the ramp with tears on his cheeks and a cricket ball clasped in his hand.

He crouched, bower-bound and silent as the child walked beneath the base of the tree and ducked through the railing to stand in safety from the bulls. He reached down to begin unzipping his fly and the boy looked away, flushed with embarrassment, terrified that the child would happen to glance up and spy him just as urine began to spray across the roots of the pear tree, and God knew what would happen then. He felt certain that right at that moment Cuthbert would appear, and though he wasn't entirely certain how this suddenly conspiratorial situation would find him punished, he knew that it would. He closed his eyes again and tried to imagine the life that existed for him this time tomorrow, and prayed for the child to return to his hopeless torments with the older boys.

The angry embarrassment continued to churn, caused not from his odd vigil in the branches but from the whole, intimidating mess of the day, where everything he saw seemed possessed of some sad significance that lost its shape as soon as he turned away, a world of words he could not name. It was the sound of scraping metal that finally broke through his reverie and he turned at last to stare down

through the boughs.

The redhaired child had not wandered back to the cricket pitch as he'd hoped but had climbed up to the second railing of the fence and was working at the metal latch holding the gate in place. He was muttering something the boy could only barely discern – I hate them I hate them – and though he lacked the strength to open it outright, the latch was slowly rising by degrees, The boy grasped another branch to steady himself and leant forward.

- Hey!

The child looked up at once, wide-eyed and mouth agape just as the latch flicked open and the branch snapped under the boy's hand with a muffled, wet crack.

He landed splayed upon the branch beneath, too shocked to cry, and watched as the rotted bough dropped with awful grace through the air till it landed square upon the makeshift sheep-shelter with enough force to buckle the corrugated rooftop. The impact was like a thunderclap, amplified by the curved concrete walls, a cannon of sound that echoed off the hills. The Anguses bolted , their speed abnormal somehow, something unfair. The smaller Angus at the front had remained standing side-on to the rails, and bellowed as the others panicked forward, heads lowered and hooves striking. As it collapsed against the gate it screamed, and the boy had the clear thought that nothing should be allowed to scream in such a way, thought it even as he watched the child thrown backwards from the force of the stampede to land hard upon the earth .

They bolted from the yard, leaping over the crippled bull to run downhill, vaulting the sheep-fences or blindly tearing them down in their momentum, following a course seemingly set by the sunflowers, trickling from the slaughterhouse to the fields of lucerne below. From the Taylor's house came cries of alarm as the escaping bulls were spied tearing across the paddocks.

At last and yet too early, too soon to remedy this dumb violence, Cuthbert emerged running from the slaughterhouse, the rifle slung over his shoulder.

The crippled bull had tried to stand, its eyes wild and madly rolling. Each breath was scratched and ragged, a torn-cardboard sound, and blood flowed from a deep gash along its flank. It staggered forward, broken-legged and bewildered, falling face-first against the ground and snuffling gouts of dust and foam. The redheaded child lay nearby , and as he tried to scrabble to his feet the bull grunted and hefted itself forward, its bulk too great for the shattered leg to withstand and the Angus fell heavy, and from his vantage it seemed certain to the boy that the child would be crushed, his sullen rebellion pinned to the earth beneath dewlap or blood-sheared horn, yet as Cuthbert darted forward the child jerked himself away and the bull hit the ground alongside him.

Cuthbert rushed to drag the child away and the boy knew he had to move now while his uncle was distracted or face having to explain what he was doing there. Certain he would falter as he lowered himself from the branch, deserving surely of some blind retribution, he reached the fence-rails and descended without incident.

It was not till both feet were on the ground that he realised he had been holding his breath.

The crippled bull began to bawl and the boy cringed. This was not the sound an animal should make. Another dashed expectation to chalk on the tally of the day. The boy thought of the benches unoccupied along the river, and sidled along the rails until he stood beside the slaughterhouse .

The bellows of the escaped herd echoed from the sunflower paddock, a constant groan like the buckle and rupture of a ship run-aground as each bull responded to the call of its neighbour, vying for dominance in this new and fleeting country only ever before sensed when the south wind carried the scent of river and pollen to the pens around the slaughterhouse. Stentorian grunts between mouthfuls of sunflower. Great sad heads shaking away flies.

Ray appeared at a trot with several men the boy recognised from the house. One of them bent down to comfort the child and the child threw his arms around his neck, sobbing. Ray shook his head, and when he spoke his voice was shaky though not alarmed.

- Jesus, Bert. I knew you were no use having around.

He turned and spied the boy pressed against the side of the building and immediately began to move.

- Bert, he's hurt.

His uncle was instantly by his side, his face masked in such concern the boy very nearly began weeping himself.

- What's the matter, what's hurt, let me -

-I'm no, I'm I'm ok -

- You're bleeding.

-I'm ...

Only now did the pain of his bitten tongue begin to sink in. He reached up to his mouth and stared at his fingertips when they came away red. The world swam grey for a moment, and he realised Cuthbert was helping him to stand.

- I bit my tongue.

- Let me see. You'll be alright, it doesn't look deep. You're not hurt, you're not, not hurt anywhere?

The boy shook his head and looked down. Ray lay a hand on his shoulder,

- Good lad, Je-sus, but what a mess. Janice won't be happy. She loves those sunflowers. First things first, better take care of this poor crippled bastard. You might want to take the boy up to the house, Bert. Looks pretty pale.

- I'm ok.

Cuthbert knelt down beside him.

- Might give it a miss this time, what do you say? If you like we can stick around, but maybe ... Maybe wait till next time till you have a turn. Do you want to watch Ray do it? Or we can go if you want. Go back to the house or go home. It's up to you.

The boy was silent for a time. Then nodded. Cuthbert helped him walk across to the other men.

So this was it, the day's zenith so brutally reached; the men gathered around the bull in a semicircle like good-natured guests at a christening, men whose faces grew vague as soon as the boy turned his head. The bull had pulled itself up against the fence, its broken leg awkwardly tucked against its side. It had fallen silent now and appeared almost sartorial. Flies buzzed about its eyes and scurried about the chafed grey landscape of its lips, but the panic had left its gaze and it seemed placid. The bull rocked forward slightly and began to gently rise, supporting its weight against the fence. It lowered its horns. Cuthbert stepped forward.

The rifle cracked and the boy jumped and the bull's back legs began to sag. He could not see where the bullet had entered, but as the bull fell to the ground blood spurted from its head and splashed the railings, the colour so rich it seemed unnatural, seemed to somehow boil in the air, bright and out of place, and surely the ground would hiss and crack as the blood burned its way into the soil, would dissolve the bull itself now that it had at last been given release, dissolution in that first draught of freedom, and later he would think perhaps his uncle's planned rite of passage had indeed come to pass, but it was not a maturing as they may have anticipated, but a division, a kind of distancing down the cleft of the boy's self, from childhood to something else, the same distance between the shattered joeys and the racehorse that had bolted down the highway so many moonless nights past, or the bulls which had escaped to a country almost mythic, and Cuthbert stepped forward to shoot it once more in the crown of its head, fine jets of blood arcing across his boots like feathers, like gently falling feathers, its tongue half severed and lolling from its mouth where its jaw had clenched shut, and when his uncle asked him how he was, the boy responded in a level voice, I'm fine. I see what you mean. I'm fine.

- Well. Not how we expected the day to go, but ... You ok? Do you need anything, some water?

- I'm just going over there.

The boy had no idea where he intended to go and Cuthbert did not stop him. He let the sound of conversation fade behind him and walked past the pear tree, noticing for the first time the puddle of urine already drying and seeming black against the dirt as the sun continued its styptic defence of the earth, to let colour seep back to the ether, to reveal all in crude grace more fierce for the desire to see each day reach its close. He passed where the bulls had broken down the fence wire, a buckled star-post pointing out across the fields where the flood of sunflowers ran.

He stood there and the breeze calmed the heat that seemed to ebb from his chest and he wondered what the child's name was, if he was hurt, what his own mother was doing at this moment, and what kind of person would leave a dog tied up like that all alone just tied up like you didn't care and he realised somehow he had picked up the child's cricket ball and was clutching it tight and dropped it quickly to watch it tumble downhill without stopping and he breathed deeply.

Far below the liberated bulls had gathered by the waterhole, glancing blows with neighbours or eating their fill or staring stoic at the fields, and the field after that, and on, there to gouge horn-locked at the earth, where to gaze upon them at distance would be to see some shape of myth heaving saliva and blood into the other's maw, conjoined and circling, their proximity rendering them blind, aware only of the other's breath and the tracks beaten upon the dirt and clay receding in a wheel as those prints most distant in this small cycle are trampled away in their turning, until such time they disengage to find a weaker rotation, and bow to drink the water until the water has run dry.

# Like The Deposed Russian Autocrat

by Steven Brozovich

THEY GAVE ME A CLIPBOARD and said "Congratulations, you're the new transport czar." I said "Why me?" They informed me that the minister formerly in charge had abrogated his responsibility by running off with the skirt from a variety show. I meant, I wasn't qualified. "Have you ever ridden a train?" "Every day for 20 years, there and back." "Son, you've got the job!" If I wanted a whiteboard too, it would have to get signed off by Accounts. "Knock yourself out."

I told my wife about my promotion. She said the problems facing our city's transport system included ageing infrastructure, poor patronage and random threats from over-individualised youth with contempt for authority. Did I think I could solve all that, and still maintain the lawns? "Would a whiteboard help?" I asked.

My first press conference went well, I thought. "More trains, and more people riding them" was my theme. I could only take half an hour off work, so I had to skip questions, but I laid out a vision of the future consisting of a dozen bullet-points and two artist-impressions designed by my daughter, the trainee hairdresser. Later, Accounts told me any cost overruns would be garnered from my wages.

I got my brother Craig, a part-time desktop publisher, to pencil in a couple of new lines. We photocopied the plans on stationery I snuck out of work and distributed them at the stations, asking people to add their comments and mail them back to me. The newspapers started describing my efforts as amateurish. I called a press conference to ask their specific complaints. They said an unnamed source had accused me of taking bribes, and held up one of my bank statements. I said that was the fortnightly payment from my job. I blamed Craig. He was pissed because he'd wanted to laminate the plans but I said it would cost too much.

"Darling, have you made the trains run to schedule yet?" asked my wife one night.

