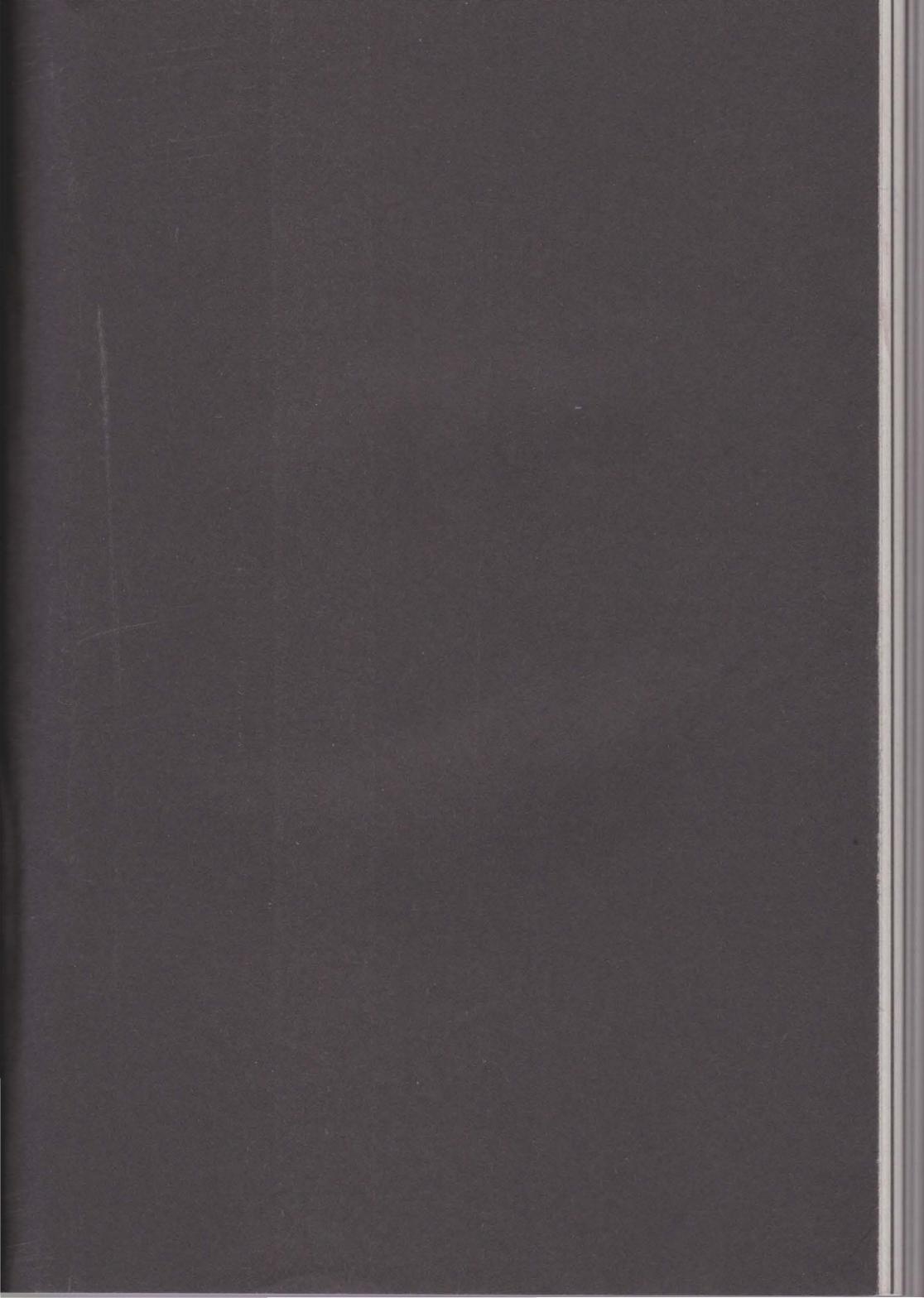






XXXV





GOING DOWN SWINGING

№ 35

Published in 2013

(1st Edition) by Going Down Swinging Inc.

© Copyright remains with the respective authors.

Going Down Swinging

PO Box 24, Clifton Hill, Vic. Australia 3056

goingdownswinging.org.au

Editors → Geoff Lemon, Zoe Norton Lodge,

Rhys Tate, Katia Pase, Simon Cox

General Manager → Emily Andersen

Digital Editor → Vanessa Hughes

Program Coordinator → Alexandra Macalister-Bills

GDS Website Editor → Megan Anderson

Communications → Alice Williams

Book Design → Holiday, workbyholiday.com

Swing Illustration → Europa, europaeuropa.co.uk

Illustrations → Darren Song, darrensong.com

Audio Engineering → Kieran Ruffles

Audio Mastering → Soup Campbell

'Dissociation' was first published in *Blackmail Press 34*

Printed by MPD

ISBN 978-0-9804053-8-5



Going Down Swinging is supported by
the School of Culture & Communications
at the University of Melbourne.



**ARTS
VICTORIA**



Going Down Swinging is supported by the
Victorian Government through Arts Victoria.



Cerveza Aguilá is a key sponsor
of Going Down Swinging.

THE WRITING

17. **Bridget Lutherborrow**
Library of Congress
24. **BN Oakman**
A Street Called the
Love of God
28. **Chloe Wilson**
Lyudmila Pavlichenko,
From the Orchard
33. **Patrick Lenton**
Swimming, and Other
Unnatural Things
43. **Lauren Aimee Curtis**
Highway
51. **Amaryllis Gacioppo**
Interstate 15
68. **Luke Farrell**
Au Revoir, Adelaide
72. **Geoff Page**
Palm and Pine
76. **Zoe Dzunko**
Burgundy
79. **Kia Groom**
You're Standing
on My Tail
98. **Justine Poon**
Shucked
102. **Kevin Riel**
Initiation

105. **Nick Sun**
 The First Time I...
 ... Watched a Man Have
 a Heart Attack
 ... Went to a Funeral on Acid
 ... Found Out Someone
 I Didn't Know Had
 Died on Facebook
 ... Stood Up for a Chicken
 ... Broke My Vegetarian Vow
 ... Went to the Slavery
 Museum
 ... Was a Children's
 Entertainer
123. **Luke Johnson**
 The Ghost of Electricity
144. **Lucy Mackay-Sim**
 Draw
147. **Upulie Divisekera**
 Fibroin
152. **Sean Goedecke**
 Phenomenology
 of Bananas
156. **Andy Jackson**
 Forensics Museum
160. **Stuart Barnes**
 Dissociation
165. **Rafael S.W.**
 The Half-Life of Tears
174. **Chloe Wilson**
 Persephone Goes
 to Night School
178. **Geoff Page**
 The Tribes
183. **Jonathon Lawrence**
 Kujirajitari (Whale Story)
194. **Gregory Horne**
 Ahab's Crew Look for
 the Whale that Swallowed
 God Almighty
197. **Alison Finn**
 Hell on a Long Dart
206. **Renee Schipp**
 The Will of Water
209. **Kavita Bedford**
 The Most Northern
 Southern City
224. **Eric Paul Shaffer**
 Monopoly
227. **Oliver Mol**
 When It Was Cold
 but Not Too Cold
243. **Aaron Billings**
 Light and Air and
 then Nothing Hurt

THE AUDIO

1. **Anis Mojgani**
Today's Love is Brought to
You by the Letter Jon Sands
2. **Jennifer Compton**
Oh Yes
3. **Tom Walker**
Time Machine Racer
4. **Benezra**
Born Under a Big Brass Bell
5. **Adam Gibson**
Angie Hart
6. **Angie Hart**
An Apology to Melbourne
7. **Dawn Sperber**
Spiders Bite Me in My Sleep
8. **Jacky T**
Mrs Freeman
9. **Tineke Van der Eecken**
For Seraphine
10. **Laura Vitis**
Picker and Boon
11. **Benezra**
Isabel
12. **Adam Gibson
& Bass Elefant**
Lighthouse Beach

GDS NO. 35 includes a separate audio album.

→ **DOWNLOAD IT:** goingdownswinging.org.au/albums ←

Choose **NO. 35**, and enter the password **16009650**. If you
want to steal that password, I suppose you have the upper hand.



If you really like CDs, you can burn one. If you can't,
email: info@goingdownswinging.org.au and we'll get you one.

EDITORIAL

**GEOFF
LEMON**

TAKE THE TWELVE MONTHS just gone and the twelve ahead, and *Going Down Swinging* will have changed more than at any other point in its history.

Not that we're airbrushing the past to march into a glorious Stalinist future. It's good to be well into GDS's fourth decade. Pushing a new creative enterprise can make you feel equal parts sucker and egotist; history, meanwhile, gives the precedent of other people's commitment and the reassurance that it's not all about you. But in recent times, new shoots have fired out at a tremendous cadence. For most of its life GDS was a Melbourne literary journal produced by two or three people. We now have ten staff spanning Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and country Victoria, contributing to a program that goes well beyond print publishing.

In 2014 we'll work with the City of Melbourne to stage four top-line spoken word shows. We'll release the headline set from each as a live album. We'll have support from Arts NSW to stage more events in that state, and to create and publish more work from those who live there. We'll work on bringing in performers from overseas, on exporting our own, and on the launches and parties that have built such a reputation for delivering good times. The flagship GDS commissions program will expand, funding several major new performance, written and visual art pieces.

The GDS website is now a publication in its own right, updating a mixture of critical, creative and entertaining writing several times a week, with a best-of compilation due at the end of 2014. We'll keep investigating digital developments, tying together art forms in ways that weren't previously possible, as we did with *Going Down Swinging No. 34* earlier in 2013. We'll also print our first single-author short story collection, a preview of which leads off this edition.

Since 1993, GDS has been the only regular supporter of spoken word in Australian publishing. So one change is immediately apparent: this edition we've moved away from providing CDs, given the increasing redundancy of the format. Our commitment to performers, though, is stronger than ever, both live and in publication. The *No. 35* album is still very much part of this collection, so do make sure to download it.

As ever, the GDS program means thousands of donated hours by staff and underpaid hours by contributors. Finances

are ever tenuous. If you get a subscription, or give one away, you'll lock in years of good reading while helping us be sure we can deliver it.

However things change, the publication in your hands is still central. It's why GDS began, to give an outlet to writers who lacked the opportunity, and we still enjoy publishing the unknown beside the celebrated. This aim informs everything we do: simply, it's about getting more writers and artists to more audiences; about the satisfaction of entertaining and the value of being entertained. When previous editors look at GDS now, there will be things that they don't recognise. We still hope they're proud of what they see.

COMMISSION SERIES

DARREN SONG

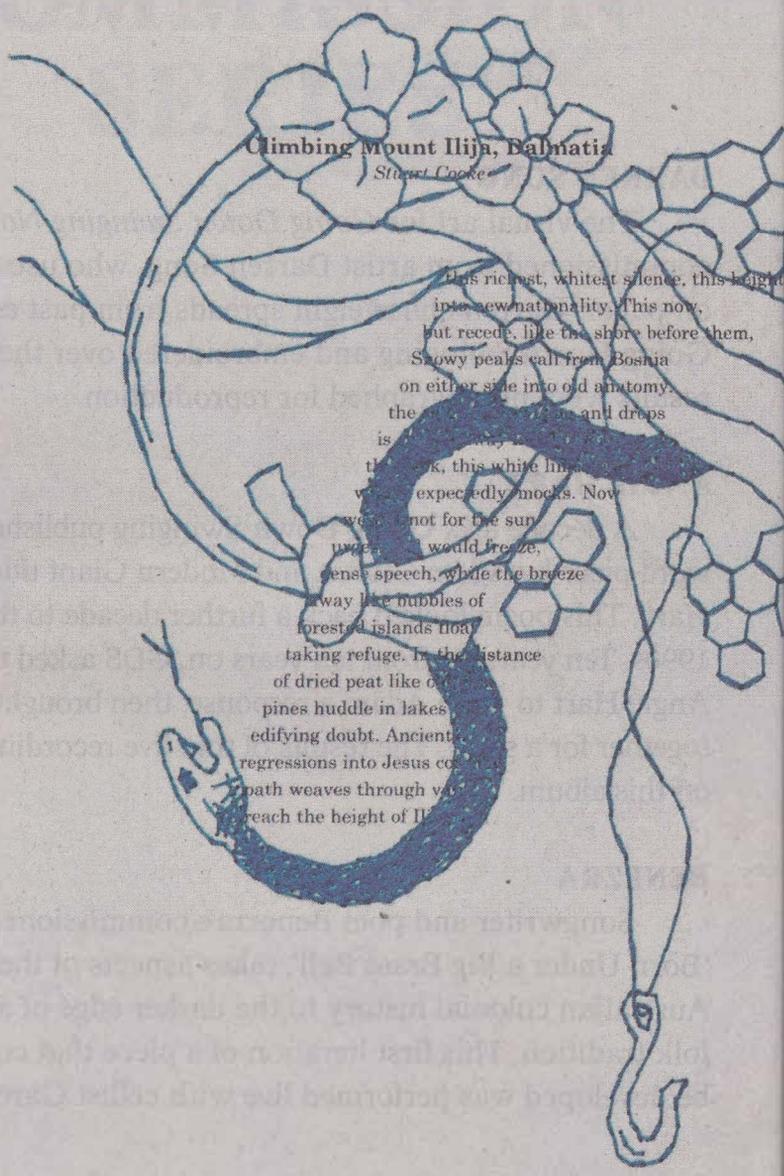
The visual art for *Going Down Swinging No. 35* was commissioned from artist Darren Song, who uses thread on paper. Darren chose eight spreads from past editions of *Going Down Swinging* and embroidered over them. The results were photographed for reproduction.

ANGIE HART

A decade ago, *Going Down Swinging* published a spoken word piece by Adam Gibson and Modern Giant titled 'Angie Hart'. This poem looked back a further decade to the early 1990s. Ten years on from ten years on, GDS asked the real Angie Hart to write Adam a response, then brought the two together for a show. The results of that live recording appear on this album.

BENEZRA

Songwriter and poet Benezra's commissioned piece, 'Born Under a Big Brass Bell', takes aspects of the blues and Australian colonial history to the darker edge of a distant folk tradition. This first iteration of a piece that continues to be developed was performed live with cellist Gareth Skinner.



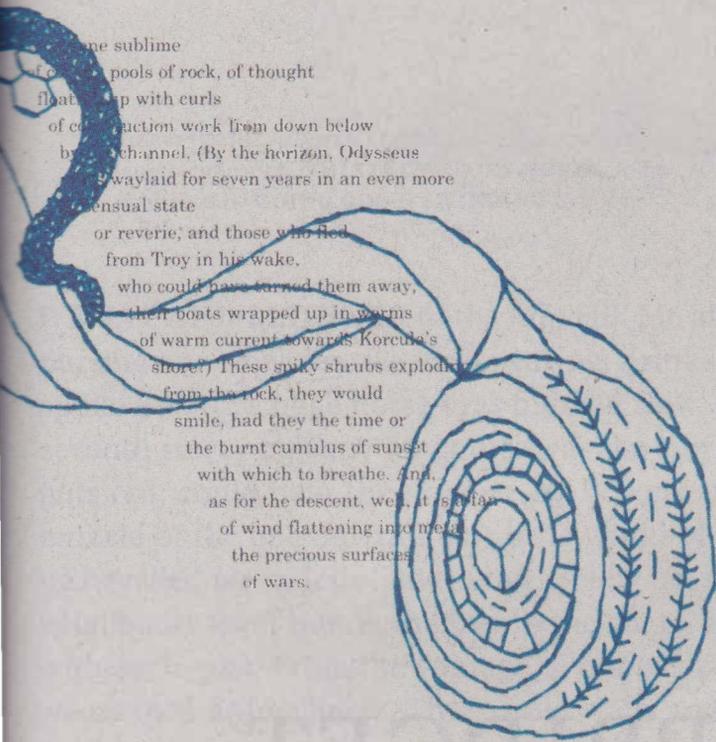
Climbing Mount Ilija, Dalmatia

Stuart Cooke

...this richest, whitest silence, this height
into new nationality. This now,
but recede, like the shore before them,
Snowy pearls call from Bosnia
on either side into old anatomy,
the sun is a sea and drops
is a sea away from the
the ink, this white line, a
was expectedly mocks. Now
were not for the sun
would freeze,
dense speech, while the breeze
away like bubbles of
forested islands float
taking refuge. In the distance
of dried peat like old
pines huddle in lakes
edifying doubt. Ancient
regressions into Jesus come
path weaves through valleys
reach the height of Ilija

LIBRARY
OF
CONGRESS

...the sublime
of pools of rock, of thought
floats up with curls
of construction work from down below
by the channel. (By the horizon, Odysseus
was waylaid for seven years in an even more
sensual state
or reverie; and those who fled
from Troy in his wake,
who could have turned them away,
their boats wrapped up in worms
of warm current towards Korcula's
shore?) These spiky shrubs exploded
from the rock, they would
smile, had they the time or
the burnt cumulus of sunset
with which to breathe. And,
as for the descent, well, it is a fan
of wind flattening into metal
the precious surfaces
of wars.



**LIBRARY
OF
CONGRESS**

**BRIDGET
LUTHERBORROW**

This is the first story in Bridget Lutherborrow's full-length collection, **THIRTEEN STORY HORSE**, to be published by **GOING DOWN SWINGING** in 2014.

WE SAT AND LISTENED to the rain fall. Me and Eduard, nursing our whiskies. Ice disappearing, drinks turned oil spills. Eduard's huge horse eyes blinked slow. On our seventh-storey balcony we could hear the storm wail its guts out, could hear the sky give in. Beyond the steel muzzle of the balcony rail, our little world of brick was dishevelled by an indecisive wind. Below us, scurrying neighbours leant into it, the tree in the courtyard thrashed with each gust. From the vantage of our brick-lined perch we seemed untouchable. Three solid walls and one open screen, just enough to see. Eduard nosed his tumbler and dipped a long tongue in the whisky, his graceless equine teeth poking out like broken piano keys. We'd been waiting all day for the storm.

→

It was one of those too-hot too-early spring days that begs to be stripped naked, to be dragged to bed and laid bare. But the heat took its time with the day. When the storm finally hit, Eduard and I were already out on the balcony, dog-tired after too much nothing. From our seats we watched the square garden bed in the courtyard. Across the way were other balconies like ours: green corrals of painted metal, clothes racks and potted plants.

Eduard and I always end the day this way. Even when we get things done it's as though we haven't moved from our places. After two drinks, neither of us feels the need to keep wandering back to the kitchen to replenish our tumblers. After two drinks, we're at ease enough to keep the bottle on the balcony. At ease enough to say, "Screw ice and modesty, screw the way they say it should be, who said whisky was any good anyway and who cares how I take it?" Nothing is quite that colourful between me and Eduard, though. He might be a horse, but we are both pretty calm about things.

→

Before the balcony and before the whisky, Eduard was inside the apartment and I was at my day job. I call it my day job even though some of the time it's at night. Eduard stays inside because he's not great with stairs. We don't have an

elevator, so Eduard has to climb all the way up here, like everyone else. Once he figured it out, he was pretty into stairs. He likes a challenge, but it's easier when he doesn't have to. He likes to talk too, though he talks slow and doesn't use many words. Not that he's stupid. He just doesn't need them and hates wasting anything. He builds furniture from egg cartons while I'm at work. I don't know how he does it, but it's really handy. I never ask him about it because he's pretty secretive about that stuff. He never leaves a mess when he's been making things and never makes things when I'm home. Egg cartons are sturdy and good for building, but they're not so good with spills. Luckily we eat a lot of eggs, which we buy from Henrietta from the first floor. Mr Gumption on the second floor gives us his egg cartons, too. Eduard makes a new coffee table every month or so. I'm pretty clumsy, apparently.

The other thing Eduard likes to do is scare the neighbours' children. There are five children in the building. Two boys on our floor, who live with their dad; a boy on the third floor; then Henrietta and another girl on the ground floor. Eduard scares them by sticking his head through the special window he installed in the front door of our apartment. I don't know how he put it in. He said it was inconvenient for him to open the door when a package comes or a pizza or someone to talk to. The children find it strange. They probably wouldn't be scared of him if they saw him in the garage or at the park, but the big floating horse head is weird. Maybe their parents let them watch *The Godfather*. Every

now and then, when he's bored, Eduard will stand around with his head out the special window, waiting for someone to pass by so he can say, "Howdy, neighhhbour," in his quiet horse voice and chuckle to himself.

Sometimes I worry this place is driving Eduard mad. Recently I mentioned moving out, hoping it might prompt him to go off somewhere else, somewhere with patchwork fields and snails of rolled hay. Or at least somewhere with a backyard. But Eduard just breathed at me through his nose and shut himself in the bathroom for four hours. We didn't talk about it again.

At my day job I do a lot of keeping track. That is basically it: words and numbers and things that someone doesn't want to lose. Most of the things don't seem worth keeping track of. Besides, I don't know if we really have space for all these numbers and words. I've heard the Library of Congress is storing all our tweets, which I guess is cool. It just seems like too much to hold on to. I know why they'd try: there are things I don't like to lose, either. Me and Eduard and the balcony, that's one way of keeping track. Some people think it's sad to do the same thing over and over. You have to let things disappear, so you can find new things. Then again, there are things you have to keep, otherwise the new things will never make sense.

There is an air conditioner at the office where I work. It helps us all hide from days like these, when the sky longs to de-robe for the whole long stretch from rising to sinking. It helps us forget the world outside is blind and rushing past

like a cape. In the morning, before I came in, the sky was an uncompromising blue, looking down with the gaze of a lover. The kind of look that is a challenge and a secret at the same time. The kind of look that says, “We both know where this is going, but I’m not going to tell you how it will happen, or when.” That’s the kind of look the sky had, bearing down on the city.

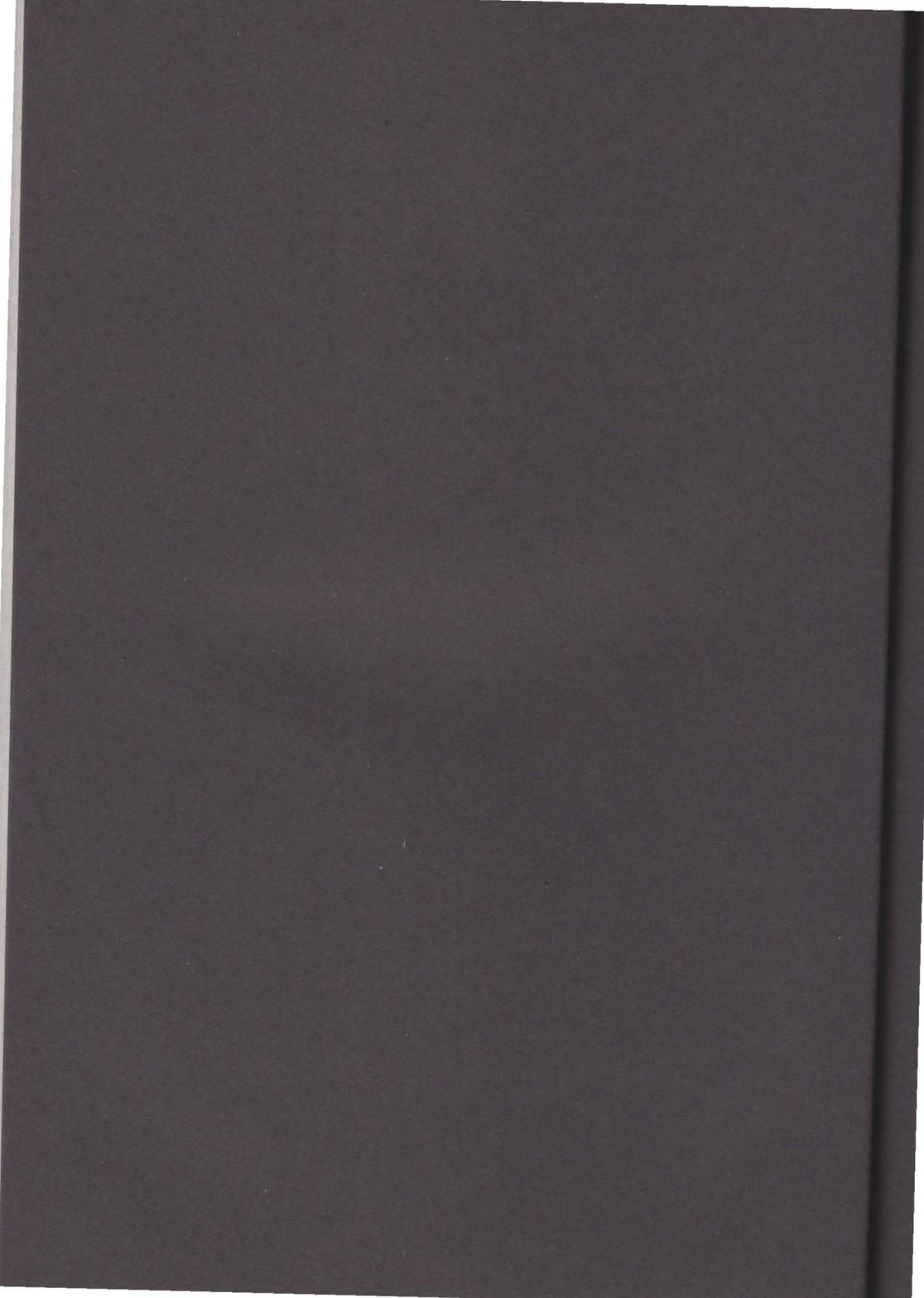
→

Before my day job, before the whisky and the balcony, there was the balcony and there was Eduard and me. The heat woke us earlier than usual, stirring sticky with mist behind our eyes. He had cold oats for breakfast, with milk, because he’s civilised. I had eggs, because I know Eduard likes the cartons. We arranged our food on the outdoor furniture, a township of china and tea. To our left, a glimpse of cityscape: skyscraper tops sketching grey staircases through the smog. The tree in the courtyard stood paper-still. Eduard looked up at the sky with his whisky eyes and there was no challenge in them, and no secret. That’s the way Eduard looks at everything – at oats, at whisky, at egg cartons and me. That’s the way he looked up at the sky, as she looked back, waiting for release. That’s how he looked at her all day, I think, until she finally put her hand to his snout. He is a very beautiful horse, after all, and has an unusual knack for building things and knowing when to let them go.



**A STREET
CALLED
THE LOVE
OF GOD**

**BN
OAKMAN**



Calle del Amor de Dios

Las Letras, Madrid

It's a disappointment: two short blocks straight and narrow, sometimes a throb of flamenco from the guitar maker's shop.

It finishes at Calle de las Huertas, but there are no orchards, no Edens, only cut stones enclosing the Trinitarian Sisters.

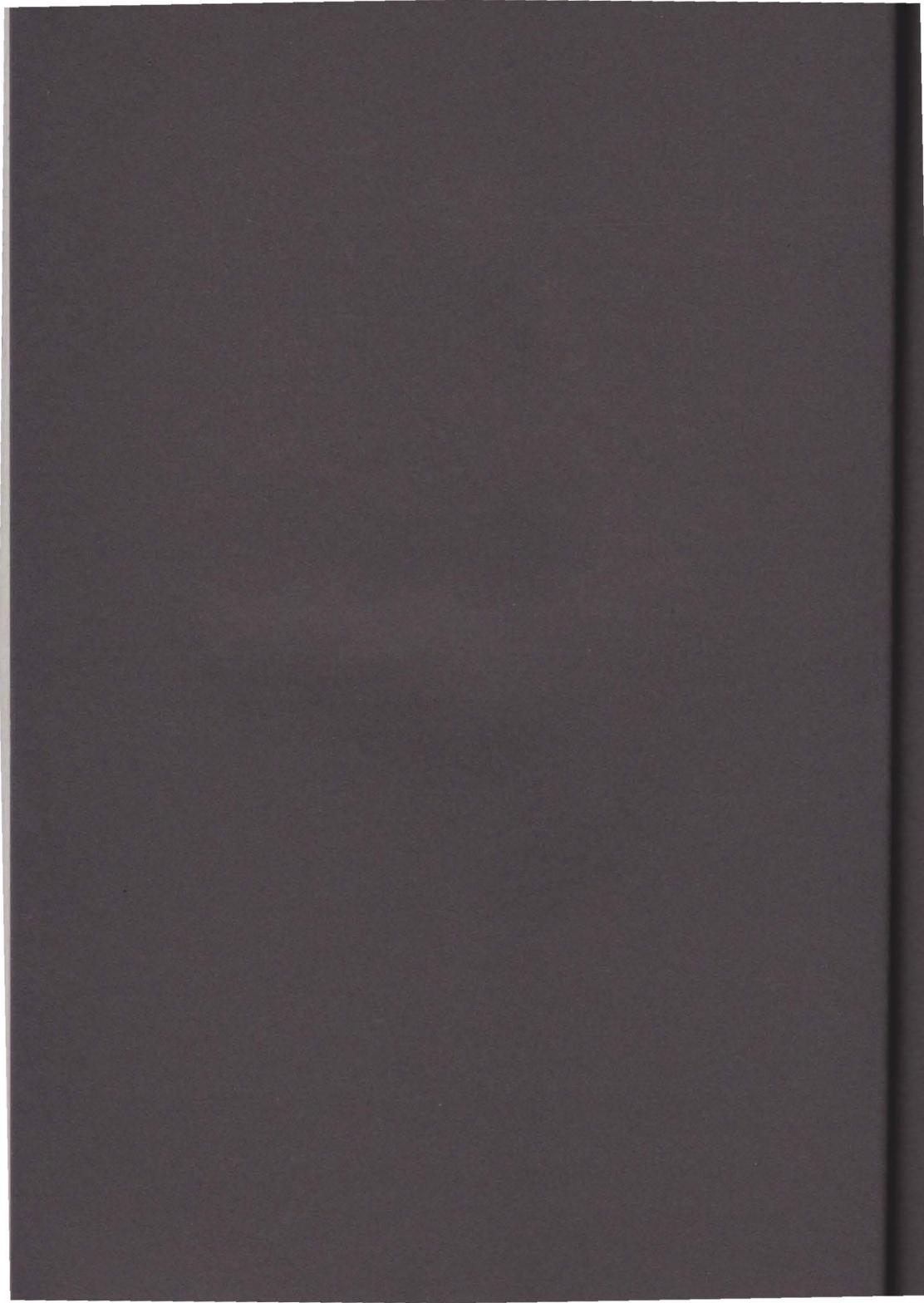
Go deeper into Las Letras, to the house where Lope de Vega, then a priest in holy orders, lived for twenty years with two sets

of authorised children. Surely Padre Lope strolled Calle del Amor de Dios to liaise with his many paramours, pay visits to

spontaneous offspring. And nearing the end, agitated by a lack of grace and dreading damnation, he scourged with enthusiasm,

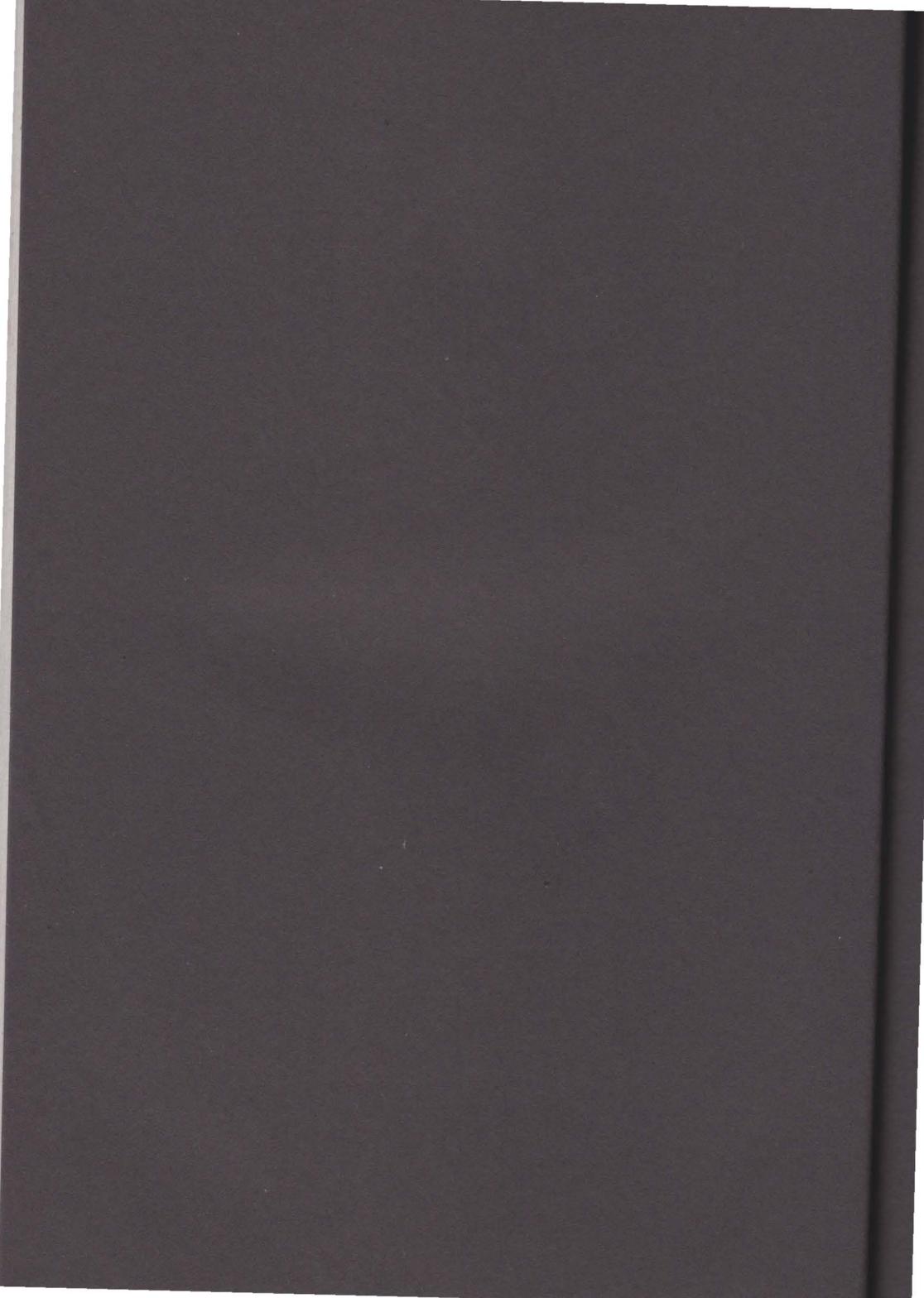
spattering whitewashed walls with blood. Pity poor Lope clubbing with Purgatory's sin-struck chancers, soul in the balance,

aspiring to virtue, craving heaven's passport, bleeding for the love of God, but wherever he turns or twists – so many willing women.



**LYUDMILA
PAVLICHENKO,
FROM THE
ORCHARD**

**CHLOE
WILSON**



1 –

I am hunched in the crotch of a tree.
On the outskirts of Odessa,
death is arboreal – we are splayed
along branches like panthers

or boas, all of our deadliness
concealed. They favour women
for these positions, thinking
our knack for stillness
comes naturally. And it is true

that we do not move
when our bladders gestate
from cherries into oranges,
from oranges into aubergines.
But such adaptations take practice.

2 –

All sorts of torsos
were strung up as targets,
when I first learned the art

of sharpshooting. The silhouette
of a raccoon, an otter, a fox –
circles rolled from their centres,

each animal a black pond
into which a rock
had been dropped.

Then one day, a man's shape,
flat and featureless. My teacher said
think of your nemesis. I'd not yet

considered this, but somewhere
a door unlatched to a room
kept dim, whose fittings I knew
by touch.

3 –

Only the witnessed kills count.
No one except the more meticulous

gods know the number
of notches I've earned. But records

are not my concern. I never
intended to slip on this dress,

death in a less recognised guise. Who was
that girl who enlisted, I wonder?

How could she not have known
I would end up here, petrified –

circumstance can turn the living
into fossil, into stone.

**SWIMMING,
& OTHER
UNNATURAL
THINGS**

**PATRICK
LENTON**

WHEN I WAS A KID, I was a surprisingly good swimmer. I never really did anything with this ability, because I lack anything resembling competitiveness in my spindly body. Or maybe it's because when I was doing swimming class in primary school, the scary poolside instructor guy kept calling me Wilhelm. "Backstroke, Wilhelm," he would yell. "Push up the pace, Wilhelm." I wouldn't answer, because it's not my name, and he would get increasingly apoplectic. Only later did this become apparent: at the time I remember wondering why he always ignored me, and why he hated that Wilhelm guy so much. Then in high school, I entered the breaststroke race at the swimming carnival because I was hot, then I accidentally won and had to go to regionals. At regionals, all the swim-mums hassled me and asked who

my coach was and tried to psych me out. It worked.

Well over a decade from the premature stifling of what would have been my golden sporting era, I decide it is time to do something about my incipient heart disease. The problem is that certain time of year when the sun turns the entirety of its broad flaming face to the earth and looks directly at Australia. We call this horrific time 'summer' because 'summer-times you will die from heatstroke', a little riff which is an example of laconic Australian humour. Summer means that the only plausible exercise is swimming, as it takes place in a pool. I mean, you still get cancer but at least it's wet. There being an aquatic centre around the corner from my house, I feel like this is meant to be. Admittedly, the hangover is probably a bad idea. For some reason I didn't anticipate that I would drink so much at a chess-themed party on a Thursday night: I obviously haven't been playing chess right. My second mistake, it will transpire, will be hubris. You see, I remember my time as Wilhelm, and retain every shred of his cocksure Teutonic swimming arrogance.

So the physical pursuit does not faze me. What I am scared about is the whole administrative side of things. I'm really bad in new situations where I don't know precisely what to do. I spend the morning in fevered worry that I will create an international scandal when I hang my backpack inappropriately on a nearby child and discover that my swimwear is now illegal. But I am so excited about getting rippling abs and a new pastime that doesn't involve alcohol that I push on anyway. This is about being an adult. Adults

are fit, goal-oriented people who are so terrified of death they will do anything to stave off the inevitable. I too can be so full of goals and fear.

After finding my bathing suit and receiving the necessary permissions from the Heritage Council to take it from its glass case, I strut on down to the pool. Approaching the attractive tanned young man at the desk, I proudly announce, "I'm making my long-awaited comeback to the sport of swimming." The gentleman blinks and nods slowly. I proceed to thrust money into his hand, and flustered by the lack of direction, say "I'll have one of your finest pools, please. I understand the general notion is I swim from one end to the other." He nods again. I shake my head enthusiastically, quite aware that my nerves have given me a psychotic sheen. To cover the awkward silence, I mutter "Rinse and repeat" a few times, before confiding to him that this is all in aid of my health. With exaggerated care, he picks out the six required dollars and sends me on my way.

Despite the problematic progress of my first foray into this bold aquatic world, I'm not ready to give up. That old familiar chlorine smell fills my nostrils like mustard gas, taking me back to a better time. I can almost hear the ghost of a long-dead German yelling someone's name. I take it as encouragement. The worst lies behind me. Pacing awkwardly around the pool in an impersonation of someone who knows what he's doing, I discover the sensible planning of three different lanes, from fast to medium and slow. I scoff at slow, and vaguely consider fast. I did used to be Wilhelm, you

know. But, considering the fact that it's been over a decade since I last swam a lap, I decide to play it safe and start off in medium. Maybe when I've hit my pace at around thirty laps, I can leap over the barrier like a mako shark and speed out the home stretch.

I dive into the water, and start a few awkward strokes. I am secretly jubilant, as the breathing rhythm and everything just comes naturally. It's like riding a giant wet bike. I do an entire lap, and things are great. The next thing I notice is that the water is ridiculously warm. Disappointing, yes. The water is also... rather burny. Then it's really burny. It's a weekend at burnies. My eyes are spasming in pain, and my skin is crawling, but I'm pushing on. I'm on the second lap, and everything feels wrong. My arms and legs are sore, and it's getting harder to breathe right. Maybe I'm supposed to exhale more under water, I think, doing so and choking down a lungful. My clean, economical strokes become claws pulling desperately at the surface, and my breathing, even above the roar of the water, sounds distinctly gaspish. This is all wrong. Maybe the water isn't as buoyant as it used to be?

I clutch the wall, breathing heavily, trying vainly to rub the chlorine from my eyes. Two pregnant ladies are bobbing around next to me in the slow lane. One is worried that she'll be picked up by the transit officers on the train because she hasn't got a new concession sticker at university yet. Still clawing my eyes, I shriek at them the valuable news that last year's sticker is valid until March. They are taken aback. The other one gently suggests I buy some goggles.

I decide to do a lap of breaststroke. If I take it ridiculously slow, I'll be fine. But I discover it's hard to stay afloat without momentum. A large walrus-man has lapped me, and is bearing steadily down from behind at what I can only describe as a terrifyingly slow speed. I barely make it to the other end. By this point, all illusions are gone. Either my ability to swim has wasted away along with my beautiful soprano singing voice and He-Man action figures, or I am suffering under a malevolent spell. Regardless of which is more likely – and I have pissed off a bunch of witches on Twitter – I need to do one more lap. Pride pushes me away from the tiles. At one point, I start hauling myself bodily along the lane rope. People are looking at me. The lifeguard is sizing me up. I actually think I'm going to die, startled at the lack of air making it into my lungs.

But I make it, and on rubbery legs I stumble into the change rooms to face the mirror and look into the boiled red pits that used to be my eyes. They are like two meteors jutting out of my face. It's like somebody tried to pack my eye sockets full of weed and smoke a bong through my nostrils. Suddenly the incredible fear of the pregnant ladies makes sense.

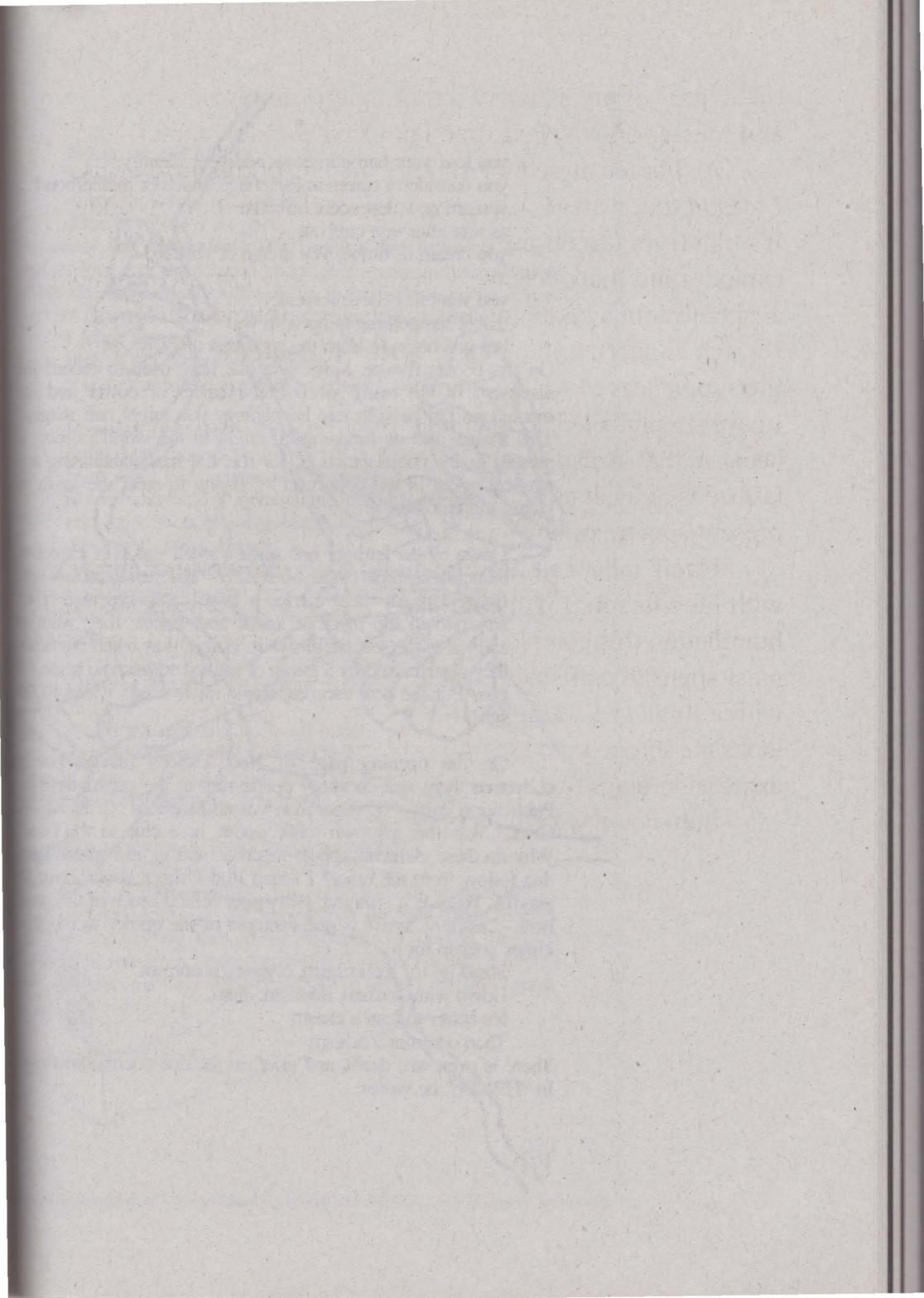
Tired and despondent and skin irritated, I prepare for the final humiliation and hand in my locker key to the tanned young man at the desk about fifteen minutes after receiving it from him. He stares. I stare back. Not so witty and psychotic now, I think. Nevertheless, a rapport had been forged – not a great one, but we each recognise the other's face – so I dredge