"57% of the time I have," I said. "It's a losing cause. No-one wants to be where they're going, but they hate being late getting there." I looked in the mirror. My hair had gone grey and my skin sallow. My boss said I was wasting valuable man-hours.

"Sometimes I think I should just make the trains run backwards. Then people can think more about where they've come from, and less on where they're going. And arriving would be a pleasant surprise."

My wife finished brushing her hair. "Darling," she said, "you work too hard. Come to bed."

## **Notes on a Conference**

*Cameron Fuller*

It's not what you say at the podium; it's what  
you sputter with a mouthful of quiche at lunch.  
How you manage to smile with spinach in teeth  
and pastry flakes on lips. It's how you  
juggle a cup of tea and a paper plate.  
How you demonstrate poise and eloquence  
when the guts drop out of a sandwich  
or biscuits break and splash in the cup.  
After spring rolls and strudel, it's how  
you negotiate the greasy, sticky handshake.  
When talking to a keynote speaker, remember  
the difference between theory and practice.  
You can have an intellectual debate  
with a chicken shashlik in your hand—  
just don't let it show you're thinking  
of the best place to leave the skewer.

# **Teaching a Post Lunar World**

*Caitlin Thomson*

I had to draw a picture of the moon  
for my children, charcoal etched on stone.

My failure to describe stars an ongoing one.  
The many Suns of night?  
My eldest asks How could you sleep?

To draw one would only confuse them further,  
even the moon, an absent touch stone for me,  
is to them a myth. A bright gravity defying rock?

My daughter traces the outlines,  
comes away with black fingers.



## The animal within

Rachael Mead

I would like to remember how to live.  
As a child I had the knack  
of that art, braiding body with thought,  
the mindless physicality  
of running through days without motive.

Now I walk on legs ripe with indigo blooms  
from unnoticed encounters with edges.  
This uninhabited body watches in awe  
as women click along, practically *en pointe*  
while speaking in full sentences.

Whole lives can be lived within our heads.  
Each month I am again surprised  
by my body's fertility, oblivious  
to the gauges of fleshy appetites.

Within my world, all is conscious,  
everything has an opinion.  
Dogs sulk, trees rejoice,  
stones endure. The household  
extends beyond the window.

I need to reverse that pathetic fallacy  
of painting the world human,  
instead dig out the subcutaneous animal,  
and learn by forgetting. Sit necessity  
at the table's head and choice out in the yard.

I want to claim my mammalian dowry  
and welcome the pariah home.  
Not in the daily particulars of belly and shelter  
but the pure kick of instinct,  
of noticing all, yet analysing none.

Pull envy from the paw's dark pad  
and lick it clean.

# The Curse of the Mano Perdida

*Daniel Preston*

PHYSICALLY, THE RIGHT HAND OF STYLES was unimpressive; slim and long-fingered, girlish, and no good whatsoever for handball or acts of physical violence. But it was not on account of its appearance that I stared constantly at it. Everyone knew that something sinister was going to happen to the Hand. It was going to be cut off by a rogue machine blade, or be squashed by a large block, or spontaneously combust, just as had happened to the right hand of every male member of the Styles family for untold generations. I didn't want to miss out on the moment when it exploded, and spent my days staring intently at it.

"Yes," Styles would tell you if you asked. His voice was unusual and melodious, like the uneasy shifting of wind chimes. "Every man in my family has lost his right hand." This delicious information was presented by Styles in a manner so commonplace that it made us itch with excitement.

Each classroom at school was built to the exact same dimensions, and the desks in each laid out in the same configuration, and due to the alphabetical ordering of our surnames this ensured that in every class I was positioned one row to the right and three desks back from Styles. This was excellent news for me; I was able to ignore Mr Broom mumbling through his moustache, or the nasal whine of Mr Clutchens, or whoever it was to be torturing our ears this hourly period, and instead concentrate on the Hand.

"My grandfather lost his hand in a horse-riding accident on a big country-station muster," Styles said. "His horse stumbled and he fell from the saddle. His arm was caught in a loop of number-eight wire on a fence, his foot in the stirrup, and the horse was still galloping. It was either the foot or the hand, and the hand gave first, sliced clean off."

If anything like that was going to happen to the Hand of Styles, I sure as hell wasn't going to miss it. I gave Mr Broom's calculus the full force of my disregard. Mr Broom was a thin man whose head was too far in front of his body, as if it were in more of a hurry than the rest of him, and his neck and spine curved after it in pursuit, making him look like a walking question mark. He had a large moustache that hung down over his mouth and wrongfully imprisoned stray consonants. He could never compete with as a soon-to-be-gone Hand.

At first we had doubted Styles' story. He was strange, and the story itself was preposterous. After all, we were no longer little children. How could we be, when the headmaster addressed us at our assemblies as 'young men'? But our doubt didn't seem to bother him; he was sure in his own mind. Then came the day when we saw the Proof.

After the school week we were released for the long weekend. We waited in our respective packs for the arrival of parents. Except Styles: only he waited by himself. Being alone was an unforgivable weakness. Even the rejects had other rejects with whom they formed friendships and alliances. But Styles did not seem to recognise this. He never sought out company. He stood in a wide empty circle, hands hanging loosely, skin pale. The effect of all that white skin stretched over the expansive framework of his ears was that of saucers fixed to each side of his head. From the front it was his eyes that held your attention. They were huge and glassy, like a pair of poached eggs.

I stood with the others. Today it was Styles' father who arrived first, rather than his mother as always before. He pulled up in his beat-up truck. One hundred eyes fixed upon the space where his father's right hand should have been. His wrist terminated in a savage stump. The steering wheel had a knob fixed to it so he could turn it easily with only his left.

Styles had got into the passenger seat, and was driven off straight into folklore.

"Bugger me," said Donkey. "Perhaps it's true."

Donald Kay was the largest boy in our year. In the showers after footy it was impossible to ignore the fact that he had an enormous cock and more pubic hair than surely anyone could need. His hands were not girly, they were good at holding rugby balls and cricket bats and beating the shit out of wimps and geeks.

Whenever anyone needed a good smashing, it was our leader Donkey who handed it out. Crimes beyond redemption might include the colour of your hair or a nerdy lisp or a problem with boils. Smail's glasses were too thick and his arms too thin, and he couldn't play sport for shit, and so we had to wallop him. Delgado was too fat, and so we gave him atomic grundies at regular intervals, leaving his underpants in tatters and stray scraps of fabric wedged deep within the uncharted territories of his arse crack.

But we made no move against Styles. He was different and he was alone, but it was the unwritten law that you had to see the fear and doubt in someone's eye before you got 'em, and he knew no fear or doubt, he was certain that his Hand was going to be minced up or ripped clean off. You could see it in his calm, almost dreamy expression.

So we all waited, watching Styles and watching his Hand.

Boys are not famous for their patience and we would not have been able to wait forever, but we had the advantage of knowing that the Right Hand of Styles was to be lost before his sixteenth birthday. "Yes," he said when we inquired. "Every male in the Styles family line has lost his hand before he turns sixteen. My great-grandfather lied about his age and enlisted during the Second World War. His very first live action was the Normandy landings. He had no more than set foot on the beach when his right hand was completely blown off by shrapnel. He turned sixteen the very next day."

We boys didn't generally care about birthdays, but here we made an exception,

and we all knew that Styles was turning sixteen on the Twelfth of September. My grades began to suffer. I couldn't bear to take my eyes from the Hand and so saw nothing of the scribbles on the blackboard. Every day brought the birthday closer.

Styles was a weirdo, but it was hard not to begin to admire him. Bravery as we knew it was something you saw on the sports field, a thing of raised fists and anger, but while this was not his way neither did he tremble or shake his head at his fate. He sat there at lunchtime as he had always done; by himself, his expression serene. He was waiting, just like the rest of us. Surely that took a type of courage no less real?

None of us had spoken about it, no-one would have admitted to such a thing, but all had begun to believe.

The Twelfth of September fell on a Sunday that year. As time sucked the juices out of the week and discarded the husk, I realised with incredulity that it wasn't going to happen at school, that all the boys were going home for the weekend, and that I had been cheated. I wasn't going to see it happen. Styles walked to his father's truck on the Friday with his head unbowed. His expression never wavered.

This is the last time we will see him with the Hand.

I swallowed down the lump in my throat. It was the bravest thing I had ever seen.

I stared out of the window on the trip home.

"Something wrong?"

I shrugged.

"Problem at school?"

I turned to Dad. "Styles is turning sixteen this weekend."

"And?"

"He's going to lose his hand. They all do, it's like a family curse or something. Always before they turn sixteen. And he isn't scared."

Dad snorted. "Ah, yes. The curse of the *mano perdida*."

"The what?"

"It's a load of shit."

"We've seen his Dad, and he's lost his hand."

Dad sighed. "I went to school with his father, did you know that?"

"No."

"He was a real dreamer. He spent too much time staring out the window into space and not enough thinking about anything real. He was a loser, son. He failed, and left school early. Got a job with a fencing contractor, old Hercus from out the coast. And he never paid attention working for him, either. Then one day they were ramming posts. You remember how our rammer works?"

I nodded, interested now.

"Well, the cap sits on top of the post, and then the monkey slams up and down on the cap, right?"

"Sure."

"So he's not paying attention, leaning about, stretching and yawning, right. He puts his hand on the cap, of all the ridiculous places, and the monkey weight comes down on it. Those things weigh at least a couple of hundred kilos. Splat, no more hand."

"So you're saying that there is a curse? Or that there isn't?"

"Son, he lost his hand because he was an idiot. If there is a family curse, then it's stupidity. Bad luck isn't something that gets passed from father to son, boy. But having shit for brains is."

What Dad said made sense, but there must have been a part of me that wanted to believe. I spent the weekend growing more and more tense. When Dad dropped me off on Monday morning, my muscles were ratcheted tight over my neck and shoulders. The boys milled around the gates. We were all waiting. Unsaid, the thought hung stickily in the air: Don't let us down, Styles.

We couldn't help it; a murmur broke from us when the truck pulled up.

And then Styles climbed out of the passenger side. It was a shocking sight. The Right Hand was intact. Completely untouched, looking exactly as it always had.

For the first time that I could remember, Styles moved hesitantly. He walked through the gates and flinched under the hot glares of the boys. In class he stared at the Hand as if it was a new and awful sight to him. That peaceful assurance was gone. He looked uneasy and scared. One row to the right and three desks back, I felt an anger beginning to swell inside me. I had been duped, we had all been fooled, sucked in by a weirdo. We had all been let down.

At the morning interval Styles sat alone as usual, but now he looked lonely and vulnerable.

He was a fucking liar, and he needed to pay. Without saying a word, without needing to, boys began to gather, standing in a semicircle about him. Styles stood, big eyes uncertain.

It was an electric moment, waiting there for the signal, the signal that could only come from Styles himself. Styles suddenly understood this fact, that his eyes had to show the fear, and in the same moment that he understood this, he had no choice but to comply. In the next instant he was running and a collective roar clawed itself from our throats as we leapt in pursuit.

Styles ran amongst the maze of buildings, twisting around corners and between buildings, but there were many of us chasing, spreading out and hemming him in, and he couldn't escape. In a long alleyway, he was trapped within a circle of us. He stuttered one way and then the other, but whenever he came to the edge he was pushed back by the palms of harsh hands, pushed back in by North and by Hurley, and then by me, and so he came to a halt, panting hard, looking around at the wall of shining eyes and glinting teeth.

Then the circle opened, and Donkey walked in with a slow swagger. He took his time, stepping close to Styles, wrapping his fingers around his collar and drawing him near almost gently, the way one might a lover before a kiss. Then he flung Styles

against the wall, and you'd have thought from the sudden exhalation from the circle that the air had just been driven from our lungs.

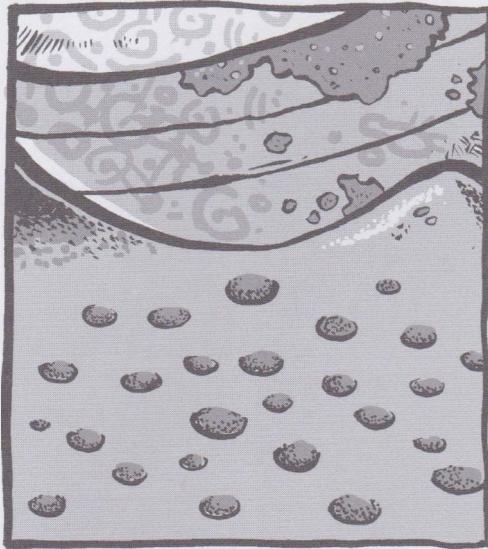
Donkey threw Styles to the other side of the circle, and pinned him against the far wall. Holding him by the throat, he gave a nod to let him know that the moment had come, before drawing back his fist.

After eighty years of hanging on through wind and rain, that was the moment the square jagged slate finally chose to let go. It skittered down the opposite roof's incline, heavy and sharp-edged, going fast by the time it spun into the air, faster yet as it dropped, and its sharp edge neatly amputated the Right Hand of Styles before it shattered against the brick. From the stump came the tssis-tssis of hot red blood, growing in volume with each squirt.

Each of the defilers and doubters reacted according to their particular character. North vomited, Winterbottom fainted, many fled. Donkey backed up, staring in horror at the white, long-fingered Hand lying crumpled in the gravel like a dead bird. And I covered my face with my hands for a moment. Just for a moment, before I was driven to look between my fingers.

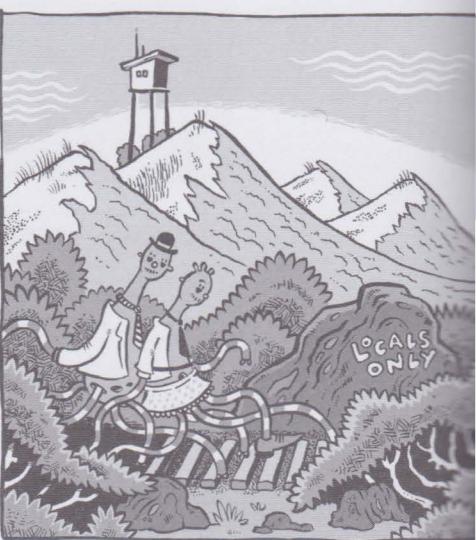
Styles pressed his stump into his shirt to staunch the flow. His face was even paler than usual, but its expression had changed, back into that serene mask.

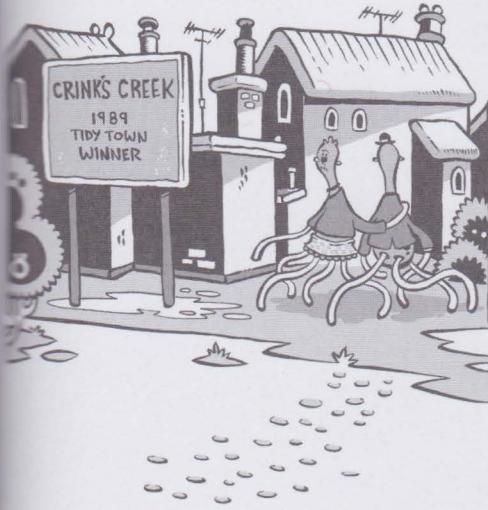
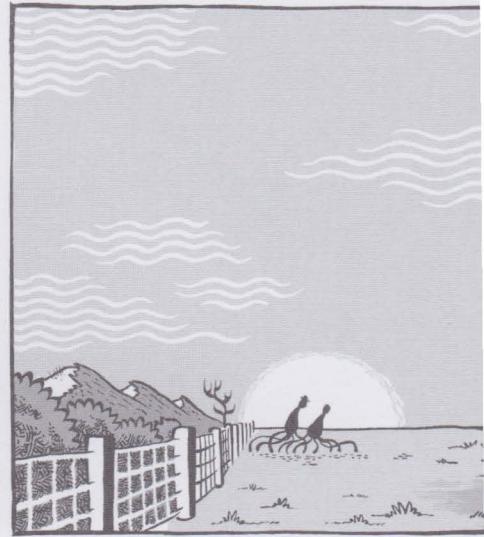
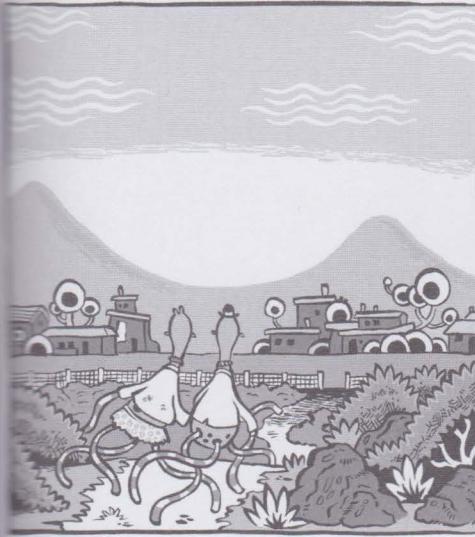
"Yes," he breathed. "Yes."

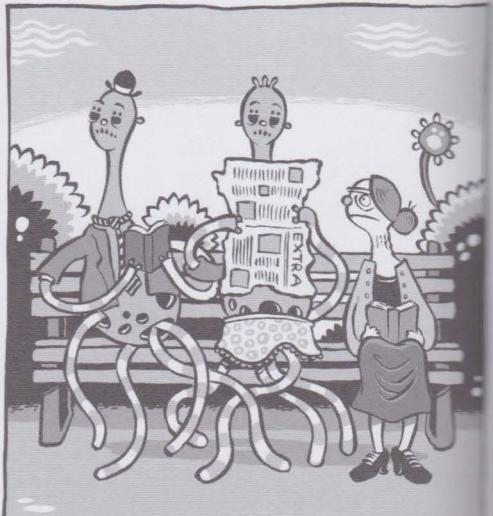
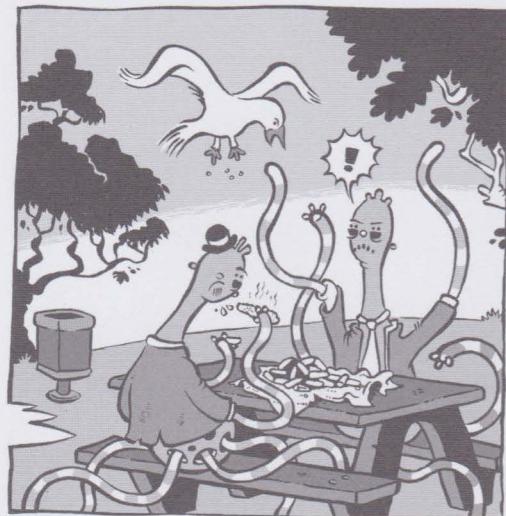


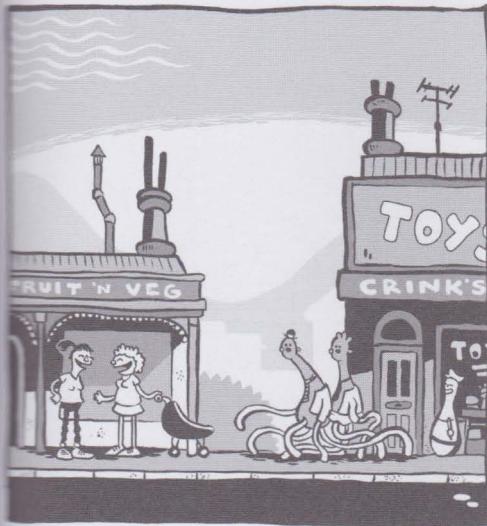
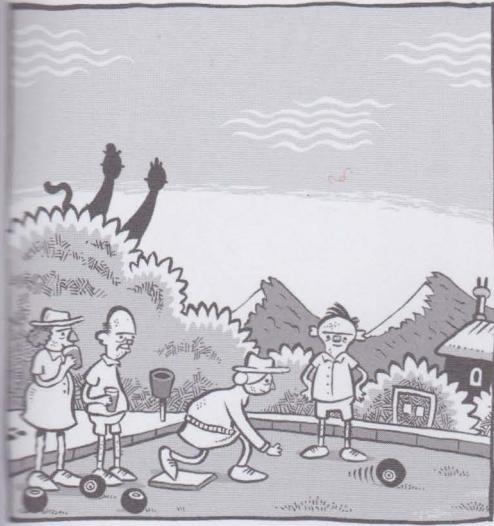
# BORDERLAND