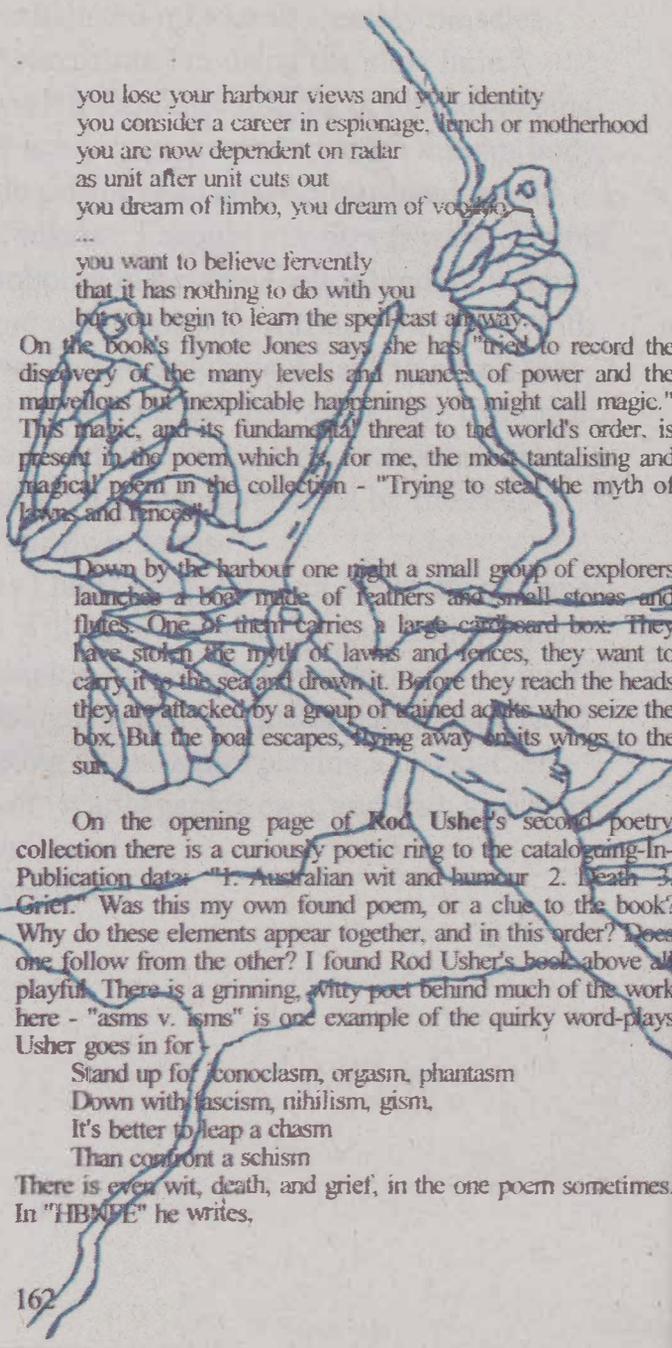
the depths of my exhausted mind and trembly muscles, and muster only: “Next time I’m using the slow lane.”

As I brace myself for another helping of tumour-beams, I reason that water is a foreign medium for the human body. It’s like trying to do push-ups in space: your head would explode, and that’s science. I should just power-walk around air-conditioned shopping malls like God intended. But as I watch children and old people slip through the water with the suppleness of well-lubed dolphins, I have to admit that I have simply failed. Which means in a way I have triumphed, because that is also an adult thing: to admit utter humiliating failure is at least as adult as being terrified by the ever-present spectre of our own demise.

I walk taller as I head toward the outside world equipped with life’s lesson. I will embrace humiliation. And because humiliation this complete needs a final varnish applied by the most apposite craftsman, I exit the aquatic centre to be faced with a small girl sitting on the stairs playing a clarinet. She looks me square in my scarlet gaping eyes, and with a solemn expression plays two notes.

Bup–bowwwwwww.





you lose your harbour views and your identity
you consider a career in espionage, lunch or motherhood
you are now dependent on radar
as unit after unit cuts out
you dream of limbo, you dream of vodoo

...
you want to believe fervently
that it has nothing to do with you
but you begin to learn the spell-cast anyway.

On the book's flynote Jones says she has "tried to record the discovery of the many levels and nuances of power and the marvellous but inexplicable happenings you might call magic." This magic, and its fundamental threat to the world's order, is present in the poem which is, for me, the most tantalising and magical poem in the collection - "Trying to steal the myth of lawns and fences".

Down by the harbour one night a small group of explorers launches a boat made of leathers and small stones and flutes. One of them carries a large cardboard box. They have stolen the myth of lawns and fences, they want to carry it to the sea and drown it. Before they reach the heads they are attacked by a group of trained adults who seize the box. But the boat escapes, flying away on its wings to the sun.

On the opening page of Rod Usher's second poetry collection there is a curiously poetic ring to the cataloguing-In-Publication data: "1. Australian wit and humour 2. Death 3. Grief." Was this my own found poem, or a clue to the book? Why do these elements appear together, and in this order? Does one follow from the other? I found Rod Usher's book above all playful. There is a grinning, witty poet behind much of the work here - "asms v. isms" is one example of the quirky word-plays Usher goes in for

Stand up for iconoclasm, orgasm, phantasm
Down with fascism, nihilism, gism,
It's better to leap a chasm
Than confront a schism

There is even wit, death, and grief, in the one poem sometimes. In "HBMFE" he writes,

Nature we call Mother
though more a battered wife
in truth *it* knows not nurture
death brings to *it* no grief.

Strangely, the categories in the opening *data* leave out love -
unless love can be included under grief - and in this collection
there are some wonderfully down to earth love poems. At a
writers festival in Toronto the poet writes back to his love:

I found a hair of yours
high in this disembodied Hilton:
it had crossed the world on my pyeloma cord!

....
I confess, I have gone astray
pressed the channel switcher
from vapid late-night chat to numbers 51, 52, 53
to see mountains of mammaries, theatres of throats
mid-range shots of pubic hair ...
dialogue to bring despair.

Some of these love poems *are* poems of grieving, and again, the
tone is so close to the way mind and body work that they stand
as stark and effective records. To Damien, who died at twenty,
he writes:

Do you mind if I try to explain the sock?
The blue one that was in your mouth?

....
I think the sock was your soft bullet,
it gagged the simple password "No!"
It saved your two friends' ears
from the possibility of scream.

When eventually they entered your room
nothing could save their eyes.

poetry is mostly simple, the lines short, the images deeply
beaches and surf are everywhere so that these beaches
are the key to Usher, as the moons are to Morgan. The high
and low lows of this book give Usher's humour a Leung
like quality: the three line poem "Out in Sheet Lightning" goes:

Hit Him using
flash!
to take mugshots.

HIGHWAY

LAUREN
AIMEE CURTIS

AND IT'S AROUND THIS TIME, when he tells her he hopes it's a boy, that it first comes to her – the image of a desert highway in soft dusk tones, and kind of blurry.

At first glance it's just a black winding tape, zigzagging into the horizon. Like most dreams she sees the highway as if she is moving on it, a sense that she's there without her body. She can smell the burnt tar and the dirt and it's warm and it sticks in her nostrils, as if it's just been raining. The haze clears and her surroundings take shape – scarlet mountains against the sky, shadows of others in the distance, purple melting into blue. The open sky is coming down on her. It's the stillness of the place that makes her feel both so big and so small. As in some of her other dreams, she can feel that she's about to wake, but wants to make it last a little longer.

It's four in the morning. She can tell her body is alone in the bed without turning over. The room is stagnant, it's the middle of summer, even sleep feels draining. So she lies in the dark, waiting for the highway to appear again. Waiting for him to return.

It's after this dream that she no longer fantasises about other men, or about starting over, but only of the highway. She tells no one of the dream, of how real the place is to her. Not her mother, and especially not him. It's the foolishness of her fantasy that makes her hide it. She finds pictures of Sonoma, the cacti in Arizona, old western movie stills, the Badlands. She keeps all these images in a notebook, feeling like a child as she glues them down. She collects pictures of old cars and finds her favourite, a Cadillac Coup de Ville. She imagines herself driving it, her bare feet on the pedals. Rounding those big, wide, beautiful bends in the desert. Just to be in motion, constant motion – that's where she thinks she'd be happiest.

Her body starts to swell. She wraps her stomach with gauze, trying to flatten the bump. She hides it from herself but her body can't be lied to. Pregnancy overwhelms her. The smell of meat makes her nauseous, she salivates too much, and her whole lower half feels like a balloon full of blood, heavy and ready to burst. She doesn't leave their small apartment. He doesn't want her outside, or doing anything strenuous. Some nights he doesn't come home, but he'll call to check she's still there, *my little runaway*, he'll slur into the phone.

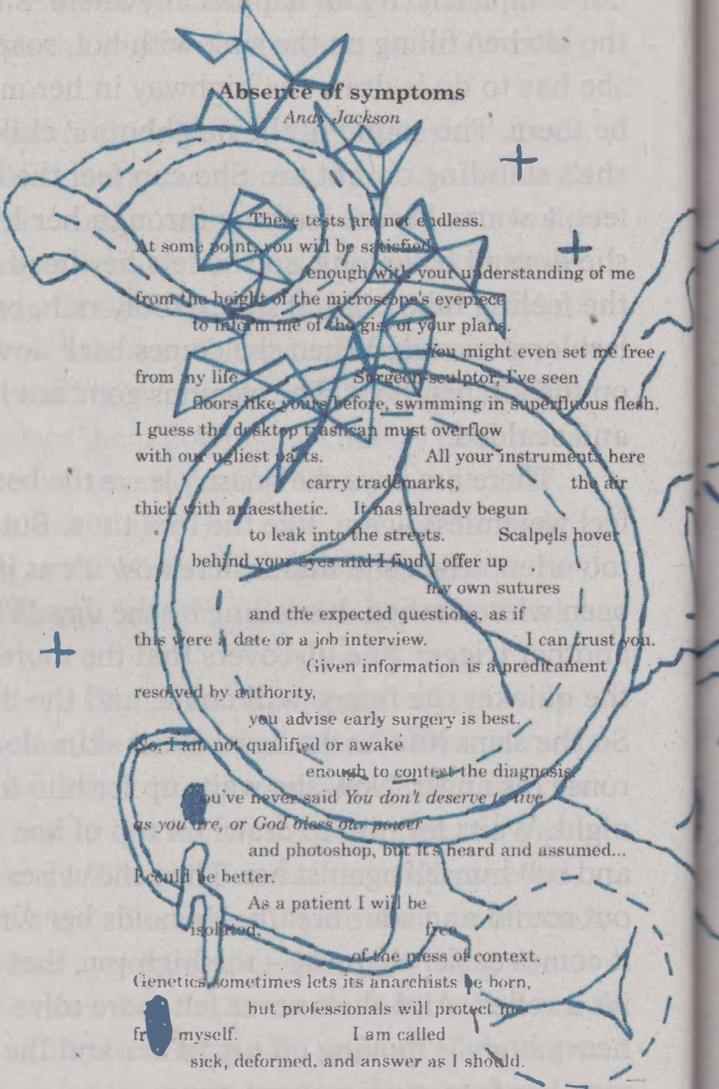
She starts doing it every day, conjuring the image.

She lets the hot air on the highway flush her body. It's physical now. She touches herself. She does it until she blanks out completely. It can happen anywhere. She could be in the kitchen filling up the sink with hot, soapy water and all she has to do is draw the highway in her mind and she'll be there. The sound of the neighbours' children fades and she's standing on hot tar. She can feel the burn on her feet, a warm breeze rushing through her legs. She knows she doesn't have long, so she lets her head fall back and the feeling take hold. It's incredibly rich, but never does last long enough. When she comes back down there's water on the kitchen floor. The steam is gone but her feet are red and scalded.

There are days she doesn't leave the bed. She wants to feel weightless again, like the first time. But she's been here too often; when she stands here now it's as if the image has been whitewashed. It's fading by the day. What she needs is another trigger. She discovers that the more forceful he is, the quicker the image will come, and the denser it will be. So she slaps him back, claws at his skin, does anything to rouse his anger. Now she waits up for him to come home at night. Waits for him to crawl on top of her, to lick her face and rub himself against her. Then she closes her eyes, blocks out sound and sour breath. He holds her wrists down and it comes easier that way – the highway, that beautiful image, it's a reflex. And she's never felt more alive than when his heavy body is moving on top of her and the wind is whipping her face, such a sweet sting.

Absence of symptoms

Andy Jackson



These tests are not endless.
At some point, you will be satisfied
enough with your understanding of me
from the height of the microscope's eyepiece
to inform me of the gist of your plans.
You might even set me free
from my life. Surgeon-sculptor, I've seen
floors like yours before, swimming in superfluous flesh.
I guess the desktop trashcan must overflow
with our ugliest parts. All your instruments, here
carry trademarks, the air
thick with a aesthetic. It has already begun
to leak into the streets. Scalpels hover
behind your eyes and I find I offer up
my own sutures
and the expected questions, as if
this were a date or a job interview. I can trust you.
(Given information is a predicament
resolved by authority,
you advise early surgery is best.
So, I am not qualified or awake
enough to contest the diagnosis.
You've never said *You don't deserve to live
as you are, or God bless our power*
and photoshop, but it's heard and assumed...
I could be better.
As a patient I will be
isolated, free
of the mess of context.
Genetics, sometimes lets its anarchists be born,
but professionals will protect me
from myself. I am called
sick, deformed, and answer as I should.

the script you have given
is more powerful than any I could write myself
But what does it mean
that in spite of your treatments
this absence of symptoms
still won't go away?



+

It rains. It rains so hard it floods. In the bedroom they are submerged, they are practically night swimming. When she wakes she's surrounded by so much liquid that she instinctively looks toward the roof of their apartment expecting to see open sky. The mattress is soaked and everything around them is sticky, stained red and brown – the bedding, her body, his body. He phones the hospital to say her water has broken and what the fuck should they do, and there's fear in his voice she hasn't heard before. On the wall above her head she notices a smeared red handprint. She remembers when they first moved into the apartment and everything was clean and airy and untarnished. Outside there is thunder. And then it really does rain. That heavy kind of summer rain that breaks through the heat, the kind that's been building up for days and makes steam float up from the pavement.

INTERSTATE

15

AMARYLLIS
GACIOPPO

INTERSTATE 15

**AMARYLLIS
GACIOPPO**

AFTER VEGAS we're careening down the highway, pushing through the desert. We're driving through the middle of nowhere but it feels like we're going somewhere. Gorges drop away by our side, and in front there's nothing but mountains, tangerine and blue as the sun settles and pierces through the glass. The music is loud and we know all the words, or think we do. We're tuned to some sixties station playing The Kingsmen's version of 'Louie Louie', and Iris' bare feet are on the dashboard as she snaps blurred photos of the cacti because they're her favourite. No matter how much her bedroom changed as we grew up, she always kept miniature cacti lined up along her window-sill in purple and green speckled pots.

Soon after we hit the Mojave Desert we stop for

supplies at a strip consisting of a service station, a Del Taco, a Bob's Big Boy Diner, and a Burger King. We park the car under a sign that says 'Gateway to Death Valley' and meander around, smoking Marlboro Lights and peeking into the window of the Burger King. I wonder where the sleepy employees live, because the only signs of civilisation we've seen since Vegas were the casinos lining the highway out of Nevada, growing ever sparser as we neared the state line. Not a house or a school or a supermarket – just flat barren land and gambling halls. It was Whisky Pete who waved us out of Nevada, a goofy cartoon cowboy reclining between two castle turrets atop his gambling palace. Iris had smirked as she read the billboard, Whisky Pete reckons we could be the next millionaires.

I sure hope so.

We fill the tank and look across the gravel of the strip at a shabby white motel with blue awnings and crumbling terracotta. A plaque advertises a swimming pool, coffee, internet, and muffing service. I don't know what muffing is. The black lettering over the word has peeled off so only its imprint remains. A buzzing red OPEN sign hangs in the window. Sometimes, to get to sleep, I count the nights Iris and I have spent sandwiched between sheets caked in dust and errant hair.

We go inside the service station to pay, and end up playing around with this cheese that squirts out of the canister like whipped cream – stuff we don't get at home. We inspect the candy bars, Three Musketeers and Pop

Tarts, wondering how far they travelled to get here in the back of a dank truck. There's a stock boy carrying milk crates filled with ice creams. He looks at us with such excited eyes – you can tell he never sees anyone his own age except for, I don't know, his one-eyed cousin Crystal or something. Iris sees me looking, and her eyes say, Don't.

She pays for the fuel, and I buy some postcards with a photo of the thermometer that stands next to the service station. The guy behind the counter tells me it's the largest in the world. When we get to San Francisco I will send a postcard to my mother: *I've seen the world's largest thermometer taking the temperature of the world!*

→

Once we're back on Interstate 15, Iris puts down her camera and says, What's going to happen when we get there?

I told you, I say.

San Francisco, Los Angeles, and then what?

The ocean, I say. The waves. We'll go for a swim.

But after that. We've got to go back sometime.

I don't see why.

She sighs. Well, the tank'll run out for one thing.

So will the money.

I say, We can make more. It's all right in front of us.

I just think we could do with more of a plan,
she murmurs.

We do have a plan, I say. We're going to get to the

ocean. And then we'll get a new plan. We'll turn around and hit the ocean on the other side. We'll become acrobats and join the circus. A tsunami will hit the coast and we'll float back over the desert like lily pads.

Iris sighs again and starts playing with the radio. I say, Maybe when we get there you'll relax a little.

We drive for kilometres without saying anything more. Then signs saying 'Ghost Town Next Right' appear by the roadside. I say, Are we doing it?

Iris grins. I veer off the highway onto a gravel road, but it goes on forever, and instead of cute little main streets from spaghetti western movie sets, we get isolated trailer park lots. We stop by the road and look into a fenced-off paddock. Judging by the stained towels over clotheslines and a pair of scuffed cowboy boots in the long grass, *this* is the ghost town. The weirdest part is the absence of people – knowing that there is life, seeing signs of it, hearing the collective breathing but not actually seeing it. It makes me shiver. A shiny black SUV speeds past. The earth under our feet seems to swell and contract like there are lungs beneath it. Iris says, Hey. I've seen this movie and the next scene is us being abducted into a creepy caravan cult.

Somewhere between Baker and Bakersfield we stop for a cigarette, and some other kids stop too, across the clearing, and they are going in the opposite direction through to Vegas. We all go to the edge of the clearing, stare into the chasm, and down below us are cattle. It must be some huge conglomerate farm – the cows are fenced in so tightly

together they can only shuffle, the earth beneath them trodden till its grassy skin has peeled back to dirt and mud. The cows, too, have sores on their skin, great red patches where the hair has worn away. Iris says, That's horrible.

I know.

We don't have that in Australia. I've seen cow farms before, and none of them are like this.

Forget Australia, I say.

The kids flick their butts out into the pasture. We get back in our respective cars and merge onto the highway. It gets dark, the sun leaking glow-stick liquid in savage pink and orange. We decide to stay the night in Bakersfield, an industrial city just off the highway that seemingly everyone in California knows because they've done this drive. When I mention it they will say Oh no, you went to *Bakersfield*? Why? It seems like Bakersfield is supposed to be everything that is wrong with America. We see the city spread out before us. There are hardly any lights. All I see for miles are houses and vacant lots and fast food outlets. After we have dinner at a Panda Express, Iris takes the wheel and I type 'motels' into the GPS which directs us to Union Avenue. We drive through dark back streets lined with cramped shotgun houses, lawns with grass up to your knees, rusted washing machines out the front and cars propped up on piles of bricks.

Jesus, Iris whispers, her back hunched over like she's hiding.

We pick a motel and park in the lot. We stay in the

car a while, neither one of us has enough energy to move. Occasionally, trucks surge past.

Maybe we should have stuck to a Best Western, she says.

C'mon, I say. Let's live a little.

I get out of the car and the air is still. There's a silence that buzzes with friction. The windows in the rooms are mostly cracked and shattered, some of the holes patched with duct tape and cardboard. One of the doors is open, the light on, a table turned on its side, stains on the walls and rubbish over the floor. A man in white undershorts strolls out taking a long drag from a cigarette.

Be brave, I think.

A Middle Eastern-looking woman buzzes us into reception, her desk protected by bullet-proof glass. She gives us the key to Room 12. The air inside is musty and thick. It fits a double bed pushed against the window, a soiled armchair, and an ancient television with the antennae half broken. There's a spurt of blood on the wall next to the toilet. Iris says, So this is adventure.

Shut up. Let's just go to bed.

Iris flicks through the channels. There's a fuzzy mottled version of *Death Becomes Her* on. I start to drift off as Meryl Streep's head does a one-eighty. Iris cuts through my stupor when she says, I'll come to the ocean with you, but you've got to stop this.

And 'this' would be?

You know, she says. What happened in Vegas and

Phoenix and New Orleans before that. I can't be watching you all the time.

It's adventure.

I'm serious.

A few days later, in San Francisco, we will meet a few boys hanging around in the street, and they will call to us and talk to us for a while. These boys will be in their late twenties, skimming thirty, one of them actually perched on thirty, but still very much boys. They will have beards and long hair and Zeppelin t-shirts, and one of them will happen to have a rent-controlled apartment in the Tenderloin, one of the last before the Tenderloin becomes the new Mission, and they will all live there, or across the street from there, and they will all have menial jobs, but really they are musicians and designers and poets or something. Americans never ask you what you do, or tell you what they do. They tell you what they want to be, what they are going to be. And if you tell them, like, I study writing and I work in a deli – you know, what you actually do – they say, Oh you're a writer. And you say, Well no, there has to be some sort of criteria for that kind of thing. Or they say, No, but what do you *do*?

Anyway, so it will happen that we end up going into the Four Forty One Club, this hole-in-the-wall, blink-and-you'll-miss-it bar with these boys, because the bar exclusively does different kinds of whisky, like apple whisky and lychee whisky, and it is absolutely tiny, a few booths

crammed up against the wall, and there are harem scarves billowing from the roof, and Victorian wallpaper that is red, everything will be red. We will sit out on the tiny alcove overlooking the street, taking turns sucking on this giant gold and red hookah, because the bar does hookah too, and one of the boys, the main one, who is slight and has a short dark beard and a beanie, he will say, You know, Bakersfield actually does have one claim to fame.