PAT GRANT



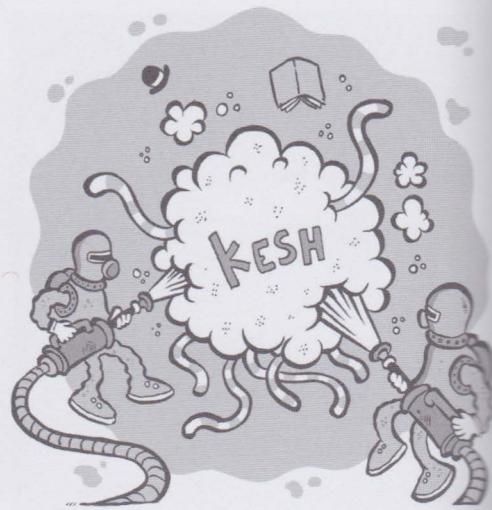
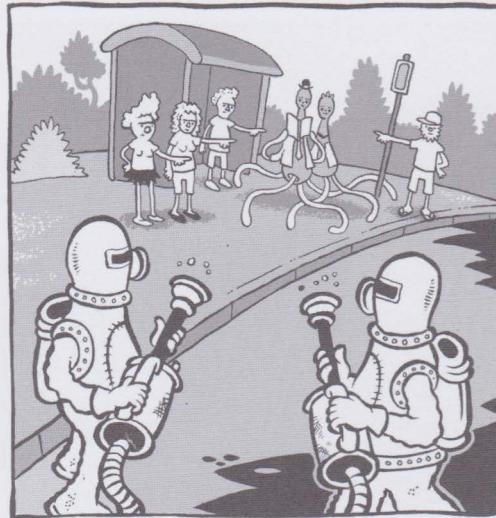
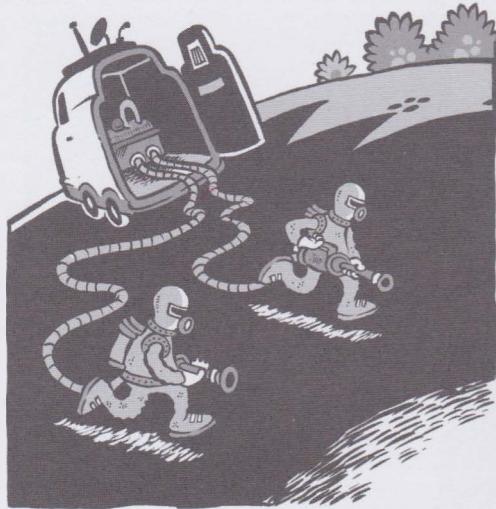


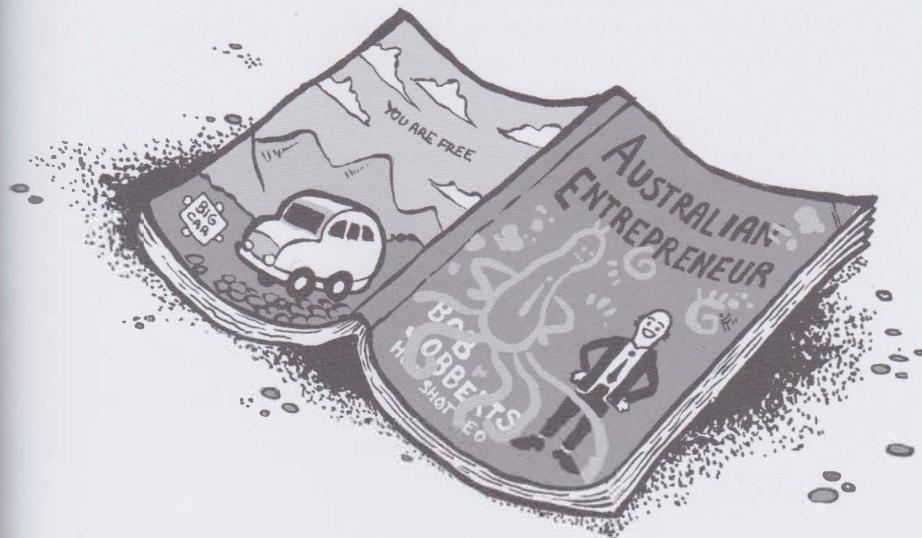
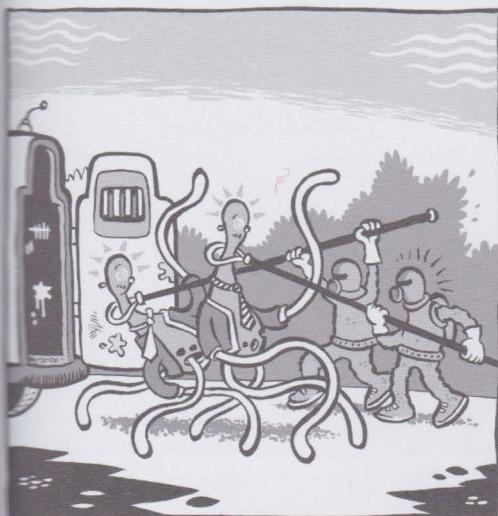












Patt

## **Veteran**

*Yoshua Wakeham*

His was a stonewall face the day  
he came home at last from some war  
he'd been fighting alone the year long.

He was slinking away to hide from us,  
one hand thrust deep as dark words  
into his jacket's hooded pocket, and  
I am remembering him like that,  
the back of his sooty-haired head  
in its oily nimbus of lamp light.

That night, very clear, the muffled slipper  
of the smoking snow against the panes.  
Waiting to hear the coming news  
(that news which never seems to come)  
and wondering, Was his tongue cut out?

Later voices whispered he was *touched*,  
words sent to hang all bent then belted  
into black boots good for journeying.  
*What happened to this man out there?*

But rolling myself like pastry  
in the oven of my morning sheets,  
I hear the axe pause the downward grunt  
and moments later the soft shuffling to the door,  
where there in the corridor he proves to me  
his hands have not forgotten speech

# Sunday

*Matt Hetherington*

but there's no sun.

the summer of another year is gone,  
and the sky is as dull as the hide of a captured elephant.

i spit at the mirror.  
the morning is dark.

an antarctic wind is whining through the streets,  
but i stand before her still  
holding out  
a broken possibility.

last night the night rattled all night.  
now we are scraping the scraps off our plates,  
trying not to think of the strangeness  
when the light bulb finally blew.

her gaze is as bitter as a cigarette.

something would make itself  
said,  
but our helplessness stares up from the floor,  
the phone will ring shortly,  
and anyway my tongue is a phantom limb.

ahead is a day as calm as a storm.  
there's nothing more boring than guarding something.

## **Part Gods**

*Marie Cook*

THEY SIT ON A BEACH TOGETHER, he very tanned, too tanned, she more protective of her skin, more covered. He wearing shorts, she a swimming costume. They bend and twist their time together as artists. She sees it in his face, the way he moves his hands, leans against a wall, twists his neck, photographed, as black and white negatives. Pensive he can see his reflection in her face from different angles all at once, consuming.

He finds a skeleton head of a bull with jaw and skull intact. In Spain in the 1930s the skull would have commonly lain in a nearby field, the flesh preyed upon till the carcass was clean and exposed, jutting from the earth. In the 21st century, in this city of Melbourne, cattle are slaughtered at an abattoir where we are protected from seeing their bones and dead flesh. Once I found a bull's skull on our farm where I grew up, and it lay among the grassy tufts, dried and half soaked into the earth in the semi-desert terrain, where in drought, sheep, cattle, kangaroo, and wild goat carcasses lay alongside open roads, or drying in their stench by waterholes.

On a beach on a hot day on fine white-yellow sand, where shiny blue waves ripple to the shore and small shells wash up along the tide line, seated on a deckchair, like the one I have in my back yard collected from a neighbour's nature strip where it had been put out for the rubbish collection by their daughter after they died, seated on a beach towel like the striped cotton ones in my laundry cupboard, he places the dried white bull's skull over his head.

She offers him his wine and lights his cigar as her god. The bull jaw scrapes his temples as he looks out to sea, and juts into the top of his head when he looks sideways at her. Sand spills from the skeletal nose, and from between the jagged jawline. He breathes in deeply under the weight of the bone. The bull-head skull of half man half beast or all god will be painted and worn and painted and photographed and named Minotaure. Half woman lies prostrate on the sand making a minotaur with her mind in her camera.

She who is seated on a towel who places three glass eyes in sand, and frames them in a photograph, three eyes looking in different directions all at once, he painting her, face and with three eyes facing different directions different angles overlapping. He paints her dark eyes her sometimes raspy eyebrows her lips covered in ruby conversation. He paints with her face a weeping Spain, a 1937 Spanish weeping face. His tears weep in her face.

I sit in my deck chair at my beach with fine yellow-white sand seventy years later and I think about the tears shed in my country. And the tears not shed. Not far from my beach very far from Spain in a local gallery one of the painted weeping women hangs. I walk along my beach wrapped in a stripy towel and think of the woman photographer of three glass eyes and the bull's skull god. It is not them with striped towels or striped deck-chairs like mine, but me thinking myself into their photographs by the sea, they sitting on clay-like sand ridges less comfortable than mine.

# The Race

*Zdravka Evtimova*

WE ARE ALL STRONG AND DIFFICULT FOLK in our family. My father drank, it was true, but he made the best cornel brandy in Southern Bulgaria, and Bulgarians, Jews, and Greeks alike gave their last penny to buy Dad's home brew for their sons' weddings. My elder brother was the best rider in the country far and wide, and my younger brother could drink as much as all the eels in the Struma River without falling from his chair. My sister sang beautifully. Men gave her jars of honey and covered the path to our small house with roses for her to step on.

My mother wove woollen rugs and she could cure fidgety children who scared easily. She cast lead bullets for them, and while the lead melted in the pot she mumbled the kid's name under her breath. Then the little one forgot all his fright and fears. I'd seen this time and again, but I couldn't explain what happened if my life depended on it. Mother was held in high esteem and Dad was a man to be reckoned with. The only person in the family that lacked distinction was I, the youngest sister.

That was bad.

I cared for Grisha.

I had noticed Grisha first when Dad organised the Big Bet. To be honest, he didn't organise anything, he let our neighbors drink some of his cornel thunder and that was enough. Men could hardly pay him for the brandy they'd drunk. It was true Grisha repaired his motorbike for free, another guy dug our cornfield for Mother, a cousin of ours plastered the walls of our living room. The guys had carts and good horses. Dad made wonderful brandy but no one could pay him well enough.

The Big Bet was a race in which the best cart and the best horse won. Grisha was a magician because he made your horse-drawn vehicle glitter, sparkle and sing. The competitors climbed in their carts and raced down the dirt road, stirring up dust as black as midnight, hooves hitting stones and crushing them into powder. The guy who won didn't collect money for there was no money among the cornel brandy drinkers. As clever as he was, Dad thought up an interesting reward for the champion in the Big Bet. The winner chose one man among the population of the village to work for him for a day without being paid. It was very easy to guess who the most sought-after guy was: Grisha.

Grisha was the only man in the district who could make your old Volkswagen start even in the dead of winter. His shoulders were as broad as the dirt road that clambered the hill to our place. I loved the way he spoke, slowly and powerfully like a church bell.

Our village was big, all green and warm at the end of summer, and the river had

not run dry completely. Some bigshots from the nearby town drove their old Fords and Peugeots, pushed them into the gorge the river had dug, and left them there, in the thick mud, to rot away. But they didn't know Grisha! He fixed the jalopies. From three rotten Fords, he put together one pretty good car, then sold it dirt cheap. He rolled in money, but I didn't care about his wealth. I cared about him.

The second thing I cared about was horses. They didn't shout at me, they carried me on their backs and they loved the bags of barley I plucked for them. I was good at driving carts and all the time I dreamt I'd win the Big Bet. Then I'd have Grisha for a whole day.

He came to our house when my sister sang and never noticed when I sang.

He didn't know I swept the street in front of our porch for him. I knew the paths he preferred and I planted geraniums and lilac bushes there. Come on, somebody who knew our village would say. These paths are so steep lizards can't creep on them! That was true. It was difficult to plant lilac bushes on stone and make them survive in the heat. I carried pails and pails of water to the bushes and geraniums, and I left roses and bottles of cold lemonade for Grisha to find. He didn't notice me.

So one day - it was scorching hot, and the grass was motionless in the motionless air - I saw him pass, and I made up my mind. His hands were greasy, his face was greasy as well, and his eyes were indifferent. My heart became as small as a hazelnut.

"Grisha," I said as I jumped in front of him. "I am Anna and I am the daughter of Lila who casts lead bullets for faint-hearted kids, and sister of Pesho who drinks powerfully. Even you can't out-drink him. My father is the guy who makes cornel brandy and you staggered and teetered after you drank from it."

"I didn't teeter!" he said angrily.

"You did," said. "But I didn't stop you to argue about that." I felt something had gone wrong. His voice was sharp and wrong too.

"So why did you stop me?" he said.

I had rehearsed two hundred times what I'd say to him, but now when the time had come, my mouth felt dry like the dust on the road that climbed the hill, and my tongue was as heavy as the hill.

"Because I... I like you," I said, which was true.

"All girls in the village of Staro like me," he remarked, which made me angry. I had picked roses for him and had trudged up the barren hill to bring lemonade for him.

"I want you to marry me," I said.

He stared. And that made me so angry I could burst into tears or into flames which was all the same to me.

"Ha, ha!" he burst into laughter instead.

"Does 'Ha ha!' mean 'yes'?" I said boiling and seething. I didn't make cornel brandy, neither did I cast lead bullets for faint-hearted kids, but I was Anna and I would have no one laugh at me.

"I'd rather marry a worm than you," he said.

I looked at him. Yes, he was handsome, and he repaired the jalopies of the entire district, and all the girls wanted him, but I was Anna!

"Shall I take this as 'No'?" I said, trying to appear calm.

"You understood me perfectly well," he said. "I won't marry you."

I was on the verge of saying there'd be no more roses strewn on the paths he chose to go for a walk, nor would he find bottles of lemonade left for him to drink, but I changed my mind.

"Goodbye, Grisha," I said.

"Ha, ha," he laughed again.

"Don't say I have not asked you," I said as he turned his back on me and strode purposefully down the path.

"Ha, ha," his laughter echoed like a whip oh a horse's back. And I knew how a horse felt after you whipped him.

But there would be a Big Bet again! Dad had brewed another barrel of cornel brandy. Well, why didn't anyone ask who'd picked the cornels, who sprinkled sugar on the mixture and who cleaned the cellar where the cornels took a century to ferment? It was me. I had thrown a lizard into the barrel and the brandy was sure to climb up your head like a lizard. The brew had a big kick in it because I kicked the barrel so many times that every cornel would clout you in the middle of your ribs.

The Big Bet day came. "Come on, Anna," Mother said. "Go and pour out brandy for the guys. The whole village will participate in the race, so don't give them too much to drink."

"I'll pour no brandy into anybody's glasses," I said. "I'll participate in the race myself."

"What!" my mother said, choking on her tongue. "A woman can't drive a cart. Nobody's heard of such a stupid thing."

"You cast lead bullets and the kids are no longer afraid of anything in the world," I said. "But I need no bullet of yours. I want to win the race."

"No!" my brothers, the best rider and the best drinker in the village, said. "We won't give you a horse and we won't give you a cart. Shame on you, Anna!"

"I won't ask you to give me a cart and a horse," I said. "I'll go and take them myself."

"No!" Dad objected. "Look at your sister. She's as meek as a calf and sings better than our TV. Why don't you try to sing like her?"

"Why don't you sing like her, Dad?" I said and he declared he was no TV and he was a brandy maker, then he nodded shortly.

I knew what that meant. This had happened before. My two brothers, my mother, my father and my sister who was meek as a calf sprang to their feet and surrounded me. My brothers threw a belt around my shoulders. Then Mother who was as strong as three men sat on my feet.

My meek sister tied my legs with the belt of her dress; my best drinking brother tied my arms with a piece of rope - the same one I used when I dragged him from

the pub to our one-storey house. Oh, no, he wasn't drunk, he mumbled as I tugged him along. He wanted to prove how grand he was. My best riding brother tied me to the chair with an old bridle and said, "We are doing this for your own good. The carts will crush you like an egg and you'll die, then who else will go and pick cornels for the brandy?"

"You are my favorite child," Dad said. "Everybody is somebody best among us. You are nobody and that saddens my heart."

"Here, drink some cornel brandy," my nightingale of a sister said. "Come on, drink that," she encouraged me. "You'll fall asleep even before the guys put the horses to the carts. I'll sing for you and you won't suffer."

I felt like tearing up her nightingale ears and feeding them to the dogs.

Mother didn't say anything for a while, then suddenly she opened the window.

"You wailed like a lion when you were a baby," she said. "I sang to you and you howled louder. Your father and I danced for you to make you shut up. You wouldn't stop. You roared as if your tummy was full of vipers. Then I happened to open a window and you became as quiet as a worm. I've opened it for you now. So I hope you'll feel good, Anna."

Then my famous family, Father, Mother and all, went to the Big Bet. Dad had drunk enough that he burst into song and the minute he opened his mouth a glass fell from the table and my best riding brother dropped down on the floor - that was his trick to make Dad shut up. Alas, no success this time! The nightingale in the family, my sister, suddenly crooned too - that was how she hoped to discourage Dad's singing efforts. My drinking brother produced a bottle of brandy and tried to feed it to Dad. But Mother, I'll give her that, brandished the poker she'd grabbed from the hearth and roared, "Stop singing, man, or you'll be dead in an instant."

It was the poker that brought Dad back to sobriety and drove good sense into his head. He stopped roaring and rumbling, and said, "Whatever you say, sugar," to Mother.

"Sugar or no sugar, you'd better be quiet," my Mother said pointedly as she took her Black Notebook. In it, she wrote down who drank from our cornel brandy and noted if the guy had to dig a cornfield, weed our peppers, or paint the walls of our kitchen to pay off his debts.

They all went out, leaving me tied like the old ox Mother wanted slaughtered after a week. I was not an ox so I started gnawing at the bridle my drinking brother had tied me with. Like everything else he had, that bridle was half rotten, and although the saliva in my mouth tasted bitter like the poison I killed cockroaches with, I gnawed the thing through and through. My hands were free.

I had no other cart but the old two-wheeled gig Dad kept in the back yard and drove the city folks with, showing them our beautiful countryside. Beautiful my foot! There were big sand hills that gnawed away by winds and heat. Waist-deep nettles were all over the place, thorns, hawthorns, thistles and elder trees flourished and burgeoned, and there were so many lizards crawling around that you could walk to

town without stepping on the dirt. The slopes were steep. Snakes and goats climbed the scorching hot outcrops of rock, and dwarf cornel trees struck root in the cracks amidst the sandstones. The soil was so red that if you cut your finger no blood - just red sand - would spurt from your wound.

In the Big Bet, one had to drive his cart through the tract of red land from the top of Purple Hill and reach the bottom of Scarlet Gorge, following the road whose ruts were so deep you could swim in them if it was raining. I rushed to the gig and then I saw there was no horse left for me.

My best riding brother had taken Lightning, our huge stallion who would eat nothing but barley, such a supercilious beast he was. My elder brother, the drinking talent, had taken our second horse, a limping ruin, but he'd already had a glass or two, and hobbling or limping horses made no difference to him. The nightingale, as always very special, rode the young colt Mother was to swap for a motorbike after the Big Bet was over. Mother's lead bullets had become so popular that after thinking and rethinking for a month, she made up her mind it was more advantageous for her to visit her patients riding a motorbike rather than a horse.

Marko, our scraggy obstinate donkey, happened to be the only living soul in sight. He was grazing dry yellow thistles in the backyard. If I had not found Marko, I'd have put our goat before the gig and run for the Big Bet.

Marko, the gig, and I were the last to come to the field of competition. It was a dry meadow, all yellow grass and red sand under the hooves of the horses.

"Hey, look who's there!" the guys whistled, and the drinking talent, my younger brother, came up, grabbed my ear and pulled it very hard indeed. Then he spat on the gig and kicked the belly of the innocent donkey.

"Go home. Now," he hissed frothing at the mouth. "Our family will become the laughing stock of the district because of you."

I tried not to squirm.

"You go home," I hissed back. "My victory will be the talk of the district. And you will buy me a bike to glorify my achievement."

"Isn't she an idiot?" I heard my mother comment.

Everybody guffawed.

"We are all democratic fellows here," Grisha, the boneshaker repairman said. "Let her participate."