I will say, Its high murder rate?

No. That would probably be better. Bakersfield is the home of the world's first Del Taco.

That is the saddest thing I ever heard.

The boy with longer blonde hair, he will say, What makes it sadder is that it wasn't even a Taco Bell. Bakersfield's one claim to fame is that it is the home of the world's first second-rate taco outlet. You've gotta ask yourself why it even exists.

The murder rate thing is very much true. In 2008 there were almost six thousand violent crimes reported in Bakersfield, twenty-seven of which were murders. And one week after we leave our motel in Bakersfield, four policemen will shoot and kill a man in a wheelchair in the room next door to ours.

→

When we start driving in the morning, there is something very wrong with the car. Fumes curl up from the hood, and

the car makes a regular *kerflunk* noise, like when your bike tyre pops. We find a Caltex in town and park in the dirt lot. I go in and speak to the clerk, and he gets the mechanic, who is fortyish, though I'm bad at guessing ages, and wearing denim overalls like they do in the movies and a red scarf tied around his forehead to catch the sweat.

What's wrong with it?

It's making a noise.

What kind of noise?

Like, a sick car noise. I don't know about cars.

I lead him out to the car. Iris says, Did you tell him about the smoke?

He says, Smoke?

Oh yeah, smoke.

He pops the hood and leans in. He says, Smoke from the hood?

Uh-huh.

He grins. This won't take long. I'll let you know when I'm done.

We go and sit on some empty oil drums and light cigarettes and watch for a while. When Iris goes to find the toilet keys, I go over to the mechanic.

I have a question.

Shoot, he says.

What is muffing?

Muffing?

Like - with a car?

Do you know what a muffler is?

Flustered, I say, No.

It's probably not something you need to worry about, he says, as he sticks a wrench into the engine.

Where're you from?

Australia.

That's a lonnng way.

Tell me about it. Are you from here?

Yep.

What's it like? Being from here?

What do you mean?

I mean... do you get lonely?

Only 'bout as lonely as everyone else does.

He stares me square in the eye and goosebumps break out on my arms. I look up at the sky. Clear. Pale. It's like that's all there is here. Clear sky and land. Always visitors, always passing through. There is nothing growing. This California is different to the coast. It's a California still living in the backwash of the gold rush, a California settled by gunslingers and pioneers in wagons. Intensely American, this western cluster of big states, Arizona, Nevada and California, leaves your mouth mealy with history.

I felt the same was when I was nine and came to America to visit my aunt and uncle. I remember walking the streets in Phoenix, the desert heat and the way it curled and wrapped itself around every strand of hair on my head. The sweat of my scalp. The prickly pears and sunflowers which grew around air-conditioned shopping centres and in front gardens, the way in which it was impossible to take a full

breath before the heat stuck to my lungs and I realised I was breathing in sun and not air. He says, Find what you're looking for?

Who says I'm looking?

He turns to face me. There is a streak of black oil on his cheek. He says, Everybody's looking. Well, I'm done. You should be fine the rest of the way.

He leads me back into the Caltex. There is a 'Leave a Penny, Take a Penny' dish next to the cash register. My wallet is heavy with one-cent coins. Maybe the dish works like a fountain, maybe it grants wishes. On that trip to Arizona, I got into the habit of reaching into the fountain in Scottsdale Square to fish for coins. My father would jerk my arm out, embarrassed.

I look at the mechanic, and I know there's something perfectly within my power, it would be as simple as clutching his hand and going into his workshop. I've realised I can do most anything if I want to. It makes me feel both invincible and afraid. I hear one of my friends saying, It doesn't matter what you do so long as it gives you something to talk about.

Then Iris pushes through the ribbons hanging across the door.

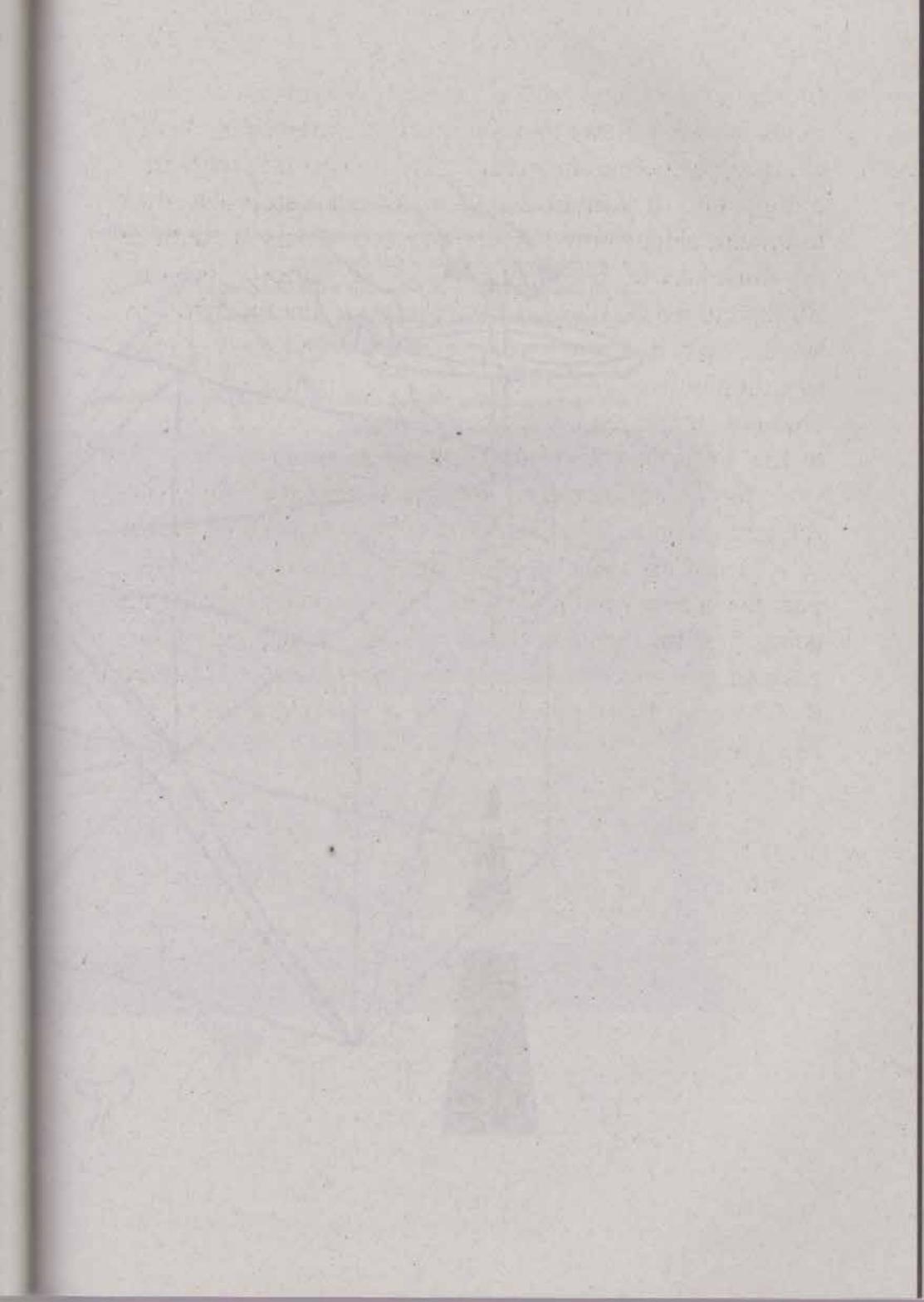
Ready?

We get back in the car, and I hand Iris a cigarette as I slide the key into the ignition. Upon arriving in San Francisco, we will pay an excess of one hundred dollars in cleaning and late fees.

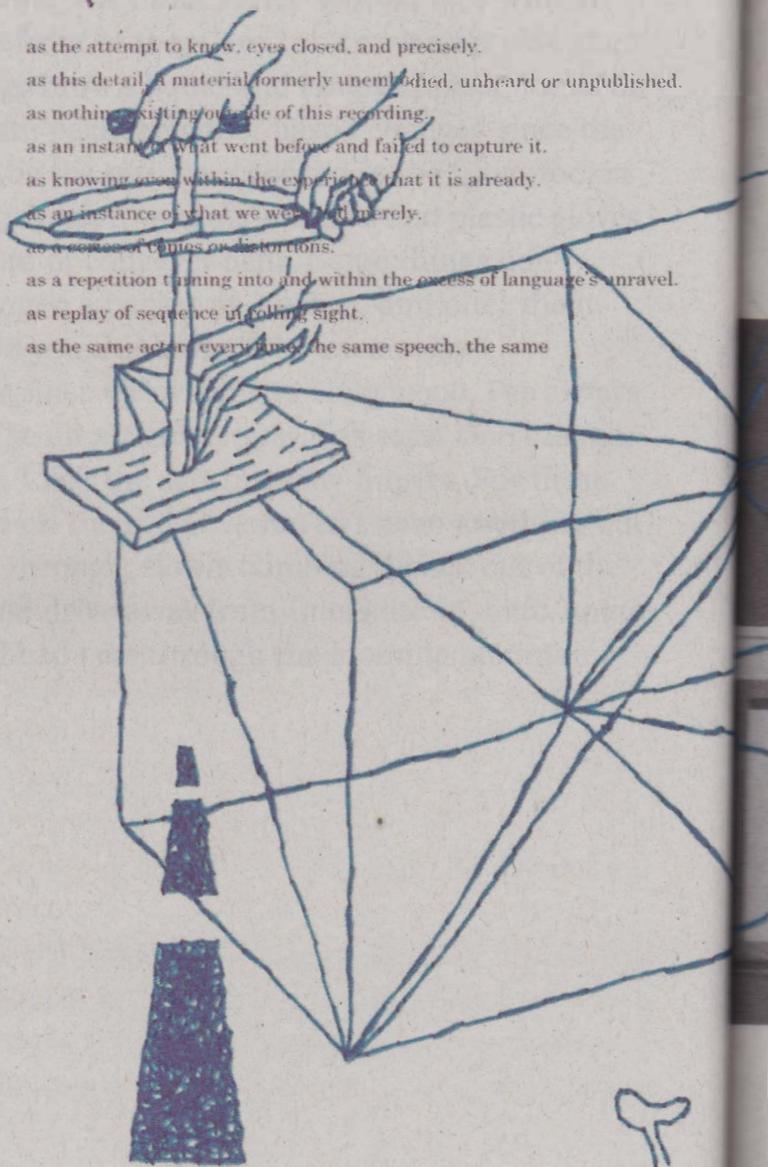
In front of the Caltex, two old women wearing floral muumuus in pale yellows and blues sun themselves in plastic chairs, one cooling the other's liver-spotted face with an antique fan. In front of them are two truck-stop pies, the kind with gluggy brown liquid and lumps of meat, knots of fat; the kind with packaging that hasn't changed since the fifties, and maybe the pies were cooked in the fifties too, in some factory by women wearing hairnets and plastic gloves, sweating in front of conveyer belts. Some things don't change. I tear open a packet of crackers and offer them to Iris. I say, Do you think that'll be us one day?

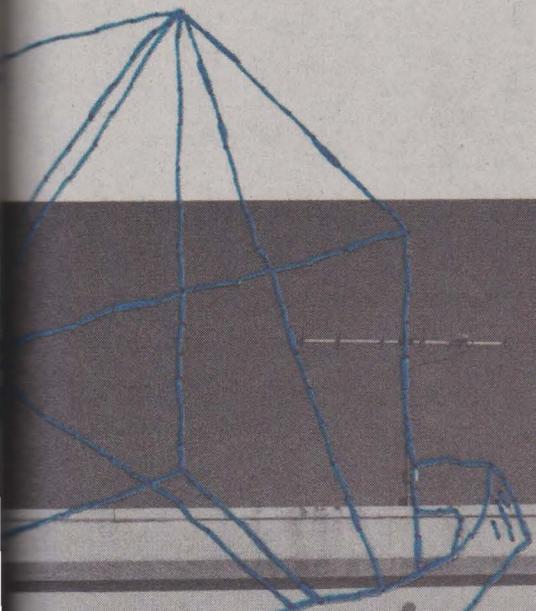
You know, since we're going to Hollywood, I've always thought I'd make an alright actress, Iris says. Don't laugh.

Grinning, I lick the salt from my fingers. For these past few weeks on the road, we haven't been anything but going, pushing through, slowly climbing. I back out of the parking spot and drive away from Interstate 15, onto Route 66. The road ahead cuts through the looming mountains like a knife.



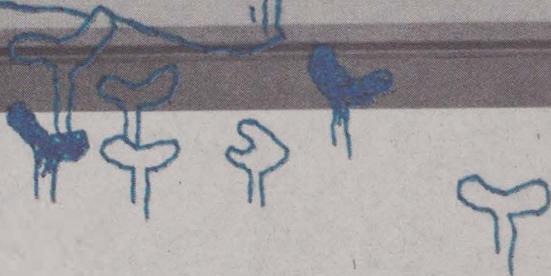
as the attempt to know, eyes closed, and precisely.
as this detail, a material formerly unembodied, unheard or unpublished.
as nothing existing outside of this recording.
as an instance of what went before and failed to capture it.
as knowing even within the experience that it is already.
as an instance of what we were told merely.
as a ~~series~~ ~~of~~ ~~copies~~ ~~or~~ ~~distortions~~.
as a repetition turning into and within the excess of language's unravel.
as replay of sequence in rolling sight.
as the same act, every time, the same speech, the same





*Where dreams
are made*

PSM. 37-4





**AU REVOIR,
ADELAIDE**

**LUKE
FARRELL**

Help lift this piano off my head, I whispered
coquettishly. I had tried to sound

casual, but the memory of the time my
father removed his belt and lashed at

the filthy rug, causing explosions of dust,
causing an asthma attack in my fragile lung

(it always seemed to be a left-lung problem)
kept recurring. I remembered the guilt

that my father had felt, how he swore
off cleaning all together after that incident.

I would visit his house in the autumn, grey
sedan pulling into the unswept drive, as he

coughed his resentment onto the rodent
droppings that littered his verandah. Blood

pressure's too low again, he mumbled, as
if excusing the whisky he shotgunned like a

teen beer drinker. He'd light a candle
whenever I mentioned her name. She's not

dead, I'd say, causing the vessels in his eyes
to break. She's living with a taxidermist in

Adelaide. Since my asthma attack. Just
before. He'd step closer and breathe cured

meats in my face. What are you going to do,
hit me, I'd say, as he punched me in the face.

And the piano would play me out with *Non, je ne
regrette rien*, though it may have been some

Carly Simon track. Don't be so dramatic, he
would have said, had we still been speaking.



**PALM
& PINE**

**GEOFF
PAGE**

The empires, I'll admit,
were not just funny hats
and anthems in a clearing,

the chatter of a Maxim,
though some of us, we're told, still write
as if we had our hearts upon

embarking for the past,
kitted out with doughty nouns,
determined to confront

its numerous shortcomings.
The natives of those centuries,
still patient on their littorals,

have yet to take our meaning.
What's the point? we say at last
and, growing petulant,

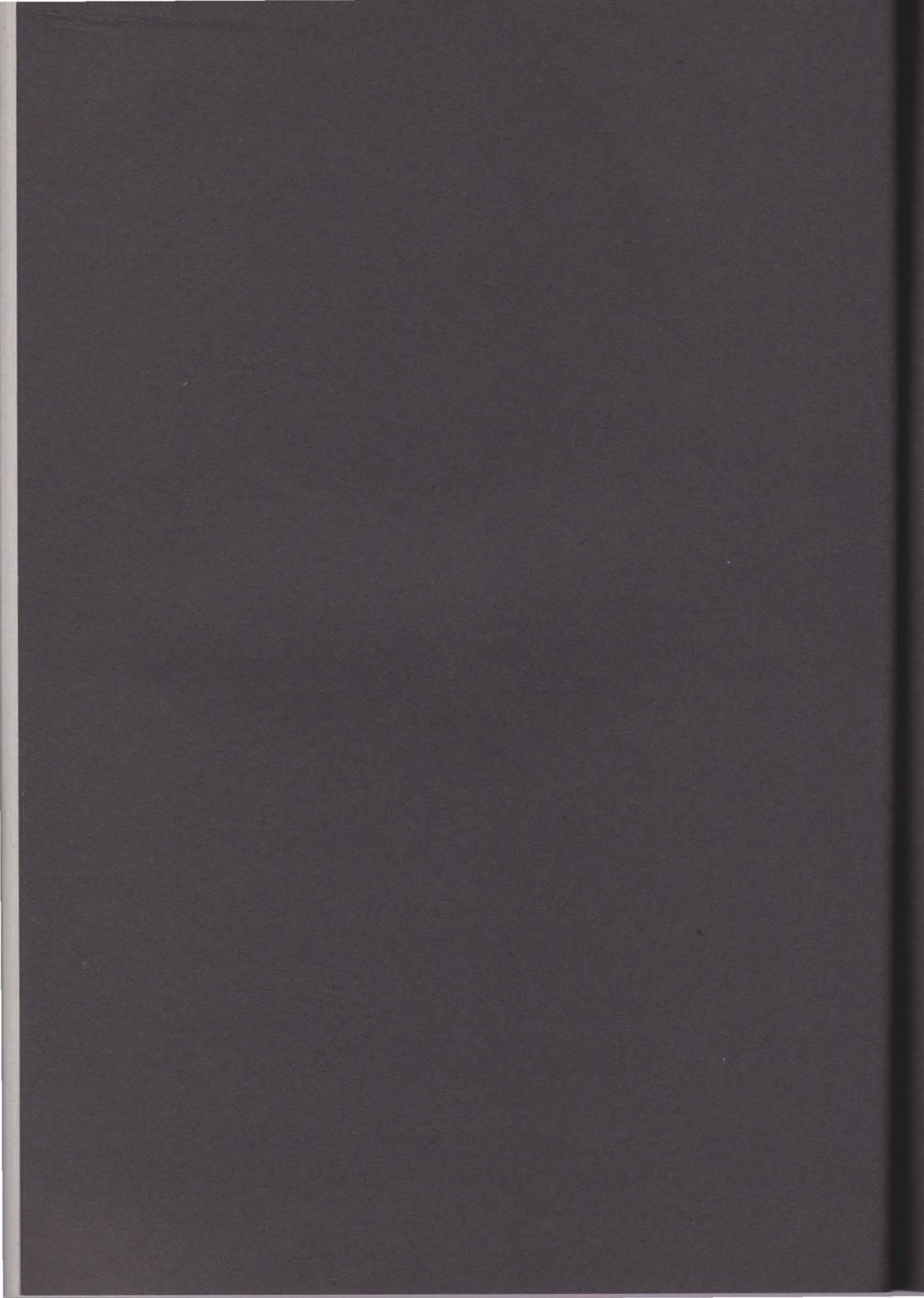
ship our anchor; sail on back
towards the now-and-here,
the splendour of our metropole,

the streets of our achievement.
The past, as all agree,
resists imperium

and yet, while pulling on the oars,
there was a song we heard,
a sort of strange foreshadowing,

an intimation on the breeze
that, though the times were not yet right,
one of two of them had seen

the future in our sails.



BURGUNDY

**ZOE
DZUNKO**

What fossil will I leave, asks the father of the ground. He has longed for exotic skeletons, feathers fanned; for bodies built on so many bones. The ground: *we impress our edges upon those we love and fail them, often*. I am changing me, firming up my silhouette in exchange for your interminable loyalty. Think now of the burgundy streets of Pamplona and how terror and excitement bond in the gut. Amongst the wildness of man he, saintly and milk-white; he, pillar of salt. Imagine the lights signal danger, crimson and glaring from Pattaya Beach; threat of leg-crawling geckos and the lick

of tide against suntanned sand. Holy,
I'm not – each young coconut I suckled
milk from, every watermelon bursting
on my chin, forgetting the hot sheets of
the tropics, once home. We beg of the world
please don't break our hearts, yet it was us
all along, pouring sand over beauty
then seeing only sand; we collectors
of internal injuries, sutured by
comfort in the things our fathers didn't
do. And then in the mirror one day, picking
sleep from the inner eye, while on the train,
or fondling department store cashmere,
reliable as the ache that remained
though the fucking was done; it departs us.

**YOU'RE
STANDING ON
MY TAIL**

**KIA
GROOM**

Essay

THE PICTURES Katherine showed me of the bite marks on her hand did not convince me. They were real wounds, certainly – two puncture marks on the mound of flesh joining her thumb to her wrist. But what did that prove? Had some weirdo turned up in her yard and bitten her? Had she, in the throes of a delusion, bitten herself? Or was this all a calculated plot? Had she punctured her flesh in this exact pattern, then taken the pictures simply so *I* would believe her? If she couldn't make herself feel special, was it enough that I believed that she was?

→

The psychiatrist I saw between the ages of twenty and twenty-four blamed my high school for my dissatisfaction

with life. “I’ve seen lots of girls from your old school,” she told me, “and it’s always the same problem: they can’t deal with being ordinary. That school spends every moment conditioning you to believe you are going to be remarkable – that you will excel in everything you do, that all your dreams will come true. It’s an irresponsible lie. Life doesn’t work that way.”

She looked me straight in the eye.

“You need to be okay with not being special,” she said. “We’re ordinary. Own it.”

→

I met Katherine in high school. She was the kind of person with whom friendship didn’t so much blossom as detonate. Our liaison at school was brief; Katherine abandoned Our Lady of Perpetual Boredom at the end of Year 10 to seek her fortunes elsewhere. Elsewhere turned out to be her bedroom, where she slept twenty hours a day and consumed endless packets of illegally procured cigarettes. She listened to 1970s punk music and burned holes in the knees of her jeans with a Zippo lighter. She adamantly refused to get a job, and spent an inordinate amount of time reading Oscar Wilde. She was an exciting friend to have, living the life I wished I could get away with. Often I would sign myself out of school under the pretence of a dental appointment and catch the bus to Katherine’s house. There we would drink, smoke and discuss how pointless conventional education was in comparison

to the School of Life. Katherine and I were special. We didn't need exam results and prestigious universities to tell us so. We were better than that. We had other things on our minds.

→

At school, our student body was taught that God made us all individually. There was no accident to our existence – we were uniquely purposeful. This is one of the numerous questionable truths people use to give life meaning, to ease the knowledge that we do not last forever. If our time is limited, we can at least be sure that our existence carries weight. We are the main characters in the narratives of our lives.