"I'll participate not because you say so, but because I want to," I snarled. "Mind you, what I'll do to you after I win you for a day..."

"Perhaps marry him?" said a guy with a horse as big as a hotel. "Are you beautiful enough?"

"I am," I said. "I'll do what I'll do."

The deep-rutted road the competitors had to follow climbed down the red precipitous slope. The hill was cut and carved by three wild streams, all of which had run dry and gaped like mouths full of bad teeth. There were three narrow bridges over them, shaky and rickety structures; then the carts had to cross the river at the

foot of the hill. There was no water in it, just thick rich mud, overgrown with bulrush and teeming with water snakes, tadpoles and frogs. The old church of Saint Ivan Rilski the Miracle Maker was on the opposite shore, in the middle of a flat patch of land, where we all gathered for Christmas and Easter to eat, drink and celebrate.

The track was narrow and tortuous, there were sharp stones that had wrenched wheels of carts before, and the rumble of hooves deafened young and old. Weeks after the Big Bet Mother couldn't hear Dad grumbling under his breath: a fact that suited the family fine. Dad usually sold two barrels of his brandy - which meant that all Dad's buddies had to weed and sweep for Mother. As a rule, these guys were as industrious as mountain rocks. It was their wives who spun for us, and knitted pullovers for the drinking talent, the nightingale, and me.

The carts were arranged in a row, all seven of them, my two talented brothers, the rider and the drunk, and five more men. I was at the very end of the row, on a strip of land where there were more stones and lizards than air to breathe.

"Stay out of my way!" the guy next to me said and kicked my donkey.

I kicked his horse in return and it was after the kick that Dad gave the signal. He whistled, waved his cap and all seven carts rumbled down the hill, raising clouds of red dust and whirlwinds of sand. I, my gig, and Marko, the donkey, waited for the dust to settle. The onlookers: the nightingale, the housewives who bet saucepans and teapots on their husbands, the girls who bet their belts on their sweethearts, all shouted, "Hello, the laughing stock there! Waiting for Ivan the Miracle Maker to kick you?"

I had a plan, a daring and wild one. I wouldn't follow the dirt road. I'd take the shortcut through the dry brambles, briars, thistles and thorns I had so often roamed around picking cornels for dad's dangerous brandy. So I kicked Marko trying to make him run though the dry grass, the spikes and barbs. The beast wouldn't budge so I kicked him harder. Off he went.

The gig hit sharp stones, caught briars and hawthorn bushes, but the hill was as steep as a hanging rope, so the animal couldn't stop. We cut our way through dry nettles, Marko ran and brayed, I shook, jumped and bounced, clutching the reins, seeing only Marko's tail and hooves. I don't know what hit him, maybe the branch of a cornel tree, then something bit me, and another thing whipped and slapped me across the face. Marko whinnied, neighed and shrieked. He couldn't stop.

We thundered across the first dry stream and a flying stone clobbered me on the forehead. Then we roared and boomed across the second and third dry creeks, or did we? Small flies got into my eyes and brambles scratched my neck. Marco could not stop. Then suddenly there was mud everywhere around me, mud in my eyes and ears, and I could no longer see Marko's tail. The gig under me shook, wobbled, and rattled, something wet and slimy slid down my blouse. I didn't care.

"Saint Ivan Miracle Maker, help me!" I shouted.

Marko, the donkey, brayed for help too. He's alive and kicking, was the happy thought that crossed my mind, and that was the last thing. In a haze, I saw one of the

wheels fall off. Then the gig hit something hard, a snag, a rock, or a bone of a dead ox. The second wheel fell off. A wet muddy thing hit my nose. Marko trumpeted, pulled hard and flew downward with the wind. I fell, my back hit the ground, and I lay prostrate like a pair of cheap wet pants. I'm dead, I thought, but I wasn't. From the corner of my eye, I saw a big cross and a stone wall: I was in front of Saint Ivan the Miracle Maker. The gig, having lost all its wheels, slumped at my side, and Marko, the beast, all splattered with mud, was licking my face with his wet cool tongue.

All my bones hurt. My nose bled and there was red mud in my mouth. The left sleeve of my blouse hung down my shoulder, a mere rag, and a frog jumped from it. There was no trace of the other sleeve. A slimy thing crawled out of my pants pocket and inched away creeping as best as it could up in the dust. A small water snake it was. Another grimy thing moved inside my blouse, slithering on the skin of my belly. Briar branches and brambles hung from my hair.

I looked around. There was no other cart in front of the church. Ivan the Miracle Maker had done a wonderful job of saving our lives. On the other hand, he had thought it beneath him to save the gig. As I watched, a side board of my vehicle broke off and fell onto the ground. Then I noticed all the other carts had stopped and the horses stood motionless in the heat. Competitors, their sweethearts, wives and mothers, neighbours, and children, all stared at me as silent as their empty pockets. I tried to stand up, staggered and my nose landed in the dust.

"She's alive!" My mother shouted and all rushed to Ivan the Miracle Maker who stared modestly at the mud in the river from his beautiful icon in the church. I saw Grisha, the man with the nimblest hands in South Bulgaria, rush to me, and I thought of the mud in my hair, of the slippery thing that squirmed under my blouse. My head was as heavy as the gig and as shaken. Then I realised I had not reached the finishing line yet.

I scrambled to my feet, grabbed one of the broken boards of the gig, and dragged it forward to the church. I'd reached the finishing line. I'd won. Then I spat mud in the dust and lay breathless on the yellow grass.

I was just trying to sit up when Dad reached out his hand to help me. I disregarded it. I had something much more important to concentrate on. Grisha was the second after Dad to reach me. He bent down and stared. His eyes looked terrified as he scrutinised my filthy feet, my mud-caked face and grimy hands.

"I got you," I said. "I won you and you are mine for a whole day."

"Priest Mano will refuse to proclaim you man and wife," my mother said still panting. She had run from the top of the hill down to the church, and I was suddenly glad she was sweating profusely. She stopped speaking as she tried to get her wind. "No marriage is supposed to last less than a day."

The carters and their sweethearts, the drinking talent and the rider, looked at me, their eyes burning.

"I'm proud of you!" the best rider said. "No-one dared drive a gig through the

Snake Gorge!"

"You flew over the crags! You drove Marko as if he were an angel!" my drinking brother said. "I love you, little sister. I love you!"

"And I'll bring all faint-hearted and white-livered children to you," my mother said. "I'll let them touch the hem of your skirt and they'll never be afraid of anything in their lives."

The nightingale opened her mouth and a magnificent song poured out of it. This was the song about Ivan Rilski the Miracle Maker who, we believed, was born in our village. Then all of them, the carters and their sweethearts, their mothers, cousins and neighbors who had come to bet on the best cart, sang along. They shouted the words of the song, and they all stood motionless.

They sang for me.

They drank a lot, all of them, and my brother the drinking talent was proud they were his friends. Maybe the cornels were the reason their voices were so powerful, or maybe it was the river that made the tune rich, or the wind they breathed in was in the song. Their song was strong. My mother cast her lead bullets and was famous; my father brewed cornel brandy, and every one in my family was known far and wide. But I was the first one, the only one in the whole village that the best carters sang the song about Ivan Rilski for. They sang and I tried to stand up. Finally, I scrambled to my feet and sang along. I loved the hill and the broken gig. As I bent to kiss Marko, the donkey, on the forehead, the slimy thing crawled out of my blouse and thudded on the red, caked earth. It was a big frog.

"What will you do with me?" the most beautiful voice asked me - Grisha's.

I thought about it. To be honest, I didn't even have to think about it. I knew.

"Dad has a big barrel in which he keeps the cornel brandy," I said. "I want you to climb on that barrel and stay there all day long."

"Why?" he breathed.

"All day long," I said, "I'll watch you."

The carters laughed, their sweethearts snickered and Dad growled, "You've got a screw loose. He can repair my old Ford instead."

"He can assemble the engine of my motorbike," the drinking talent ventured.

"No," I said. "I won him. He's mine for the day."

When everyone was quiet, Grisha, the expert mechanic and loudmouth, looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Well...if you ask me the same question which you asked me before... My answer will be positive. You just have to ask me once more."

I looked him straight in the eye and said, "No."

"Hey, nitwit, you've got him," my brother, the best rider, said.

"I don't ask the same question twice," I said.

"You are more obstinate than Marko the donkey," my nightingale of a sister said gruffly. "And less intelligent."

Everybody was quiet then the most beautiful voice, Grisha's, said, "Will you marry me, Anna?"

I couldn't believe the words I'd just heard.

"Anna, dearest," the most beautiful voice said.

I stole a look at Dad who was scratching his head, speechless. My mother, although she was a brave woman and cast bullets against fear for young and old, stared at me unbelieving.

"I'll have to think about it," I said.

Oh, come off it, I knew what I would say. I'd dreamed about it thousand times. The gig had no wheels, and Marko was a sorry sight, all covered with mud, a couple of leeches gleaming like stickers on his back.

"Yes, Grisha, I will," I said. "But you'll climb atop that barrel and stand on it for an hour, okay?"

# **The Rabbit Woman of Honolulu**

*Adam Aitken*

You a tourist? No, I work here. A college student? Good. Tourists are always photographing my rabbits. Now you've met the Rabbit Woman of Honolulu.

I'd broken my own taboo on photographing people without asking them first. She waved a finger at me. I apologised. I thought she'd tell me to fuck off. She had that right. It was like she had eyes in the back of her head as I was about to press the shutter.

We walked down Kapiolani Boulevard.

Rabbit Woman - or was it Rabbit Lady? My memory is already getting into mythic mode. But that's her own name for herself, the name she said.

Then she told me how the world was going to end when a black hole at the center of the earth would suck everything into it.

Like all media savvy people, she knows how to deal with the media. She's got the Press Release memorised.

Habla Espanole? Where are you from? You look Latino. My mother was an Arab, my father a Spanish aristocrat. I never knew his surname.

Do you have a number I can call you?

The world will end. But there is a solution - a massive Noah's ark a thousand feet long and three hundred feet high built out of Koah wood, the Hawaiian super timber that resists rot.

Read the bible, it was all in there. Make sure to seal the insides with waterproof tar. If I could get the students of the university to build it she would appreciate it a lot.

They were smart college students, and they could make it.

The hills of Manoa. She pointed to them. They'd be wiped out by a thousand foot Tsunami. But the ark would float above it all.