Scientists have made links between narrative thinking – the human tendency to thread our lives together as one might a story – and the concept of ‘patternicity’. This term, coined by science historian and founder of the Skeptics Society, Michael Shermer, describes the human mind’s impulse to connect the dots, forming links between individual data to create a series even when no connection exists. In his 2011 book *The Believing Brain*, Shermer defines patternicity as “the tendency to find meaningful patterns in meaningless noise”. He posits that this behaviour is an evolved trait: in the ancestral environment, associating a noise in the grass with a potential predator could be the difference between survival and death, even if most of the time the link was false. A sceptical Homo sapiens who failed to recognise

the potential connection might end up as dinner. In other words, being Mulder had a greater payoff than being Scully. Human beings have been programmed to want to believe.

→

Katherine met Luc online. It was the golden age of the internet, a time before Facebook, when people went by handles and rarely used their real pictures. Katherine had plenty of free time to browse dubious message boards, and found Luc skulking in a Yahoo! Group for enthusiasts of the paranormal. He was of average height, average build and average attractiveness. He wore his hair long and dyed an offensive shade of orange. When we eventually agreed to meet him, he told us he would be waiting in an underground car park in Perth's central business district. He said he preferred to be underground because it 'reminded him of home'.

During our subterranean sojourn, Luc regaled us with tales of his adventures on the astral plane. He had an astral wife. They had astral sex. Now she was astral pregnant. When I asked if he anticipated paying astral child support, he ignored me.

Later, walking back to the train station, we ran into a friend of mine from school. As the three of us stopped and made polite conversation with Stacey, who already harboured reservations about my sanity, Luc gave a series of pronounced, insistent coughs.

Stacey raised her eyebrows at him.
“Do you mind?” Luc asked.
“What?” she said, confused.
“You’re standing on my tail.”

→

Luc is one of many people who identify as Otherkin: people who believe their ‘other’ souls have been shoved unceremoniously into human bodies. This otherness differs vastly within their community. Some are faeries, elves, or as in Luc’s case, dragons. Others are cats, wolves and foxes, their particular strain of otherness intersecting with the internet’s favourite online subculture, furies. Still others insist they are reincarnations of fictional characters – anything from Tolkien’s hobbits to 8-bit videogame protagonists to Sailor Moon. Otherkin have developed elaborate pseudometaphysical explanations to justify their beliefs. Alternate dimensions, alien worlds, the intersection between subconscious creative plains and the physical realm – all these things help Otherkin reconcile their internal reality with the harsher humdrum of human existence.

But what gives rise to this need to be other? Luc’s tail incident was emblematic of Otherkin behaviour: it’s not enough to *feel* different, you have to let people know you are. But surely life as a regular human being is difficult enough without the stress of accommodating and advertising such illogical beliefs? What makes some people take the quest

for uniqueness to such drastic, rationally unsupportable levels? The kneejerk response is to assume these people are unfulfilled, their everyday lives so unremarkable that the only way for them to feel special is to concoct a bizarre worldview allowing them to be an elven werefox Pokémon.

Yet really, we're all susceptible to the appeal of things beyond the natural realm. We are taught to give in to delusion, to pull the wool over our own eyes from an early age. Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny – all these beliefs are logically nonsensical, yet we go on believing them well after our capacity to reason should identify a six-foot pink rabbit distributing festive candy as perhaps a little farfetched. The reward for these beliefs exceeds the amount of energy and time we expend sustaining them. And it's not by coincidence that it feels good to believe.

→

Dopamine is the chemical our brain releases when our reward and pleasure centres are triggered – essentially, when we are happy. A 2009 study in the *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* identified a link between high levels of dopamine and the ability to recognise or create patterns. Individuals with above-average levels of dopamine are more likely to identify patterns – faces in the clouds, messages in audio static – even when no patterns exist. Even more interestingly, when dopamine is administered to test subjects with average or below-average levels, they too begin

to identify patterns more frequently, whether correctly or incorrectly.

This suggests that patternicity – the belief in *something*, whether rationally held or not – is linked to the reward and pleasure centres in our brains. That believing in stuff, however outlandish, *gets us high*. And that the higher we get, the more likely we are to believe crazy, irrational things.

→

During our seventeenth summer, Katherine and I spent most of our time around the swimming pool. Feet swirling the tepid water, mouths bloody with the pulped bodies of cherries, we sipped six-dollar champagne and philosophised about the future.

For kids who had apparently been raised to believe in our own limitless potential, our goals were not ambitious. “I just want to smoke, sleep and read Voltaire,” Kat declared, blowing a pillar of smoke into the dense afternoon air. I nodded. I had just finished high school, barely completing enough coursework to be permitted my certificate of graduation. My final year had filled me with a crippling existential angst: what was it all for? Surely there was more to life than this? Graduation. Dead-end job. University, maybe. Pieces of paper that qualified me for a slightly less dead-end job. Paperwork. Pay slips. Forms Formalities. And all for what?

I couldn't bear it. That was not the life I was born to lead. I was *special*, dammit. I was better than that.

“Hey,” Katherine said. She was sloshing the dregs of champagne around her glass. “Wanna know something?”

There were plenty of things I wanted to know.

“Sure.”

“Vampires,” Kat said. She looked at me seriously, her eyes slightly unfocused. “They’re real.”

It seemed rude to disagree. It was her swimming pool, and her wine.

“Okay,” I said.

→

A 1989 survey by Norine Dresser, then an academic at UCLA, suggested that twenty-seven percent of American high-school and college students believed in vampires. Those twenty-seven percent were, in a way, correct: whatever your view of the field of vampirology, the late Dr Stephen Kaplan had no shortage of people contact his New York Vampire Research Center claiming to be the real thing. He described his work as trying to “separate the kooks and the crazies and the psychos and degenerates” from the pool of candidates, because like Otherkin, self-proclaimed vampires differ vastly in their definition of what vampirism actually is. Some claim to feed off the psychic energy of people around them. Others really do ingest blood, human or otherwise. Some view the vampire as a metaphor for darkness, for an affinity with death, or for reciprocal, perhaps even parasitical, existence. Others truly believe that they are, or will become, immortal.

Feo was of the latter variety. My own pursuit of difference had seen me drawn to the goth subculture that was flourishing in Perth. I wasn't ready to embrace my inner dragon, but teasing my hair and applying too much eyeliner was a measured alternative. Even in the décor of a goth club, Feo stood out, dressed to the nines in Victorian lace, his front teeth and gums stained from the merlot he was drinking. At least, I'd assumed it was merlot. The acne aside, he might have been an extra from *Interview with the Vampire*.

"If you like, I'll bring you to my coven house," he offered. "You can meet the elders."

I pictured slightly more senior goths, rolling ten-sided die and poring over roleplaying handbooks while munching each other awkwardly on the neck.

"If I don't drink blood regularly," he confided, leaning closer so I could breathe in the intoxicating aroma of body odour and patchouli, "I melt."

I politely declined his invitation.

→

Occupied by neither school nor work, Katherine had a lot of time to sleep. When she slept, she dreamt vividly. A frequent figure in her dreams was a tall, pale young man, face perpetually shrouded in shadow. He would sit on the end of her bed, talk to her, stroke her hair. There was something wrong about him – something that caused the skin on the back of Katherine's neck to prickle uncomfortably.

But his voice was so soft, and he spoke to her as if they were old friends. She began to have trouble differentiating when the dream ended and consciousness began, so often did she dream him in familiar settings – standing behind her in the bathroom mirror, or sitting with her in the living room of her parents’ house. She would wake in the night and swear she could still feel his presence in the room.

“I think he’s a vampire,” she finally told me one evening. “There’s something he wants from me.”

→

It’s with equal conviction that popular horror author Anne Rice appears to have been slowly losing her mind. In February 2013, she posted the following to her Facebook page:

Lestat and I are dancing; slow dancing like kids did in the 50’s; he’s holding me and I’m leaning against him as we barely move on the dance floor. The bar’s dark and almost empty. Just the lights of the juke box in this corner. And this is my song for him, funky, old, pure -- playing on the Juke Box. “Tonight you’re mine... completely.” Oh, how I’ve missed you. How I’ve longed for you. Oh, how much I love you. [sic]

Rice has a reputation for speaking about her characters as though they were real. Not only are her books written in

such a way as to suggest she is ghostwriting the memoirs of actual, legit vampires, she's also sworn up and down to numerous fans over the years that *it's all true. Every last word.*

Perhaps Anne's dopamine levels are off the charts. Maybe her sanity has been dwindling since the 1980s, or she's just a clever author with a gimmick. Of course, there's always the other option: that she's actually telling the truth.

→

“I need to tell you something.”

It was four-thirty in the morning, and Katherine and I were sitting outside my apartment on a pair of violently coloured cane chairs. It was summer again – our twenty-fourth – and the heat was so oppressive it was impossible to sleep. We shared a cigarette and stared at the empty street.

Growing up had been inevitable. I couldn't survive on handouts from my mother forever. After I turned nineteen I had got a job in a call centre, which made it hard to retain any sense of personal distinction. It's difficult to picture your mystical destiny when you're spending eight hours a day convincing the elderly to purchase robotic vacuum cleaners.

Yet I still imagined there was something more, something to life that I was missing, that was darting out of sight when I turned my head. Ghosts. Aliens. The Loch Ness Monster. Jesus Christ. I needed something. Something that I could witness, *something* that I could believe that would make my life extraordinary.

“Shoot.” I looked at Katherine. She was very pale, staring straight ahead and tugging at the loose cuticles around her nail beds. It was several moments before she responded. Her mouth opened, closed again, pulled tight in a kind of wince, as if whatever she was trying to say was causing her physical pain to expel.

“I met him,” she said, finally.

“Who?” It had been a long time since we’d discussed her dreams. I didn’t have time for stories that added nothing to my own sense of uniqueness.

“*Him.*” Katherine still wouldn’t look at me. She examined her nails and pulled fiercely at the bloody flap of skin.

I must have rolled my eyes. I suppose I didn’t think she’d notice. She stiffened, but if my reaction angered her, she didn’t express it.

“How?” I asked, at length. “I mean, are you sure? Are you sure you weren’t dreaming?”

“I was sitting outside when it happened,” Katherine said. “I was wide awake.”

“Had you been asleep? I mean, had you woken up to pee or something, then gone outside, or...?”

“No! Shit.” She stuck her bleeding finger in her mouth, sucking on it for a few moments. “I was awake, okay? I didn’t go to bed at all that night. I knew it was going to happen. I... I had a feeling. So I waited up. I waited in the garden, and he came.”

I said nothing. I didn’t know what to say. We weren’t seventeen anymore. There were only certain fictions that

it was reasonable to believe now. A stable economy. Owning a home some day. Getting married, having kids.

“It frightened me,” she said, softly. She was staring out at the desolate street, eyes watching the shadows warily as if expecting them to birth more figments from her subconscious. “It scares the shit out of me. Still. I don’t think I can handle this.”

I turned to her then, turned my body full towards her and reached for her shoulder.

“Why would it scare you? You like this guy, don’t you?” I momentarily suspended my disbelief, allowed myself to enter the conversation as if we were talking about a dude she met at a bar.

“You don’t understand,” she bristled, pulling away from me. “He’s not... right. Seeing something that unnatural... something animal takes over, you can’t help but be frightened. Even though he didn’t do anything threatening. He just turned up – standing there on my deck, next to the pot plants and hanging baskets, his hair kind of damp from the rain. It was totally normal. Not weird at all, except for the fact that he shouldn’t have been there. I pinched myself. I was wide awake. But he was standing there, flesh and blood and totally real. And in my body – my body knew I was terrified. I was shaking, my heart was going crazy. I wanted to run away. But I couldn’t. I just sat there.”

Half an hour ago we’d been discussing *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. Now we were seriously entertaining the notion that a character from Katherine’s dreams had dropped by her

garden in the middle of the night to strike a pose by her father's collection of exotic ferns. I shook my head.

"So what happened then?"

"Nothing. Nothing really. We went inside. It was cold, and I was wrapped in a blanket, so he told me to go into the house. I gave him a towel for his hair. He told me I wouldn't believe that any of this had happened when I woke up the next morning."

"And do you? Believe it?"

"He gave me proof."

A breeze washed a fresh wave of heat over us. The night smelled like jasmine and car exhaust. I flicked the ash off the end of the cigarette. I wanted this. I wanted it so badly.

"What kind of proof?"

→

"Sometimes," my psychiatrist said, "it's more damaging to break a delusion than to indulge it."

I took a mouthful of scalding tea and set the cup back down. "What's worse?" she went on. "Allowing someone to believe they've been chosen as the recipient of some unique knowledge or experience, or pushing them to accept they haven't? Needlessly medicating them? They're rarely a danger to anyone. If anything it makes them happy."

The *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* study ends with the assessment that belief in the paranormal can be an important dimension of personality. While exceptionally

high levels of dopamine have been linked to mental illnesses like schizophrenia, it seems it's entirely possible to hold paranormal beliefs while being, for all intents and purposes, completely sane.

I never could decide how I felt about Katherine's experience. However many times I went over it, she was still one of my closest friends: wasn't I obliged to believe her? Whatever the reason, she clearly needed me to. And what about me? Couldn't I, just for a little while, shut off my rationality? Didn't I deserve to entertain the possibility of something extraordinary happening: in my town; down the street; in my best friend's house; almost close enough to reach out and touch it?

If I couldn't be special, would it be enough that I believed *she* was?

(-) i just realised that both times we spoke i didn't once ask about john & yoko. i'm ever so sorry, i love their work, & i have one friend two kids & a house & a wife (also my [redacted] from [redacted]) & a proper job & a 'people mover' car. [redacted] is lovely, but a total freak for doing all these things. i disappoint him an awful lot with inane chatter for nonnormal. i have a four day used by [redacted] at that point you might want to take my lid off, give a sniff & pour me down the sink, if we were to materialise in a static spatio-temporal vortex - where dimensions got stuck - i'd happily sit with you & write up in that big scarf, i look forward to chinese tea in your company but no contraband.

needed. i am well on the way to 'wellness' but thank you for the thought, by some trick of the light, i am yours to keep or borrow or disregard if you wish. the tiger isn't drawn, but it is a type of cat - which is why he came to you i think. he heard you needed some feline company & was willing to travel. they're like that tigers, always up for it. if aphrodite tries to mess 'em all have some harsh things to say to apollo & all the big dogs. no, you are right. [redacted] old soul & blues records. here on tatooine all the trees are changing colour

R2 sends you a series of affectionate bleeps. i think he may have a thing for you. > i just installed skype at the request of barcelona as promised. here is some > <http://www.themonthly.com.au/tm/video> i recommend hage & goethe & [redacted], who is never a strong or commanding person, said really nicely but just kind of matter of fact that whatever happened with [redacted], if i decided to go back to him etc. that i just had to get out of that house. do you know you smell like lemongrass & it reminds me of my childhood? there i've probably said too much. i don't know what this says about me actually

aforlorn
segue

the rain which speaks always of the love of god to the loved.
as for my brain - contains far too many sketches of Antistates from the 80s, references to the
rituals & guilt/doubt which hangs off me like a too big teddy bear. you are welcome to the
spid thing. i am unkind, but it also contains the memory of you lying next to kaka in a park
an unexpectedly beautiful afternoon that you'll keep, you can have the rest. right. rock on.
oh anakin, thank you for your encouragement but i'm very glad you won't - here this morn
last night to see my squabbles pacing around the room the anxiety ritual. it's been a few
nights but better than any show is > awesome! high socks, christmas, barnyard, fidelity is really
body as for whether you should help out your

X with his problems. i'm afraid i don't know
the details - they sound painful. [redacted] threat to
[redacted] you [redacted] was drinking
too much then i forgot & when i arrived home
there was johnny [redacted] sitting in my bag,
& then he got out his guitar & sang me something
about train rides & the freezing night
&

he sang it so well he sounded so much like johnny cash just wanted to let you
know i'll be thinking of you tonight, in the performative sense. will you bring
an guitar to bed sometimes perhaps? & sing? (i will play the maracas...) is the
sauce of my [redacted] i am going to bed with this winton.

spike because of spike milligan, spike from degrassi, or because of bully,
is there another spike? i'm not too sure of (opek star etc), i'm not big on junky
creature, apart from [redacted] i just thought of it instantly when you showed
your house that first time - the stars, the vietnam sticker, the memories
the walls. i am listening to some hillbilly music, kind of ragged-ass country
oh, here is some dardwood accordion & blood meridian berkoff language
in chewy [redacted] mules & sawhide, despite the distance, you have written all
for me it is a story, a fantasy (there are elves at work here & intergalactic
elements afoot), to which i don't know the ending, & that is [redacted]
& your

like irresistibility, perhaps you'll come back sometime & we can play
guitar & i will give you cheese & tony kushner. i believe i have left my leopard
cat > somewhere > i also left the lemon delicious in the microwave (drats!) if
i were a guitar you would be one with a star trek control panel on it allowing
tuning & multiple pickups

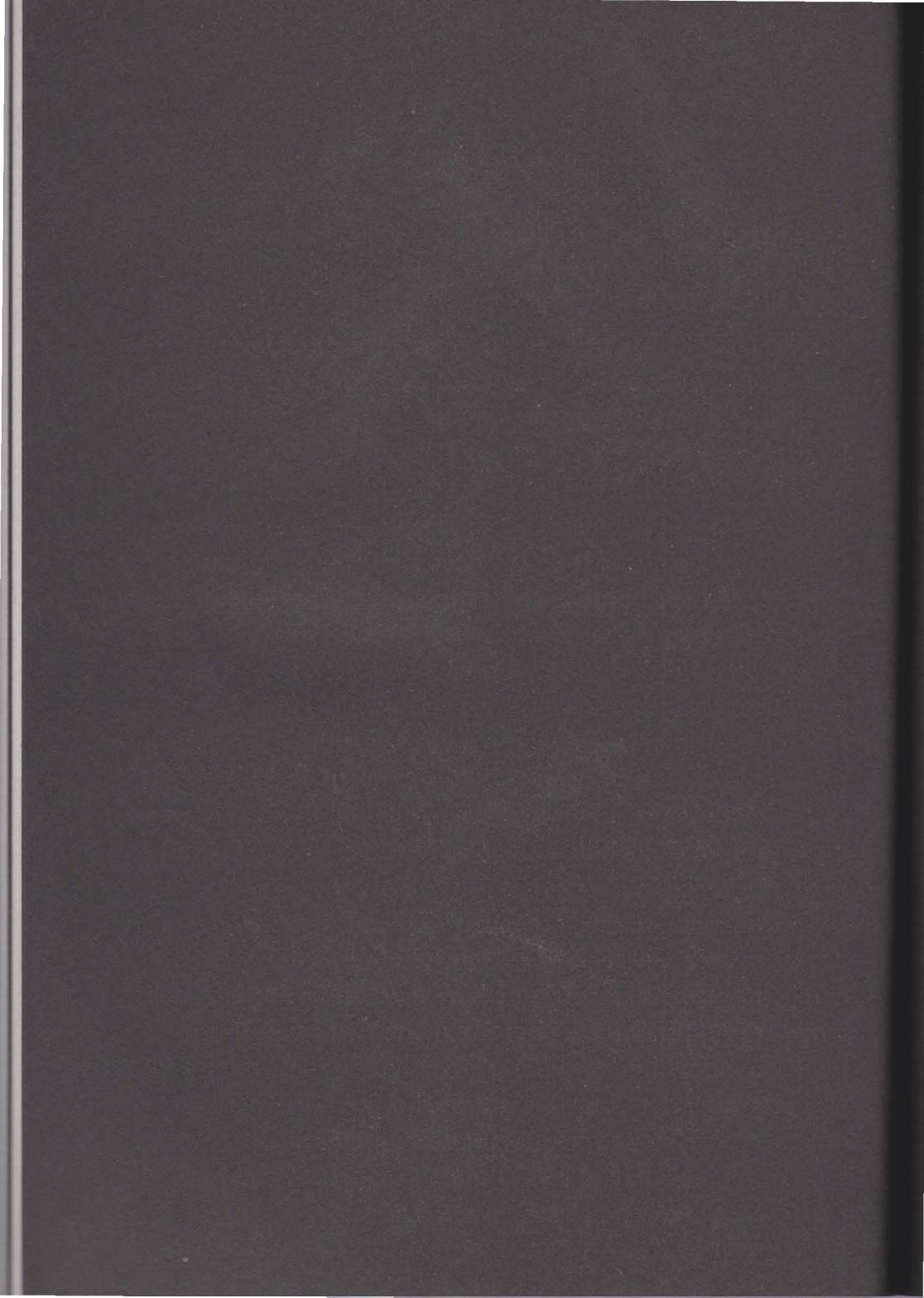


SHUCKED

**JUSTINE
POON**

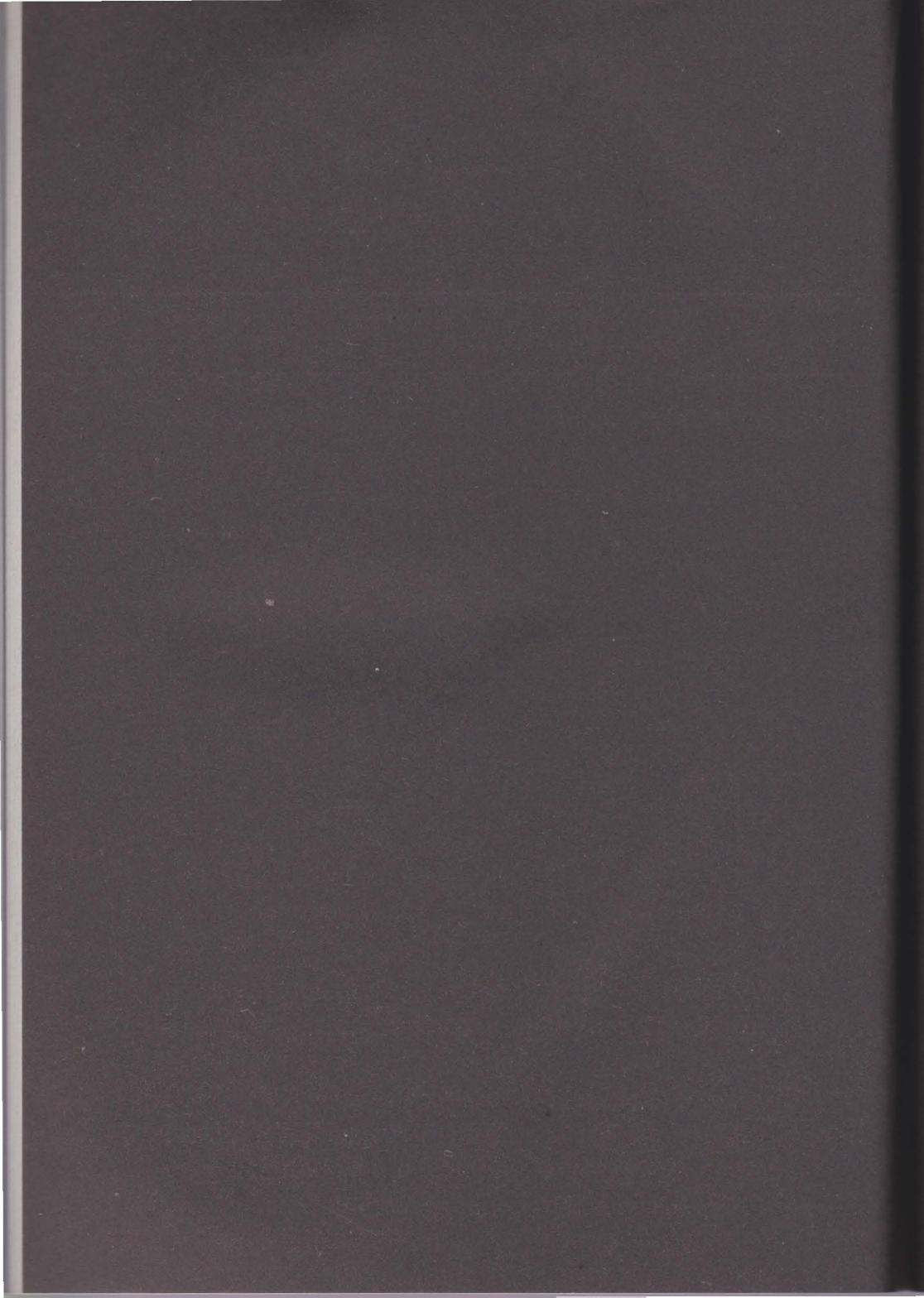


when she looks at young women, she feels
pinpricks along her under-eye circles.
lustre becomes memory. awareness makes her
expressions mean, unlikeable. ideological graffiti
builds up – who could teach her anything with
all that talk of feminism? there is no new interest
in her body and she kind of shrinks into oversized knits
and hikers' socks, having recently discovered the men's
department is straightforward when it comes to price,
quality, and seasonal appropriateness. he thinks,
i used to watch you slide wineglasses onto overhead racks
in a way that seemed so natural you could have been
a delft painting: some milkmaid, some dainty figure in
jewel-toned cloths, a startled frozen earring. now,
artlessness is a genre full of bad actors and knowing eyes.
when he is stressed, he cannot make love to her. if she were
young, or perhaps if she were new, he could probably do it
anyway and then he would feel like top dog fuck yeah.
she thinks, i'm not sure i give a shit in theory but i will
fucking kill you if you swap me out with some young
vital thing and stay just as happy; if you get bald and
miserable, i am likely to let it slide. you can live
and i will send you pictures of me naked in a foreign room,
somewhere you had never seen
but always suspected.



INITIATION

KEVIN
RIEL



The first casket you saw winked
brassy with polish. By then you knew rot

when you saw it and heard it,
quoted from *The Catcher in the Rye*,

knew your parents occasionally lied,
that they sent your first dog Zorba,

who'd go hoarse barking at seagulls,
to live on a farm in the clouds

with the Tooth Fairy and democracy.
What a shock, though, that you

cradled your mother's shoulder
the other day – as if someone led you

into the torch-lit Altamira of your heart,
showed you the darkness is not empty,

named the animals on the walls,
the dead artists' handprints blooming –

and uttered the emptiest cliché
you knew, “He is in a better place,”

and meant it, incomprehensibly,
except to mean, you are an adult now.

THE FIRST TIME I...

NICK SUN

**... WATCHED A MAN
HAVE A HEART ATTACK**

I was on my way to a comedy gig to try out some new jokes. I had no new jokes. I prayed: Universe, please give me something I can talk about tonight.

I turned the next corner and a man was on the ground having a heart attack.

Damn, Universe, I thought. I wish I'd been specific and asked for something funny.

Paramedics unbuttoned his shirt. His wife crouched over him, wailing. A crowd was gathering. "Please leave us alone!" his son pleaded to the crowd. No one moved. Insensitive pigs.

I joined the crowd.

To my right was a man eating a box of fried chicken and chips. I could tell by the look on his face and the way he was eating that in his head he was thinking, *Mmmmmmm, good chicken.*

Eating fried chicken while watching a man die. Chicken. Heart attack. Chicken. Heart attack.

I looked at the man having a heart attack, imagining his flickering vision falling across his family, the paramedics... and then some guy holding a drumstick. Double take. The last thought to run through his head before extinction: *Is that guy eating chicken?*

I walked away thinking, who cares about this stupid gig and the new jokes I don't have. I just watched a man eat fried chicken while watching another man die.

I walked away thinking, man, I really want some fried chicken.

I walked away in the wrong direction. I doubled back. The man having the heart attack was sitting up and breathing from an oxygen mask. His eyes were open. He was going to make it. The man eating the chicken was gone. In his place was a guy eating Subway. I walked away thinking damn, now I have nothing to talk about.

... WENT TO A FUNERAL ON ACID

Once upon a time I took acid at my friend's funeral. I learnt something very important that day.

Never take acid at your friend's funeral.

I thought I would attain some kind of chemically-induced religious awakening that would kill the fear of death I'd had since being born auto-erotically asphyxiating myself with the umbilical cord, but the only realisation I had that day was that funerals are the worst parties in the world.

The eulogies began. Eulogies are like acceptance speeches for awards no one wants to win. I looked around. Everything was melting and breathing. Everyone was trying to hold it together, like that's the whole point of funerals, some kind of contest of wills to see who can avoid publically expressing the horrific feeling of loss assailing them at that point in time. Whoever wins is awarded the prize of a lifetime of surveillance because they are obviously some kind of clinical psychopath. Everyone was losing badly.

It was time to line up and say our final goodbye. We lined up to kiss her on the forehead. This was it. The big moment. The big moment that I had been waiting for my whole life when I got to kiss a dead body on acid. Eat your heart out high-school yearbook. Wish upon a star Jiminy Cricket.

Her forehead felt like the skin of a thawing chicken on my lips. It tasted of sorbolene crème. We all filed out. There were hors d'oeuvres on platters waiting for us in the lobby. I kept staring at them wondering who the hell could eat at a time like this.

"Well, I've just seen the dead carcass of someone that I used to know and spent the last few hours morbidly

contemplating that this same end will inevitably happen not only to everyone, but more importantly me... Roast beef sandwich anyone? Made with the flesh from a corpse just like the one I've just kissed? Don't mind if I do..."

I took a sandwich. It was pretty good. I wrapped another one in a napkin for later. We walked through fields of tombstones and plastic flowers with a half-life of about fifty thousand years, flowers that don't rot like we do but just fade, like the memories of our loved ones when they are no longer alive to keep their image burning inside us.

... FOUND OUT SOMEONE I DIDN'T KNOW HAD DIED ON FACEBOOK

There was a post from a Facebook friend I had never met in real life. "At 6:32 this morning, my wife Jesse Fairbanks lost her battle with cancer and died peacefully surrounded by loved ones, aged 27. I will always love you Jesse. Your husband and soulmate..." blah blah blah.

I didn't know what to do.

I clicked 'Like'.

I was the only one so far.

I scanned myself for feeling. I definitely felt something. A kind of itchiness. I scratched my elbow. I wasn't itchy anymore. Beneath the post were sixty-five comments all addressed to Jesse like she was alive and on Facebook reading the comments about her death.

“We miss you Jesse!”

“I love you so much Jesse!”

“Oh god this is so sad Jesse! (frowny face)”

Someone actually put a frowny face. Like she was going to answer back. “Thanks a lot you guys! (smiley face) It’s totally awesome on the other side! Free ice cream! Biggie and Tupac are friends again and working on a collaborative album! Lol rofl twerk yodo.”

I sat staring at the comments grow, thinking about the intransience of life and the dehumanisation of society through technology. In the end I defriended him. I decided I didn’t want to know about people I didn’t know dying. I went on YouTube and watched a cat jump out of a box.

... STOOD UP FOR A CHICKEN

There was this chicken loose in our street. My neighbour kept saying, “Whose chicken is this? Who owns this chicken?”

It looked perfectly happy, scratching around in the dirt like that. “It’s nobody’s chicken, just let it be,” I said.

“No, we have to protect it, otherwise something might kill it.”

“That’s the price of freedom,” I said.

Eventually the other neighbour who had a chicken coop offered to take it. “Free chicken!” he exclaimed.

“Not any more,” I said.

He put it in the chicken coop with the rest of the

chickens. The rest of the chickens were black. This chicken was red. The other chickens pecked the shit out of it. We were protecting it from something killing it, and that something was its own kind.

I began to identify too much with that chicken. I would watch it from my balcony, and at the first sign of a mass pecking I would run in and intervene. “Hey you stupid chickens! Stop pecking him just ‘cause he’s a different colour than you! He’s just like you!” I would yell, throwing sticks at them.

Yeah I didn’t have much going on in my life back then.

One day the chicken was gone. I never did ask what happened to it.

... BROKE MY VEGETARIAN VOW

I had been a vegetarian for five years. I was living in a share-house and there was this freezer full of ancient frozen meat. My housemates wanted to throw out all the meat. “That’s a waste of these poor animals’ lives. We at least owe it to them to eat them so their deaths weren’t in vain,” I said. They shrugged and left me to it. “Till the seventh day from today, I declare this Meat Week!” I exclaimed to no one.

Secretly, I was glad to finally have a moral excuse to eat the flesh of a dead animal. There were so many different kinds to choose from I didn’t know where to begin. In the end, I ate six sausages. Afterwards I lay on my bed sweating this weird meat sweat. My heart was pounding and my

vision glazed with a dark red wash. When I looked out the window, the world outside was made from cuts of meat. Pavements were pork chops, hedges were steak. Our letterbox was a roast chicken. I growled under my breath as my muscles clenched involuntarily and my reproductive organs engorged with blood. I wanted to kill. I wanted to fuck. I wanted to eat more meat. I began to laugh this weird demented laugh while staring at the ceiling dripping with blood and mince. I felt as insane as God.

Meat Week never ended.

... WENT TO THE SLAVERY MUSEUM

I went to the Slavery Museum in Liverpool. They had a museum for slavery I guess because a theme park would be out of the question. It was the wrong choice for a first date. The most depressing thing about the Slavery Museum, besides the fact that you couldn't buy slaves in the gift shop, was the Slavery Museum.

The main boat that shipped slaves from Africa to England was called *Africa*. Calling a slave ship *Africa* is like calling a concentration camp Israel. Perhaps that's how they lured them onto the boat. "Hey come on board Africa!" the slave trader would say.

"That doesn't look like a landmass, that looks like a smelly crowded slave ship."

"No, that's Africa alright, get on board!"

There was an enlarged photograph of thirty half-naked black slaves standing in four rows behind three seated white English plantation owners dressed in finery. On the chests of the slaves in the middle was thick white paint spelling 'MERRY XMAS'.

The slaves looked unhappy and dehumanised. Afterwards we had ice cream. It was okay ice cream, but even okay ice cream is still pretty great. While I ate the ice cream, I thought about the photograph. I thought that reality needs a safe word. That way when things got too serious, say when you were being whipped on the high seas on your way to be worked to death on a godforsaken sugar plantation in the Carribean, you could just yell out, "Purple Dolphin!" and everything would freeze and you could take a breather for a while, go to the catering table, eat a doughnut, have a chat with the director, get a massage, and then when you were ready, you could resume the horror and get on with it.

While I ate the ice cream, I thought that we think we are so great, but it's really just because our closest competition are monkeys who stick twigs in holes to fish out bugs to eat.

... WAS A CHILDREN'S ENTERTAINER

This one time I did this festival in some small English town called Oxfordinglyhamburybridgeshire or some shit.

I was one of three non-white people there. I don't trust English country people. I've seen the movies. You know the ones where they stick the outsider in some kind of burning wicker contraption full of birds with pitchforks for feet that relentlessly peck him to death. I am a six-foot-three Asian male with a wispy beard down my chest and hair all the way down my back. I may as well have had 'SCAPEGOAT' slathered across my face in black tar.

I was hosting the open mic that night. I went into the main tent and the crowd was half middle-aged parents and half children aged between five and twelve. I looked at the jokes I was planning to do:

- England sucks
- English people are dick
- Voices in my head told me to push someone down the stairs
- They lied to me
- Eating a meatball marinara Subway made me look like I'd gone down on a homeless lady
- Time-travelling paedophile going back to fuck Baby Hitler would be okay
- My career isn't going well
- Why do you hate me?
- Wouldn't it be cool if you could shoot blood out of your eyes onto annoying people's faces?

I looked out at the young smiles, glowing like candles. This would not do. I would not be that man in their lives. I needed a backup plan. I didn't have one, so I went back to my tent and took ecstasy.

I was coming up pretty hard by the time I got onstage but because I had been in my tent taking ecstasy, no one had told me that the neurotic midlife-crisis failed folk singer turned frustrated mother-of-three doing Joni Mitchell covers had decided to do three encores, so I bounded onstage with my eyes bouncing around in my skull like pinballs shooting lightning bolts and grabbed the mic off her thinking she was leaving but she just stayed.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Oh sorry, aren't you done?” I said.

The crowd laughed but then she restarted the song I had interrupted and we all realised we were once more hostages to her funeral dirge of youth murdered by time. Just don't swear, I kept thinking, waiting for her life force to decline to the point where it could no longer sustain the crisis propelling her through the void.

She finished. I got onstage. The gig went great. Performing on E is amazing. I only swore once. I was trying to get the kids to fight each other for their parents' money and when I realised it wasn't going to happen I said “Shit.”

One of the kids stood up and pointed his finger at me and yelled “COOL MAN!” Others followed suit and soon I had a contingent of children pointing at me and yelling my new name. The tag stuck and for the rest of the festival

I was known as Cool Man by children and adults alike. But as I was to learn, fame is a double-edged sword and with power comes responsibility or some shit.

I don't know if you can fully grasp the horror of being swarmed by a group of fifteen children between the ages of six and thirteen while being really, really high and trying to eat tacos while attempting to hide your intense phobia of being seen eating in public. Kids, kids everywhere.

“Cool Man! Cool Man!” they chirped.

“Cool Man isn't feeling very cool right now, man...” I mumbled nervously, bits of taco falling out of my ripped face.

“Cool Man! Cool Man! Come and play with us!” they demanded. I reminisced about the good old days when I was just a representative of the hostile unknown. Now I was the exotic other and everyone wanted a piece of me.

On the last night there was some kind of disco in the main house. The kids swarmed around and demanded I play with them. I spent two hours on ecstasy having a pillow-fight with children. It was awesome. Every time they hit me in the face I was in heaven. Like I was headbutting clouds. If I could have come out of my face in a non-sexual manner I would have. I became convinced that I had stumbled upon a new-age therapy that would make me bazillions. Frustrated businessmen and bored housewives would pay big bucks to regress into a chemical paradise and have children whack them hard in the face with soft pillows.

Three days of bad sleep hit home and I suddenly got tired. I tried to work out an exit strategy. “Cool Man needs

to go to the bathroom, kids,” I said, planning to give them the old slipperoni.

“We’ll come too, Cool Man!” said my most ardent supporter, Jimmy or Billy or Jammy I think his name was.

“Yeah, let’s all go to the toilet with Cool Man, Cool Man!” said the others.

“Uhhh, I don’t think Cool Man would be cool with that,” Cool Man said.

“Awwwww!” they protested.

“Cool Man needs some lonely toilet time,” Cool Man said.

I started walking towards the toilet by the exit, hoping they would leave me, but they clung like limpets. There was no way out. Now I had to go to the toilet even though I didn’t need to. I headed into the toilet with six children between the ages of five and ten following behind me.

This looks bad, I thought.

I looked around furtively. I walked into the toilet stall. Billy or Jimmy or Sammy or Silly and his sister tried to come into the stall with me. Please believe me, Your Honour. “No, you can’t come in here,” I said. As much as it was against the Cool Man ethos to draw boundaries, sometimes the law makes authority figures out of all us.

I shut the door and hid. I could hear the kids playing with the water in the sink.

Maybe I should try and pee, I thought. I didn’t want to. I stood there with my dick out while six children played with the water in the sink on the other side of a rusty hinged door.

Is this wrong? I wondered. I didn't want to be a celebrity anymore if this is what it was like. All I could see was a huge bold headline:

COOL MAN = PAEDO PIED PIPER

Be cool, Cool Man. Keep it together.

I heard the bathroom door open. "Uhhh... Is everything... okay in there?" I heard a parental voice quaver.

Look, I can understand parental worry but still, it was insulting. Cool Man does not touch kids. You could say that was Cool Man's one and only rule. A motto. "Cool Man says, don't touch kids." You know, unless it's a kid touching themselves but it was their own choice and therefore out of Cool Man's jurisdiction.

"Yeah everything is fine!" I shouted back.

"Everything is fine!" chirped the children.

"Oh. Ummm, okay... uhhh. Just checking, that's all." The mother laughed nervously.

She left. I flushed the toilet to make the children and the mother think that I was innocent just like the way I used to be and left the stall.

"What are we going to do next, Cool Man?" said Billy or Jilly or Gammy.

"Listen Sammy or Simmy or Jemmy or Bemmy... Cool Man has to go to bed now. Cool Man needs to replenish his coolness."

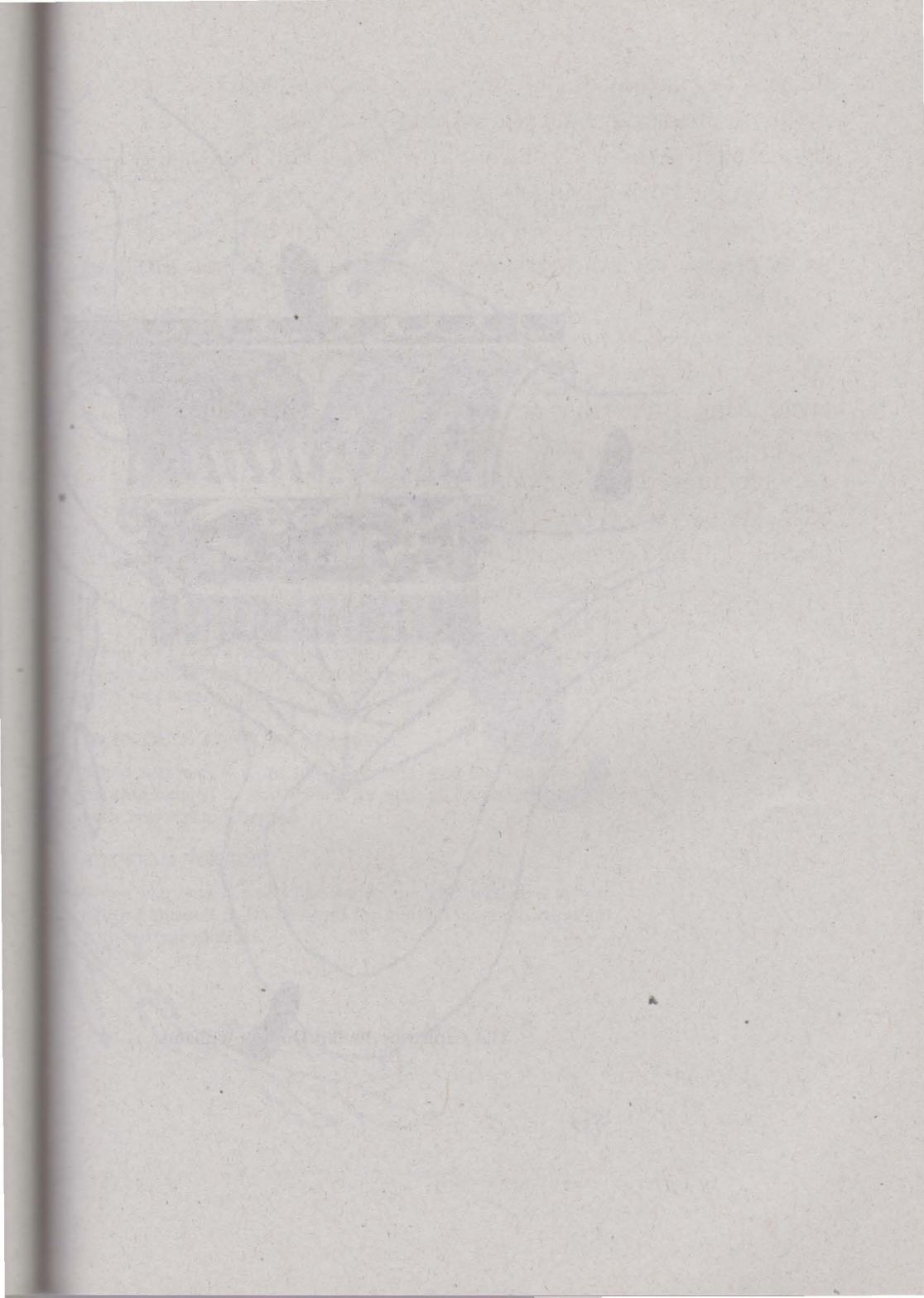
"Why can't we just keep playing forever, Cool Man?"

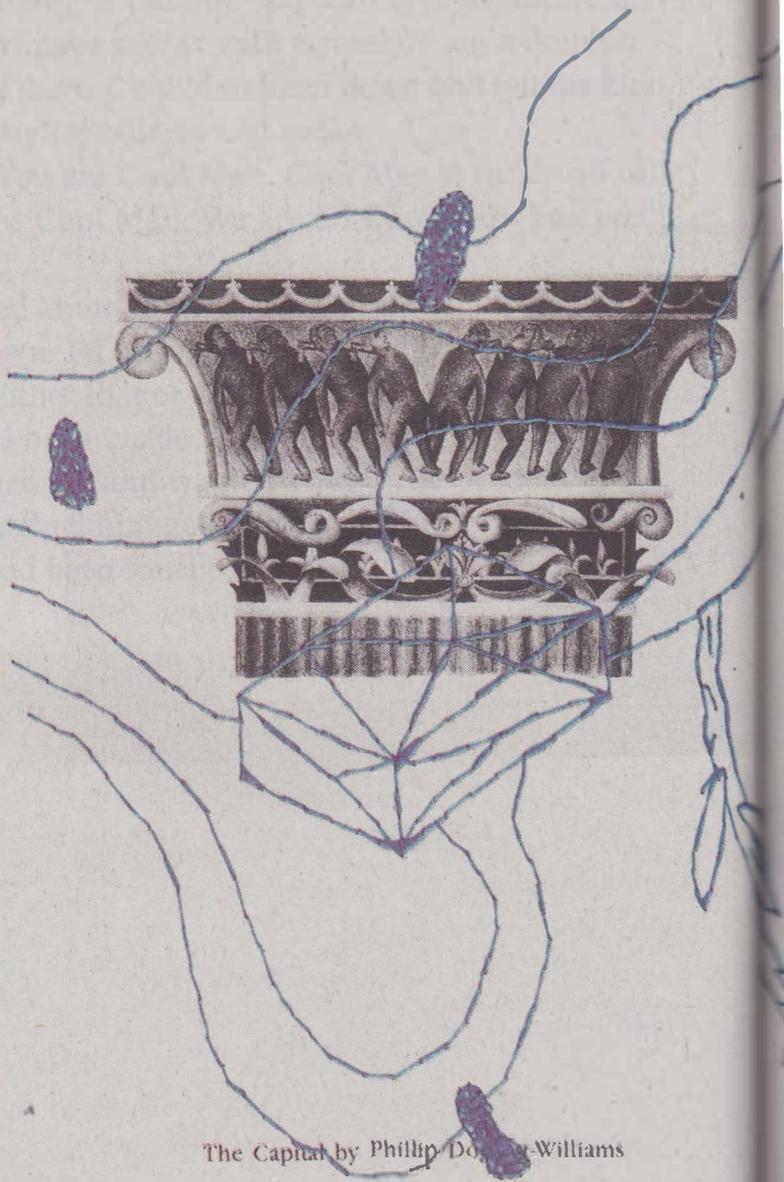
Bemmy or Hammy or Lammy said with eyes so sincere they made my heart have gaysex with a rainbow on a dolphin right then and there. Cool Man knelt down and put his kind paws on the boy's shoulders and spoke.