The TV guys came and photographed me. I was on TV. She smiled.

I asked her if she lived in Kapiolani Park. (Lived there, like a home I thought? A stupid question.) I move around she said. Why I asked. I get bored she said, and she didn't hang around the library in McCully.

Too many crackheads. Then she told me about her rabbits. How a certain guy, a crackhead in McCully Park had actually taken one, stole it out of its kennel and cut its throat.

Then he burnt his mouth on a crack pipe. But the police had his number, and so did the Philipino Mafia. The bastard. The police had had it with him.

The police photographed the rabbit, the dead one.  
He was going to die.

# Fences

*Melissa Howard*

THE WEEK THAT WE MOVED IN, the nights exploded with breaking bottles, drunk screaming and cars ripping up and down the street. Our wobbly fence creaked in the dark. I lay awake in bed and felt sick with anxiety. Isn't this area supposed to be gentrified?

Two doors up from ours, there is a council house for Aboriginal families. Wooden and detached in a street of stone terraces, it sprawls across a block of scraggly lawn like a deflated paddling pool. The metal fence is broken and the gate hangs limply like a dislocated limb.

Brenda, whose terrace joins ours, tells us that she nails everything down. The small space between her fence and house is crammed with birdcages and pot plants, candles and lifeless ponds. "Even the pond," she grins, and smoke hisses from the gaps in her teeth. When she opens her front door, you can smell stale cigarettes. My daughter Lily and her imaginary friend, Adrie, search the nailed-down ponds for baby crocodiles. "There he is! Can you see him, Adrie? He's pink. He must be a girl one."

"They fight like bloody cats," Brenda tells me, shaking her head. "Some woman ran up the street once - in the middle of the night! - screaming that the police had raped her. Why would they want to rape that ugly bitch?" She calms down, and inhales deeply on her cigarette. "They move every six months. Lucky! Sometimes you get quiet ones. Kids - but that doesn't stop most of them."

The neighbor on the other side, the ginger-haired sparkie, doesn't know what the hell she is talking about. He's never heard anything, and he's been there for 12 years. "They're alright," he says.

Later, Lily, Adrie, and I are in front of the mirror, getting ready for an Australia Day party. One of us is mildly hung-over. None of us know what Australia Day is celebrating. The air is thick and filmy. Sweat is already forming in the small of my back. I'm pulling the brush through Lily's blonde bob and she winces as the bristles catch in the knots. "Adrie has pink hair down to the floor," she says, her lip wobbling. "But it never has knots so her mum never brushes it."

I roll my eyes, "Whoopee for Adrie."

The dog is in the doorway watching the preparations, and casting hopeful glances at her lead hanging from the door handle. Her optimism gets on my nerves. A noise outside sets her off. "Polly, shut the hell up!"

"That's not nice," chides Lily.

A man is screeching, like an angry bird. We pause to listen. His voice is so high-

pitched that the words are strangled in his throat, and all that is left is the sound. A woman's voice swears back at him, and her words roll and blur like watercolor, "Fa rkencaantbaastardmuthafaarkenpieceofshhhtgetthaarkkouttaheeya!"

Lily looks up at me, her eyes wide. I squeeze her arm. "It's just the neighbors, baby."

They moved into the street a few weeks after us: a middle aged lady, a handful of little kids, a teenage daughter and her boyfriend, and their baby. Lulu, their Pomeranian, shrieks at Polly through the broken fence. They have another dog too, a nervous black Staffordshire-cross, who escapes from their open gate and limps up and down the street. Every morning the mum wraps her thick cardigan tightly to her waist with her lean, brown arms, and strides past. Never with a shopping bag, a letter to post, or a lit cigarette, she disappears at the corner but is back within minutes. We chat once, over the bonnet of my car. Lily whinges and kicks the back of the driver's seat. Her oldest son is in the AFL, she tells me. He is her pride, her heart. She works as a teacher, and started the Koori program at Thornbury Primary. I tell her that I've heard good things about it. I tell her that in New Zealand we learnt Maori in primary school, and spent nights sleeping on the local marae for school camps. "It's different there," she says. "At least there was a treaty. Didn't mean much but it was something."

Later, when I visited the school, the children were gluing strips of fluoro-coloured paper onto a balloon and another mother rolled her eyes at me and whispered sarcastically, "Yeah, the Koori people have always been mad for papier-mâché."

I tell her my neighbor that she is the first Aboriginal person I have spoken with, or maybe I just think it. Either way, it's true.

I don't tell her that when I was a teenager and I first saw the smoky, drunken crowd outside Smith St Safeway, I shook my head in disgust. "Those drunks need to pull their shit together," I said.

"It's not that simple," said Mary, a friend of my aunt's.

"Yes it is," I said. "No-one else can help them get over it."

"Get over it?" Mary asked me. "It is everything to them. What would you do, smart-arse, if neon-green people flew in on spaceships and murdered your friends and family, and introduced new diseases that killed off more? What would you do if they took your terrace, and your car, and said you couldn't use them anymore?"

"Yeah," I protested weakly, "But it's been ages."

"It's only been two hundred years," she said. "There are fish that old. What would you do?"

"I'd kill myself," I said, "Fuck that for a joke."

"Exactly," she said. "I'm not saying it's pretty, but they are alive. You wouldn't even make it that far."

I have heard the teenage couple fight before, usually at night. The hippy neighbor, with the ponytail, tells me that he can hear every word. The wind carries the angry

fragments into his back garden. "She winds the young fulla up," he says, in his gentle voice. "Hits him too - really belts him." He shrugs and says, "When you're at the bottom, there is always going to be trouble."

The screeching sounds very near. The blind is down to protect my sore head, with a big crack at the bottom to let in light. Lifting up the corner, I push my face against the glass and peer out. He is standing right by the fence. His face is grey and clammy, his eyes are wide and unfocused. He bleeds above the eye, and his jaw is tightly clenched. She yells and spits at his back. Holding a post of the fence with both hands, as if it were a neck, he shakes it violently. His curly hair flays his cheeks like strings of a whip. Like soft cartilage, the posts in his hands snap easily, and he drops the bits onto the concrete. The rest of the fence faints in shock, and slumps to the ground. White chips fan across the footpath like dislodged teeth after a fist-fight. He lifts his head and looks straight at me. My breath hardens in my chest. I pick up Lily, and run away from the front of the narrow house, down the hall, and into the sunny courtyard. The dog trots behind, enjoying the exercise. Fear is fat inside my gut, and growing like a malignant foetus. I think: he will smash through the window, and he will come down to us. He will break us like rotten wood. I put Lily down, and she balances nonchalantly on one naked foot, and colours the other with a piece of blue chalk. She sings, "Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jo-lee-ee-ene! Ahm begging of ya, please don't take ma ma-yee-an."

I breathe deep, and yell over the back fence to the sparkie neighbour, "Call the police!" His back door is open, but football commentary is blaring from the television, and he can't hear me shouting. "Bogan," I think furiously. "Bloody bogan!"

My heart is clattering inside my ribs, and I am angry, very angry. How dare he smash that fence? I have a kid in here! And I'm really hung over! I remember that before Lily was born, I loved drama. I wanted things to get messy. Danger, death – mine, others – was far away, and impossible. There was an edge, sure, and death was over it, but that edge was protected by a steel fence. I could batter myself against it, a moth against the lampshade, and be confident that it would protect me from the fizz of the bulb, and keep me on the side of life.

But that fence that I thought was there to protect me – to protect all of us – was knocked down at Lily's birth. Pulled into sleep by wires and chemicals, my legs shook with cold and my blood dripped over the narrow gurney. They sucked me clean, pushed my insides back in, and filled me back up with somebody else's blood. The faceless masks nudged me back onto the side of life. Lily was lined up with the premature babies in their incubators, like plastic takeaway containers on a counter. They clawed at their pink tissue-paper skin with jerky limbs, and screamed without sound. A fragile symphony of technology kept their butterfly hearts beating. Lights flashed, wires hummed and buttons beeped in a precise rhythm.

Our secure back-yard with the high fences feels like a trap. I decide that if he comes down into the yard, I will throw my kid over the fence into the sparkie's manicured courtyard. That might get his attention. I tell Lily to stay put. She shrugs, and perches happily on the back steps in the sun. "I'm three and a half – not three," She announces, "I'm going to a party where they have a chook called Henry. Adrie can't come to the party. She has swine flu. What's swine flu?"

I peer under the blind. He has gone, and the street is empty and quiet. My anger evaporates, like the popping of a soap-bubble. The police are quick to arrive. The neighbours are quicker. Brenda shakes her head, and squeezes her lips into a line. "Those mongrels," she mutters, "those bloody mongrels."

The teenage girl and her mum examine the broken fence, their arms folded across their chests. The baby pulls at their trousers and whinges, a stream of snot leaking from his nose. I apologise for calling the police. "I don't want him to get into trouble," I explain "But, he's got to fix the fence. I mean - I've got a kid!"

Polly darts across the broken fence and licks excitedly at the ankles of the policeman. He bends to scratch behind her ears and she collapses in pleasure. "Where is he?" He asks, bent at the waist. We all shrug. He sighs and straightens, slides his notebook into his pocket. "You've got our number," he says to the women.

Weeks later, the temperature hasn't dropped below 40 degrees for days, and everybody is tip-toeing along the edge of madness. The old man from across the road is hospitalised with heat-stroke, and the hippy neighbour finds a possum unconscious in his tomato plants. It is the week of the bush fires. I drink a beer and nearly pass out. Lily is asleep, so when the dog starts to bark, I have to leap naked across the room to throttle her into silence. He is standing outside the still-broken fence. I put on my dress, and go out. "I'm so sorry, ay," he says, shifting nervously from one foot to another. He gives me some flowers and Lindt balls, and a fairy colouring-in book with crayons for Lily. The little girl comes out with Bella the crotchety Pomeranian, and she smiles at me shyly. Bella and Polly circle each other suspiciously.

"You scared the shit out of me," I say to him.

"I'm so sorry, ay," he repeats.

"It's OK," I say, "But you've gotta fix that bloody fence this week. The dog will get on the road!"

I feel proud of my forgiveness. I'm just so reasonable. But I do wonder, uncomfortably, how forgiving I would have been if it were the sparkie who broke my fence. We chat, on the street, and Polly licks the little girl's legs. He tells me about some place they stay at called The Mission, and I tell him I read about them in books as a kid. The heat is disorienting, and the flowers wilt. I go inside and eat the chocolate.