“Listen. You are Cool Man. Cool Man is inside all of us. Everyone is Cool Man. We are all Cool Man. *You* are Cool Man.”

He looked at me like I was full of shit and I knew it. I'd let him down. I'd become the man I'd tried so hard to avoid being. Either that or they would tell their parents that Cool Man had been inside them all along.

He hugged me and walked away without looking back. As I watched him go, I felt something that I thought I had lost. I had been touched. By a kid. Don't touch kids.

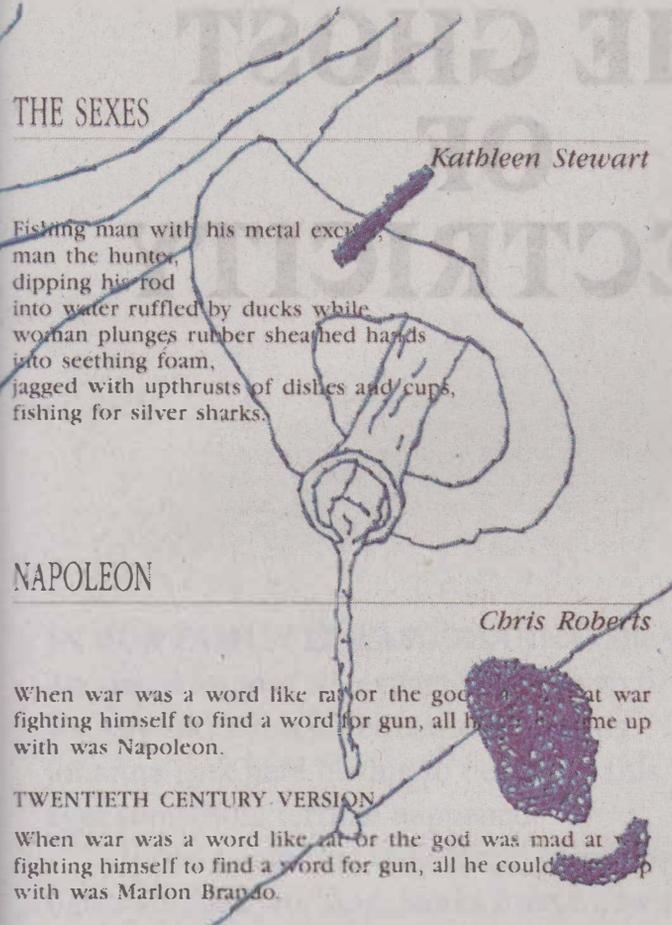




The Capital by Phillip D. Williams

THE SEXES

Kathleen Stewart



Fishing man with his metal excu-
man the hunter,
dipping his rod
into water ruffled by ducks while
woman plunges rubber sheathed hands
into seething foam,
jagged with upthrusts of dishes and cups,
fishing for silver sharks.

NAPOLEON

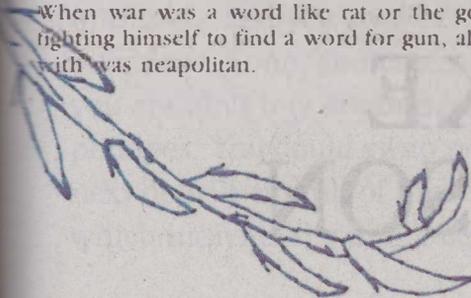
Chris Roberts

When war was a word like rat or the god was mad at war
fighting himself to find a word for gun, all he could come up
with was Napoleon.

TWENTIETH CENTURY VERSION

When war was a word like rat or the god was mad at war
fighting himself to find a word for gun, all he could come up
with was Marlon Brando.

ICECREAM VERSION



When war was a word like rat or the god was mad at war
fighting himself to find a word for gun, all he could come up
with was neapolitan.

THE GHOST OF ELECTRICITY

**LUKE
JOHNSON**

IN OUR FAMILY IT WAS JOHANNA. She was the youngest and weakest and we expected her to go first. Afterwards we convinced ourselves it was a blessing. “It’s a good thing Johanna isn’t here having to deal with this,” we’d say whenever something terrible happened.

In the beginning only trivial things happened. Traffic lights stopped working, banks forgot how much money you owed them, NASA lost contact with the satellites they’d put into space and you couldn’t buy fizzy drink from the vending machines. Soon, you couldn’t buy fizzy drink at all. Then you couldn’t buy anything, not even a bag of home-grown potatoes. You could swap possessions with the people living next door: a tin full of nine-volt batteries you’d been saving, which individually didn’t contain enough juice to give your

tongue a sherbety buzz, but collectively could be wired to power an electric drill or toaster for a few minutes; but for what? An empty fridge-freezer you might use as a coffin for whichever of your babies went next?

Johanna came three weeks before the final cut off, which qualified her for registration. Registration meant rations. They say a lot of people were abusing the system, falling pregnant simply to take advantage. Four packets of double-A batteries, twenty-five litres of fuel and a week's supply of sugar staples. We were living through rich times.

The last half-litre of Johanna's fuel was used to power our family's TV set on the afternoon of her third birthday. The appliance, bought in a time when governments still handed out cash awards for birth registrations, had sat lifeless in our living room for years. My sister Aggie was ten and even she couldn't remember what it was like to watch TV. So with the generator coughing away outside and the neighbours massed at the windows, our family sat and watched videos on the TV set.

Home videos first: Mum kissing Dad with electric beaters in her hand and icing mixture on her lips, me unwrapping a bicycle horn on Christmas day and bursting into tears, our old dog Toby standing with his front legs on the rungs of a stepladder. Then, because we ran out of home movies, the propaganda videos sent by the government: the temporary shut downs, the permanent shutdowns, people cheering, more people cheering. It seems a great waste now, to have used the last of Johanna's birth fuel on those dumb movies,

but it made us happy at the time. It made Johanna happy too, small and weak and sick as she was. Johanna who went that very same evening with the neighbours still standing at our windows praying for a miracle, praying the half-litre would go on forever.

After Johanna had gone and we'd put her in the ground, Mum said she wished we could all just go. Dad said he wished the politicians who'd done this to us would go. I was only six, and it was difficult to know what to wish for. I wished for a lightning storm.

Lightning storms used to excite us more than anything. Almost every backyard in our street had some kind of metal tower erected at its highest vantage point. The most effective ones were built from high-tensile steel and had radio aerials for sceptres. Others were just bedframes and sheets of corrugated iron stacked on top of one another with mattress wire linking them back to household power boxes. Occasionally a fork of lightning would take one of these homemade lures and the house connected below would light up in a flash of harnessed energy and children's laughter. More often than not though, the wiring job was shonky and the house would light up in flames and panic. Then it was just terrible for everyone.

Dad wasn't the only one who hated the politicians for what they did to us. Cancelling out the power like that when they should have been the ones to know better, to have fore-sight. Over and over we listened to them explain how much carbon we were offsetting and how many hospital beds

we were freeing up. “Let’s not forget, things were looking pretty bad there for a while,” they’d remind us in handwritten campaign notes slipped beneath the doors of our houses while we slept. “Population growth was out of control, don’t you remember? Who do you think fixed all that, huh? Tell me it isn’t easier to find a parking space with all those OAPs off the road. Keep that in mind when you’re filling in your ballot paper this Saturday.”

In their defence, it must be said that the first shut-down, lasting four minutes and localised to major hospitals and nursing centres only, saved the economy more than 112 million dollars: a figure which for a long time was hard to ignore, and one which made heroes of the national treasury. Approval ratings climbed as high as ninety-seven percent. Not to be left behind, opposition leaders quickly incorporated power-shortage policies into their own campaigns. “If elected we promise bi-annual closures. No? Quarterly closures.” The race led from hospitals and nursing homes to all public buildings. Monthly. Twice weekly. Such was the fear of falling out of favour in the polls that no member dared oppose the bills.

Before long private enterprise was cashing in. It would’ve been bad business not to. The more a company relied on electricity the more it had to gain by going without. They say the millions upon millions of dollars each outage cost fuel and mining companies hardly compared to the bad press and loss of revenue their rivals faced for leaving the meter running. It was a time when people

were still optimistic and willing to give this thing a go. Celebrities and sports personalities appeared in TV commercials urging people to make a conscious effort to support companies with no product and limited services on account of their ethical, green politics. On a global scale, countries like Tibet and Mongolia outgrew superconsumers like China and the USA within five years. Philosophy graduates fast-tracked straight to the top of *Forbes 500* companies. Entrepreneurs invested their money in steam technology and bought discarded shopping malls for the thrill of watching them sit in the dark overgrowing with indoor climbers and rodent colonies.

After we put her in the ground and Dad said his piece, we left Chillingworks for good. It'd been our town since before I was born. Dad said there was no longer anything there for us but ghosts. Everyone was talking about ghosts back then. It was a way of naming all of the good things that no longer existed. Johanna was one of the best things. So we moved inland over the mountains, where it was dry and easy, which was just what we were looking for: clear skies to help us forget.

I suppose a decade must have passed, and then another. Mum was the next to go and Dad not long after. When Dad went, the tarnished silver wristwatch he'd worn all through his life suddenly jolted back into action. We buried him on top of Mum, with the ticking watch fastened to his arm, and returned to Chillingworks.

“You’re back,” our old neighbour Tom said the day we arrived home. I went and shook his hand and Aggie did a little curtsy bow. Tom’s wife Marge came out and stood next to him without saying anything.

“Oh,” Tom said. “We didn’t think you would ever be back. Not after what happened to Johanna. Did Hank and Molly come too?”

“Mum and Dad went recently,” I said. Aggie’s eyes watered over and she did another little curtsy bow to show she was okay and didn’t need me to go and put a comforting hand on her. “Mum first,” I explained. “Dad’s wristwatch started working again when he went, so Aggie and me took it as a sign that it was time to come home. Been walking for close to eight months, I reckon. Shared the old parking garage out on Jackson last night with a herd of deer. Things have sure changed around here. Still, good to be home.”

Tom nodded and his wife smiled politely and held onto his arm. She might have given him a little nudge. “His wristwatch started working again, hey?” Tom said. “Ha! Fancy that!” He looked at his wife and she stared at his arm and didn’t let go. “Yeah, I heard of that sort of thing happening when a folk goes and passes. Body’s full of electric current, see? Surprised the government didn’t shut the lot of us down, too.”

Aggie made the sign of the cross, which was customary whenever someone mentioned the government. Kind of like knocking on wood.

“Don’t suppose there’s too many of them government

bastards around these days?” I said. Aggie signed again.

“Christ no,” Tom laughed. His wife smiled awkwardly.

“No. Good,” I said. “Good. Dad would be happy about that. Thought we’d move back into the old house. Tidy it up a bit and try to stay out of harm’s way. Been a long time.”

“Oh,” Tom said. “Thing is...” He paused and his wife squeezed his arm. “Thing is, young David’s moved himself in there. You remember young David? Got himself set up sort of like permanent, you know?”

“Oh.” I thought for a moment and Aggie looked at me to say something, to solve this unexpected problem. “Set himself up in our old place?” I echoed.

Tom and his wife nodded their heads in unison. I tried to think. David was the youngest of their boys. Maybe a year or two older than Johanna would’ve been. The only real memory I could conjure was turning around and seeing him sitting on Tom’s shoulders that afternoon Johanna went. Trying to see past our sad little family circle to the TV.

“Well.” I looked at Aggie, cleared my throat and started again. “Well, I guess it’s a pretty decent-sized house, big enough to have had five of us living in it. I guess there’s no reason why he couldn’t keep living there, too. Aggie and me certainly don’t take up much room. Imagine David’s much the same?”

“Thing is...” Tom went quiet again and waited for his wife to give him a squeeze. She did. “Thing is, you see, David’s not exactly living over there by himself, you know? Much like yourselves he’s grown up now and he don’t

remember what it was like before there was no electricity. He's gone and gotten himself a little family and they're all living over there quite happy now. Such a long time passed, you know? And now, you lot, well... Boy's happy as Larry, I tell you."

Aggie looked at me and I looked at her.

"No hard feelings, right?" Tom said.

I put my hand on Aggie's shoulder and shook my head. Aggie started crying.

Tom must have felt bad to see us like that. "Jeez, I mean, I'm sure he wouldn't mind you bunking down in one of the back rooms for a night or two. Right Marge? Since you come all this way and all."

Marge looked up at him and very subtly shook her head.

"Yeah. Second thoughts, you folk are probably best to see if there isn't something else around here which is available. I mean, I heard a couple of them Radford kids were looking pretty sick for a while. Dare say Mike and Shirley might be worth a try. Place they got there's damn near a mansion. Dare say that'd be your best bet. Least for tonight. You know how it is?"

I nodded, smiled politely and put my arm across Aggie's shoulders. At the bottom of the street I turned to see Tom and Marge still standing there watching us go. Marge gave up Tom's arm and did a little curtsy bow, which from as far away as we were might just have been her bending down to pick something up off the ground, a clothespin maybe, or a fallen bird's egg.

Aggie and I didn't bother going to the Radfords' to see whether they'd mind us spending the night in one of their hopefully dead kids' bedrooms. Perhaps at some point the fuse that kept sentimentality alive in most people's heads had burned out. But for Aggie and me, living in virtual isolation for so many years, knowing what it was like to watch your loved ones go kept us decent enough that we marched right past the mansion on the corner.

Without needing to voice our options, we returned to the parking garage where we'd spent the previous night. The deer were gone, or perhaps just grazing on a higher level. Upset as we were, we managed to make camp and sleep soundly through the first few hours of darkness.

It must have been about midnight when I woke to see Aggie standing by a large window built into the exit ramp wall. Standing beside her was a deer. A buck, by the horns and muscled flanks. He was staring through the window too. I wrapped my sleeping bag around my shoulders and went and stood between them.

"Look," Aggie whispered.

Maybe three or four kilometres away, in the direction from which we'd come, I could see a faint light. The deer could see it too and was standing proudly with his head bowed toward the light and his antlers buzzing with static.

"What do you think it is?" I said.

Aggie shrugged.

"It might be coming from the Radfords'," I suggested.

"Let's go take a look." Aggie was still whispering.

“Okay. I mean, it might take us a while to get there. But okay.” I shuffled back over to my shoes. Aggie petted the deer on the nose and he shot a healthy stream of urine down the concrete ramp. Something to remember him by.

They say it’ll be hundreds of years before the human body clock forgets its long-time partnership with the hour and minute. If this is true, then the walk didn’t take much more than an hour and a half by my reckoning. Many times we lost sight of the glow, but just kept moving in that direction. Maybe we both knew where we were headed anyway. Past the Radfords’ mansion and back to our old house with the decaying weatherboards and bullnose veranda.

How can I possibly describe the joy of seeing electric light again after such a long absence? Across the dandelion front lawn the fluorescent colour intermingled with the darkness and cast shadows on the ground like musical notation. Behind the curtains, silhouettes danced like plump, Viking-horned sopranos.

“What do you think’s going on in there?” Aggie asked me.

I shook my head. “A party, maybe?”

“I’m going to find out.” She left me standing on the crumbled footpath and hopped the car-tyre fence into our old yard. Part of me expected her to be zapped the minute her feet hit the ground. Or the squeal of an alarm, like the ones they used to sound before each shutdown, when electricity failures were intermittent events like shark attacks. There was no zap. No sound. Aggie tramped across the lawn with me scrambling after her.

Together we climbed the porch steps and knocked on the door. There was no answer. Louder. "Hello? David?" Still there was no response. The silhouettes had disappeared but not the light. We tried opening the door. It was locked. The windows too.

"I'm going to break the glass," Aggie said.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"It's our house," she said. "Whether David's living in here with his new family or not. Rightfully it's still ours, right? I mean, who gave him permission to take it over? Can't you go on holiday without somebody moving in while you're away? Besides, don't you want to see what he's got rigged up in there? In our house? Where's all that light coming from, hey? Power that belongs to us. That's what I say." Before I could object, Aggie was off the veranda and searching in the garden for something to smash the window. She held up a metal scarifying point with a thin piece of wire running through it.

"Ooh, what you got there, hey?" a voice interrupted. It was Tom, standing on his side of the fence in his hessian nightgown. "Why don't you come inside and have a drink? Marge makes a puddle water just like tap water used to taste. You kids aren't too young to remember that, hey? Why don't you come on over and we'll talk about old times. Them Radford kids still alive, hey? That's no problem. Me and Marge got plenty of space. Don't know why it didn't occur when you folk was here earlier. Yeah, sure, come have a drink and spend the night at ours. Best to leave young David alone in

there with the strife and kids, hey? What do you say?"

"What's all this light coming from inside our house?" Aggie asked.

"Jeez, I don't like to go talking about other people's affairs, you know? Best just let David do whatever he's doing in there and come over here for a cup and a bit of a rest. No point concerning ourselves. You say old Hank's wristwatch just kicked off again like that, hey? How about that! Why don't you come tell Marge and me about what else happened while you kids were off and away all those years? Your house, I mean, you folk just up and left like that, so sudden and all. It's not like David moved himself in there that same afternoon or nothing."

"Mr Chisholm, why don't you just cut the crap and tell us what the crap is going on?"

In all our years together, I never once heard Aggie speak like this. Dad used to say 'crap' all the time, but Mum would remind us that nobody thought you big for using language like that. "Nobody here to think them small neither," Dad would quip back when he was feeling particularly crappy.

"Mr Chisholm?" Aggie pressed.

"Well, I mean, you know, you arrive back here after all these years. And nobody's got a gun to your head or nothing. But hell, you know, what's David's business is David's business, right? And I ain't the kind of fella to go trespassing on nobody else's personal life like that."

Swinging it by the wire, Aggie hurled the scarifying point through the glass pane beside the closed door.

“Jesus, girlie!”

Light beamed out through the broken window like images of the sacred heart you can still see painted in run-down churches. Brighter than any Jesus heartstring though. This light was bright enough to set the whole street on fire.

“You got to understand, you kids, there’s some things old folk like me and Margie just can’t understand. And David’s business is his business. I mean, you got to let them grow up someday, right? Boy’s got to decide what’s right for him and his, you understand?”

An eye appeared at the window, peering out at us like a zoetrope turning the spectacle back on its viewer.

“It’s a little girl,” Aggie said, approaching. “Hello. What’s your name?”

The girl poked her hand through the hole in the glass and Aggie took hold of it. Touching the girl’s skin made Aggie’s own hand become very bright. Then her whole body began to glow.

“You got to understand,” Tom said, “I mean, David was only a little kid himself, and we thought he was just playing make believe and then he says he’s going to marry that girl one day, and me and Margie, you know, we’re old folk, and we just thought the boy’s got a wild imagination. Then when he finally takes us over to meet her and, hell, how many months had passed by that stage? And you folk, well, nobody thought you folk was ever coming back again. Seeing her like that though – I tell you what. And after that... boy, time just kept rolling by, I tell you. Not for little Joey or David though.

Neither of them's aged a day in twenty years, if you ask me. But then, they always was running around together, them two. Even in the early days. And she was still sweet as ever. I mean, before she... you know? And I don't mean to sound rude or nothing, but you folk just up and left without even a second thought for poor little... But hey, what's done is done, right?"

Aggie let go of the girl's hand and started pushing against the front door. When she couldn't budge it she stuck her arm through the broken window and fumbled around for the lock. Everywhere she cut herself more light streamed out. It was as if she was bleeding pure light. Eventually she managed to get the door open, and standing in the old foyer was our beautiful Johanna. She was almost too bright to look at. The four or five babies crawling and playing at her feet didn't mind the glare. They seemed used to it. She picked one up, a little girl who didn't look much younger than her, and started breastfeeding the infant. Aggie laughed madly.

"I mean, she's looked like that since the day you folk left, I tell you," Tom lowered his voice. "Certainly in all the time I known her since. Young David, he reckons she got a youthfulness about her and certainly there ain't no denying she got something. Margie and me, we can't make hide nor hair."

Young David appeared in the doorway then. He had a cheerful smile and didn't seem upset with our intrusion or the broken window. He didn't say anything, just waved to Tom, who waved back nervously. It was true, the boy looked exactly as he'd looked sitting on his dad's shoulders twenty-odd years earlier.

Johanna stopped feeding her baby and offered the child to Aggie, who cuddled the little girl against her own adult-sized breasts and began weeping.

“Do you remember me?” she asked, after she’d managed to calm herself a bit.

Johanna nodded and David stood proudly with his arm around her little shoulders.

“How did this happen?” I said to Tom.

“Hell, you know, you can only watch them for so many hours a day. I daresay young David snuck back over here trying to peek in on a bit more TV. You folk left so quickly, and nobody knew whether you were coming back, or what you had planned. And your parents, I mean, old Hank. What, you say his watch just started up again like that? After all them years? Who’d have guessed! Young David though, jeez, he never seen a TV in his life before that day. I guess it got him all excited. And whether we was sleeping or what, me and Margie, well, hell, he must have just crept back over here sometime in the evening, trying to catch himself another peek. Reckon when he couldn’t get no picture out of it, he must have gone down back and dug little Joey up out of that hole again. Strange thing for a boy to be thinking about digging people up like that, but whatever was going through his mind that day, them two’s been close as thieves since and neither of them looks like they’ve aged a day, if you ask me. Happy as punch, they are. Good little parents too. Margie helps out when she can. But little Joey, you wouldn’t find a kinder soul.”