Not everything is easy to fix. Fences are, and he organises his cousin to help him. They get prices for wood from Bunnings. But the landlord decides that he doesn't want him to fix the broken bit: he wants to do a dirty on the insurance and get the whole fence replaced. It's so dodgy. We all know the fence was half-broken already. Weeks pass, and crispy grass pokes through the gaps in the fallen spokes. Polly trots over it, and escapes onto the road. I find Lulu loose on the street and she trots nervously away from me and snarls, lifting her black lips to reveal pointed yellow teeth. Her skin is crawling with insects. I catch her and squeeze Frontline onto the back of her scrawny neck. She nips at my fingers as I knock on their door. "You're the only neighbour that we've talked to," says the little girl, and takes the dog.

"That's crazy," I say, but feel proud that it's me. "You guys are my favourite neighbours," I tell her, and it's true. But, I wish they'd keep their dogs off the road. They get a new black Labrador puppy, and it cries all night, like a neglected baby.

Summer limps past and the temperature drops. The curtains are always carefully drawn at their house so all you can see are the shadow of photo frames, and a boomerang. The mum had said she was separated from her husband. "He's important," she told me, "but, no good. Violent. Most of the important ones are no good."

Snails gather under the broken fence. We wear socks, and turn on the heater in the mornings. One afternoon, I ride my bike to the second-hand book store on High St. The wind is cold and wild. Pedalling home past Wales St Primary, I see an ambulance parked by the knocked-down Northcote Pottery. A police car glides past. The teenage girl is standing on the footpath looking down the street. I ride down to her and my tyres scream when I brake.

"What happened?" I ask, worried.

"We gave my cousin fifty bucks to get some smokes for us," she says, her eyes locked on the ambulance. "But, he didn't come back. He spent it on grog! My mum's so upset."

"Why the ambulance?" I ask, confused. She seems unhurt – no blood or bruises.

"He was coming towards me," she says softly, "Saying shit."

The police car glides to the curb beside us. "It was self-defence," I tell her. "Tell them that."

She looks at me blankly.

"I'm just the neighbour," I say to the policewoman, and nudge Polly into the house with my foot.

Eventually, the fence is fixed. The handyman is old and apologetic, and leaves a trail of paint footprints in the hallway. The fence is taller than before, and Lily climbs it to watch the kids walking to school. She blows on her fingers, and her hot breath makes smoke rings in the cold air. Later, in my car, I see him – my fence-breaker. I lift my hand politely off the steering wheel. He nods at the new fence with a smile, and I grin goofily back and wave. A streak of rust darts in front of my car: Lulu, the Pomeranian. I swerve to avoid her and the tyres screech like a bird.

# **Ledger**

*Alex Skovron*

A word is worth more than a thousand pictures,  
There's not a threesome but a thousand Graces,  
One small Commandment and a thousand strictures;

The famous ship that launched a thousand faces  
Has ruled the oceans for three thousand years;  
Ten thousand times the fugitive sparrow chases

The elusive crumb, and the fifty thousand fears  
No longer daunt the drunken thirty thousand,  
Or Hades' thousand thirsty volunteers

For whom a thousand monsters and a parliament  
Of maidens by the toppled thousand are the same –  
Like twenty thousand wilted flowers sent

To as many places, the twenty thousandth name  
The true recipient, twenty thousand others  
Pressed to a thousand speculations by a game

None of the thousands know, so that none bothers  
To grasp its thousand rules; meanwhile the saints  
(That city of ten thousand sisters, brothers)

Circle ten thousand times, and each acquaints  
Himself or her with one of a thousand scriptures,  
To salve or stem the million sad refrains.

# **Afterlife**

*Wes Lee*

SOMETIMES, FOR A FRACTION OF A SECOND, I get my mother's birthday and the day of her death mixed up like the way I do with Jesus. At Easter I think that's when he was born and Christmas he was crucified. Until I remember. My mother was born on April 3 and died December 24. No one remembers her like Jesus, but a couple of people remember her better than Jesus.

I read this theory about people existing in the afterlife as long as people remember them here on earth, then when people stop thinking about them they just disappear. And I thought, what if you exist in the afterlife the way a person remembers you, not as the real person you were, just a kind of quasi-person that fulfils some need of the living? Like someone might remember their mother like Mary, with limpid, all-forgiving eyes, her hand resting placidly on her breast, and they're stuck there in the afterlife like Mary, a statue, just gazing at the other people there with these useless eyes and not being able to cry or scream or shout or laugh or take the piss.

What if you completely didn't recognise yourself the way someone remembers you and it comes as a shock: staring down at your pulpy arms, your dimpled thighs, your ugly frog mouth that never stops opening, and feeling sad because someone back on earth never really knew you?

What if there were all these versions of you in the afterlife, walking around saying good morning and talking about the weather, because you were being remembered by all these different people, then one by one the versions disappeared? Which one would be left the longest?

Or what if there was just one version being remembered by lots of people, so many conflicting rememberings poured into one body that you were being pulled all over – like that girl dragged through the sea at terrific speed by the shark in Jaws, back and forth through the water?

What if you just kind of faded out, the shape of you got weaker and weaker until you were nearly transparent before you disappeared? Like a ghost. Perhaps that's where ghosts come from – they're people who just about everyone has stopped thinking about until they're nearly see-through, and there's just one tiny thought somewhere holding onto them like an anchor: a thin piece of string at the end of a balloon held aloft by a child's little hand.

Or when the last person thinks of you, when the last thought happens, you disappear, poof, in a wisp of smoke like in a cartoon where the cat gets hit by a giant inflatable hammer, or blown out of a cannon by a wicked mouse or sly bird.

There's this boy I see around, one of those people who once you notice them

you see them everywhere. Tall with a bright red acne face and ginger hair. In my mind I call him Rain Man because he blurts things out and rocks back and forth at a table in McDonald's, speaking to people who aren't there, laughing to himself, scribbling on a notepad, and he never makes eye contact. After the first few times I saw him, he came near my table and I tried to smile but his eyes blanked me. He just stood there making this high moaning sound, his head jerking, the veins in his neck ropey and strained. I didn't know what to do, how to act towards him.

Like the slow boy, Gregory, who asked me to dance at the school disco. I saw him break away from the line of boys at the other side of the hall, and I knew he was making his way to me. His outsize head and big gangly body bobbing towards me. The most beautiful girl in the school, Jennifer Moretti, standing beside me. I knew he was going to ask me, that he was not going to ask Jennifer.

I'd tried to ignore him, standing there with a helpless grin on his big round face.

"Dance with him," Jennifer said.

"No."

"He's come all this way over. Go on, dance with him."

"Why don't you dance with him?"

"He isn't asking me."

Everyone around watching, staring at us. Party streamers dangling from the four corners. Cut-outs of stars. The planets stamped over the walls in silver tinfoil. Jennifer poking me in the small of my back, trying to shove me out onto the dance floor.

I'd felt suddenly stupid in my purple suede skirt and the silver tanktop my mother had crocheted for me. The most beautiful girl at school had made me feel like a dork for not dancing with Gregory, because I thought I was more special than that and realised nobody could see.

At the time I'd thought, how dare he walk over and ask me, how dare he embarrass me.

I went for a job last year when I'd just left school and was at a loss for what I would do, as an assistant to the art teacher at the drop-in centre. I pictured myself mixing paint, filling jam jars with water, moving between the tables, making a suggestion here and there, but I cocked up the interview, the woman asked me what I thought about the mentally ill and I said I was afraid of them. She stared at me for a long time, then shuffled her papers and smirked. I knew I wasn't going to get the job, but why? It was the truth. I was afraid but I wanted to teach the thing I could do. I wanted to give something and get paid at the same time. I should have lied, if I'd have lied like everybody else I would have got the job, because you can't tell me people aren't afraid of something they don't understand, something unpredictable. But being afraid and knowing it, how can that be bad? Soldiers go to war knowing they're afraid but they still go. The army recruiter doesn't say, what do you think of war? And the soldier says, well I'm not afraid, I like the thought of

it, I think it's a good thing, I can't wait to get there and start killing.

And when I'm on the bus going home, I see Rain Man running along the pavement. Running home, I think, to wherever he lives. His big red face shining with sweat, looking like he's enjoying the running. His mouth wide open laughing, arms flapping, no thought of how he appears to other people.

I sometimes imagine getting off the bus, dropping my bag on the road and just running – running beside him. And I think that's what the afterlife would be like: suddenly finding yourself running with Rain Man after you'd been scared of him all your life. Laughing, egging each other on, legs and arms flying, elbowing each other as you ran.

Sometimes I'll be sitting there on the bus, staring at the back of people's heads all facing the same way, looking like they're carved in stone, embarrassed if they cough, looking like the tiniest sound would split them in two, all silent on that bus, and I imagine turning to look at each one of them. All the heads turn to look at me, then turn to look at each other, pure joy comes out of their eyes, flows from their eyes and mouth, a white strong light, and we see for the first time, we know for the first time. I feel it underneath, that's what the afterlife is like.

I think that's what happened to my mother.

We never got a chance to say goodbye or say anything that people get to say if someone is ill or old and you know they are dying. It was so sudden, that's what my father said when we were standing in the kitchen, just the two of us, after we'd come back from the emergency room. We were in space, in the darkness of it – Christmas tree lights winking from the living room – but we weren't floating, and the words from his mouth had just fallen. I could hear the kettle boiling, bubbling and roaring like the loudest sound I'd ever heard.

If my mother is existing somewhere the way I remember her, it would be the way she is in a photograph, taken in black & white, that my father keeps in a frame on the sideboard: her bright blond hair styled in a bob, her arm stretched high waving; eyes shining, looking like she was made of light. Standing at the bus stop, waving at my father who was walking along the road, coming to meet her. They were going to a concert and her friend from school, Margaret, took the picture. Her friend Margaret who got photos of them both taken with The Beatles when they were just starting out, before they were famous: my mother in a pencil skirt and her hair all pushed up in a bouffant with Paul McCartney's arm around her, looking so young and thin, a waif before he was famous, before everything would come to him, looking almost shy with his arm around my mother.

Soft and strong and a thousand things all at the same time, like light, she had to be light being those thousand things at the same time. How could we be anything other than light.

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