“Jesus, did you think to come looking for us?” I said.

“Well, now, hang on a minute, you folk just up and left...”
Tom said a lot more after that, none of it very persuasive.
None of it lessening the magnitude of what had happened.

After that night, Aggie adjusted quickly and spent most of her time at our old house, looking after the kids or doing the laundry, helping with housework that that Johanna and David found difficult on account of their size. I found it much harder whenever I was left alone with them. It was difficult not to talk like they were still three years old. I'd go to say something like, “Who's seen my lucky coin?” but before I could lean forward and pull it out from behind one of their ears, they'd explain that such behaviour really wasn't necessary. “Just be yourself,” Johanna would say to me. “You're my older brother and I love you even after all these years.” I found the more she got to know a person and the more comfortable she felt, the brighter she'd glow. Sometimes when her and Aggie were together, I could hardly stand to be in the same room.

A few months went by like this, until David pulled me aside one day.

“Look, I know you're family, but things aren't really working out here. Let's be honest. You pop around unannounced and sit at the dining table with an anxious look on your face, making the rest of us feel just as edgy. You're worse than my father. I just think it might be best if we don't see you so often.”

“Aggie too?” I asked.

“Aggie’s great,” he told me. “You’ve seen her with the kids. And with Joey too. Joey just lights up. Well, you know what I mean. No hard feelings though, right?”

I could hardly disagree. As much as I loved Johanna, and Aggie too, I had to admit that the best thing was probably for me to take off again.

“Where will you go?” Aggie asked.

“There’s talk of them starting up work on the power grids again,” I told her, trying to sound enthusiastic. There was always talk of them starting up work on the power grids. But the truth, as everybody knew, was that the power grids were beyond repair. To make electricity again you needed electricity. Aggie knew this as well as I did.

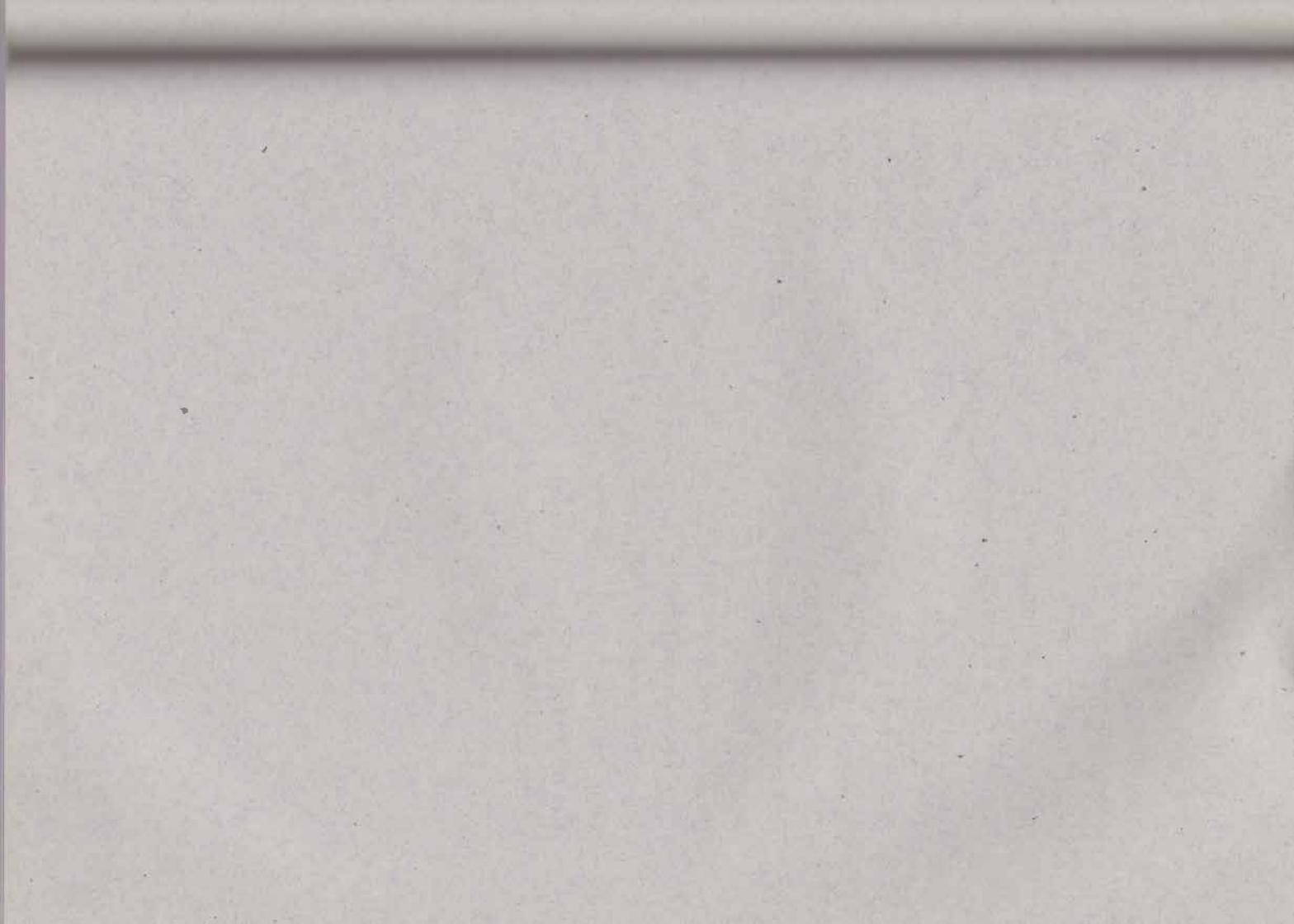
“Wow, that sounds... wow,” she said.

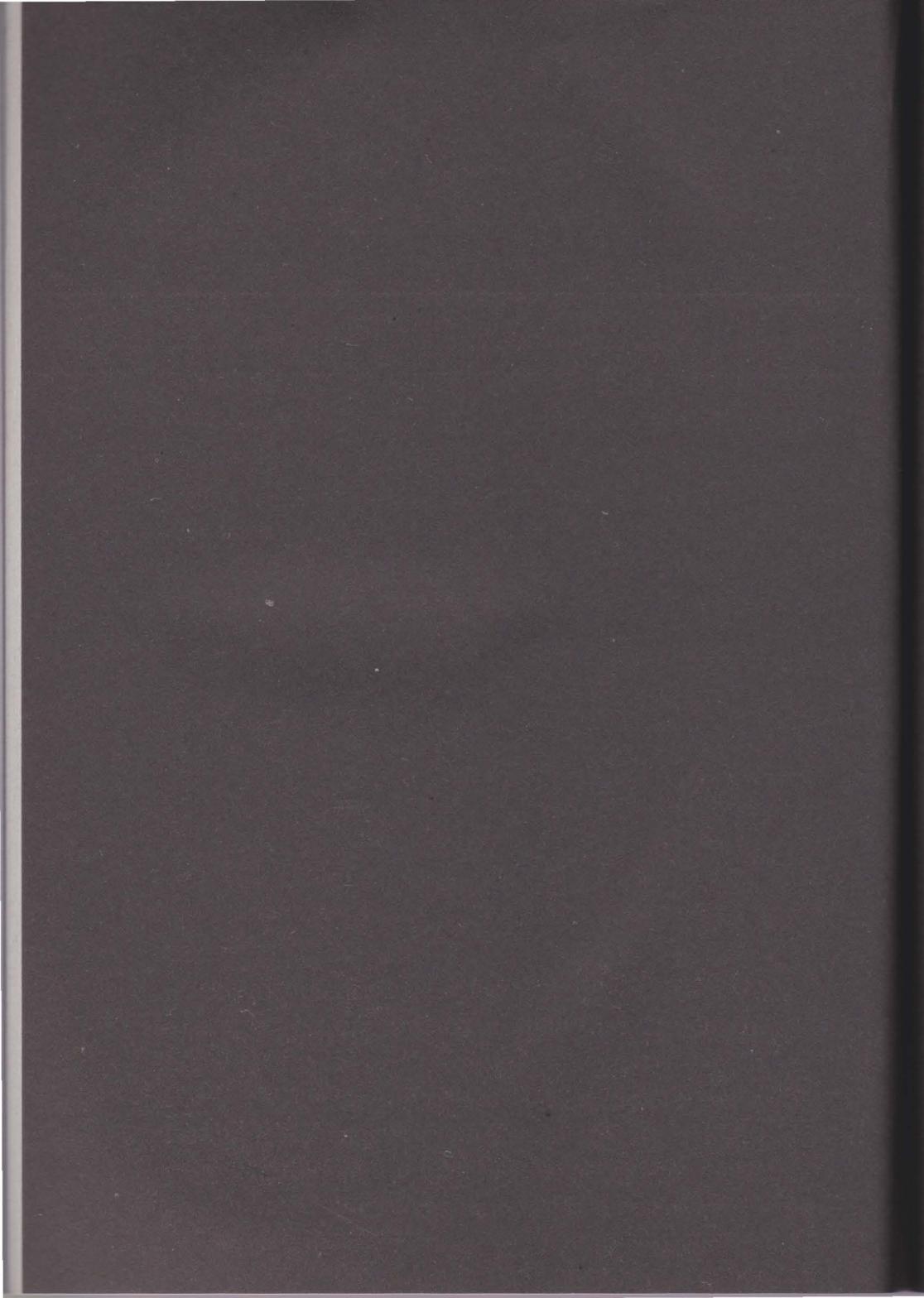
The night before I left, Johanna came into the spare room. She wasn’t glowing like usual, but looked just as I remembered her when she was still alive properly. Just the same as in those early days, she came and tapped me on the shoulder to ask if she might get into my bed. “Can I hop in?” she said in this little kid voice, which wasn’t at all how she’d been speaking since we’d been back. It was only a single bed but I shuffled over. It felt weird to have my baby sister, who was really an adult, snuggling up to me, but nevertheless that’s how we went to sleep again.

In the morning, Johanna was gone. When I lifted the covers I could see there were drips of light leading from the

bed out of the room and down the hall and down the stairs to the basement where she often went when she wanted to be alone for some reason, or when her light was becoming too much for everyone else. “Joey’s feeling a bit off colour,” David told me when I came into the kitchen. I nodded and said goodbye to him and Aggie and kissed the kids and left without seeing Johanna again.

The last I heard, Tom, Marge and Aggie eventually all went just the same as Mum and Dad. I often wonder if the electricity leapt out of Tom’s body at the time of his going, setting off some nearby cuckoo clock. As for me, I haven’t aged a day since leaving Johanna. So much of the world has disappeared, and they say in a thousand years there won’t be any buildings or roads left. Strange to think. The only things that’ll be left will be the ghosts, I guess. I might even return to see Johanna and David and the kids then. Just a quick visit, to check whether the house is still standing when all the neighbours’ have fallen down. It’d be nice to think one of the best things could keep on going like that.





DRAW

**LUCY
MACKAY-SIM**

The heat burns everything to acid white.
Strange boot heels wake the hibernating dust.
At bolted windows, shadows cross and cross
themselves, a prayer worn thin by fretful hands.
Mongrels drag their squeeze-box ribs to hide.
The shuttered town has no breath left to draw.

A woman like a five-year-old would draw:
black eyes above a triangle of white.
She'd wanted nothing but a place to hide
her son, a wedding ring, a box of dust.
With ragged cotton skirts clenched in her hands
her eyes rise up to find the mission cross.

Ten years today her husband's double cross.
"I finally beat that bastard to the draw,"
he'd said, and she had clasped her shaking hands
and kissed him with her knuckles turning white,
but felt their future shake itself to dust;
chance reach to scratch them, buglike, from its hide.

They never had a chance to run or hide.
The devil lived, and where the rivers cross
he caught them. Life spread wet across the dust.
Her boy went still, and wouldn't let her draw
him close – his little face just slightly white,
his fingers making guns from chubby hands.

No dreams, the guns now itching for those hands.
Who'll say now that he doesn't have the hide
to make that old scar young again? The white
soul spoils to redden. Up above, the cross
waits darkly for the vengeful son to draw
blood in the sacred name of nameless dust.

The other yawns and idly hawks the dust
out of his gold-plate mouth onto his hands
to show the kid he's just about to draw
and give the little runt a chance to hide.
He can't recall just who he killed to cross
this puppy and his pretty ma in white.

Boy hoofs the dust and glances at the cross.
She tries to hide her mouth behind her hands.
A white bird bursts into the blue sky. Draw.

FIBROIN

**UPULIE
DIVISEKERA**

Essay

BORN FROM A CULTIVATED MOTH, silk is formed from a thread of the cocoon of *Bombyx mori*. Dupion, crepe, georgette, crushed, water, organza, voile, taffeta; products of an ill-fated yet venerated grub.

The empress (it must always be royalty) drank tea and found a cocoon had fallen into her cup, just as another emperor had discovered tea when leaves of *Camellia sinensis* chanced to fall into his hot water. In the heat the cocoon unravelled to fill her garden.

It is always a single thread, it always requires heat to unravel. The grubs are killed in their cocoons by steam or heat; a skilled worker picks out the thread and unwinds the entire cocoon; the thread is woven into the fabric that conquered the world.

In its beginnings, silk was only for imperial houses. When the merchants took it, the Indians in the south wove it with golden threads into the jacquard, in the north embroidered it, and in Kashmir spun it with pashmina into the most expensive fabric ever made. Two-toned silks changed colour with direction, diffraction tricking the eye. The Arabs made their own jacquard, named damask for Damascus, with Persian script woven into the edges.

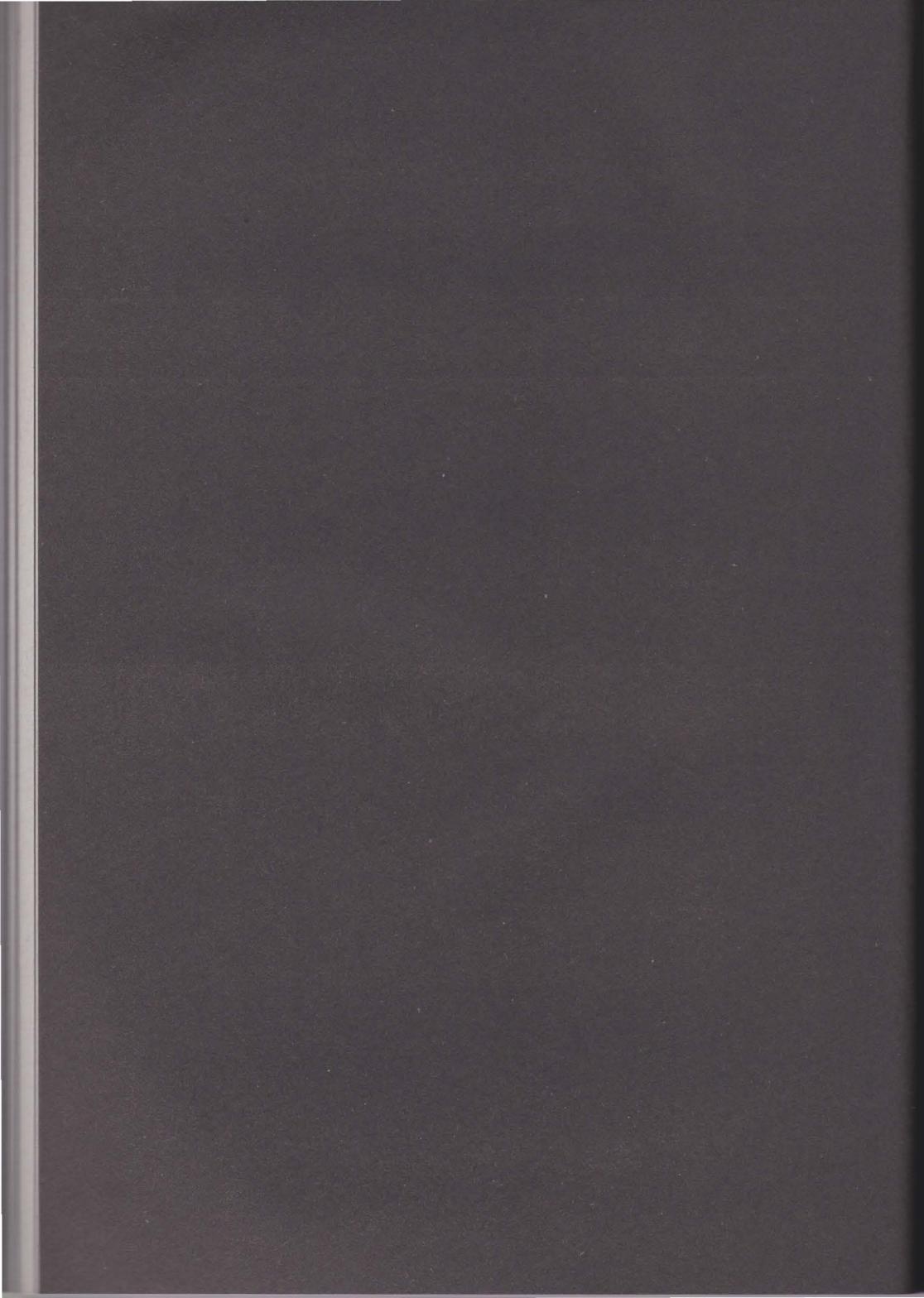
Along the route of the silk trade that capped the Roof of the World, making Central Asia a field of conquerors, they built *caravanserai* – inns for weary travellers. In Persia some are still in use today. Food and silk and art travelled the Silk Road from Isfahan to Europe, from Isfahan to Taxila, from China. Buddhism travelled along it. Saffron spread along it. Silk was the catalyst for multiculturalism, blurring boundaries along the edges of the great nations of earth.

The crucial thread is made of one protein: fibroin. It's the same protein in spiders' silk, or the larval cocoons of bees, lacewings, wasps and ants, but that of *Bombyx mori* is most prized. A single thread is coils and coils of protein, the protein itself chains of amino acids that form beta sheets, like tiny atomic ribbons. The ribbons were found by making a crystal from fibroin and firing X-rays at it, until the spots of a diffraction pattern – light altering by interacting with the surface – revealed their existence. It took five thousand years to find this out.

Recently, scientists in Japan took the essence of *Bombyx mori*, its DNA. From corals and jellyfish deep beneath

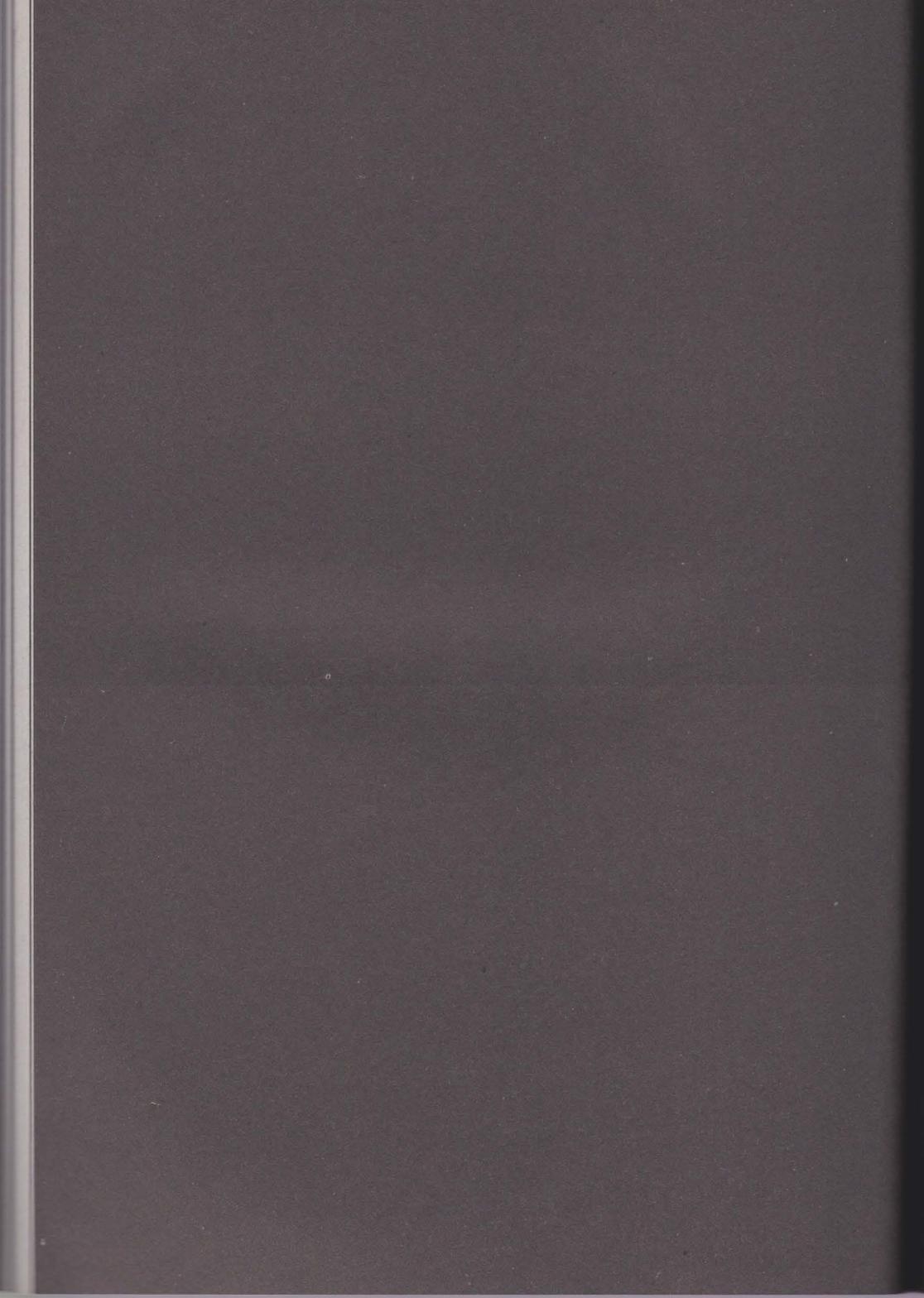
the ocean, they took other proteins, took their instructions, attached them to fibroin's secret code and put it into grubs.

The grubs as ever were fed on mulberry leaves; nothing else will do. You can imagine the labs and the petri dishes. They were killed, as is right and proper, and the threads unwound and woven into silk. The silk was taken to a designer who made a wedding dress, the dress was exhibited. When they shone ultraviolet light on it, the silk altered: the new fluorescent protein came alive. In the strange light, the clean white silk glowed green, red, pink. In the age of molecular engineering, the death of *Bombyx mori* continues to adorn and delight us.



**PHENOMEN-
OLOGY
OF BANANAS**

**SEAN
GOEDECKE**

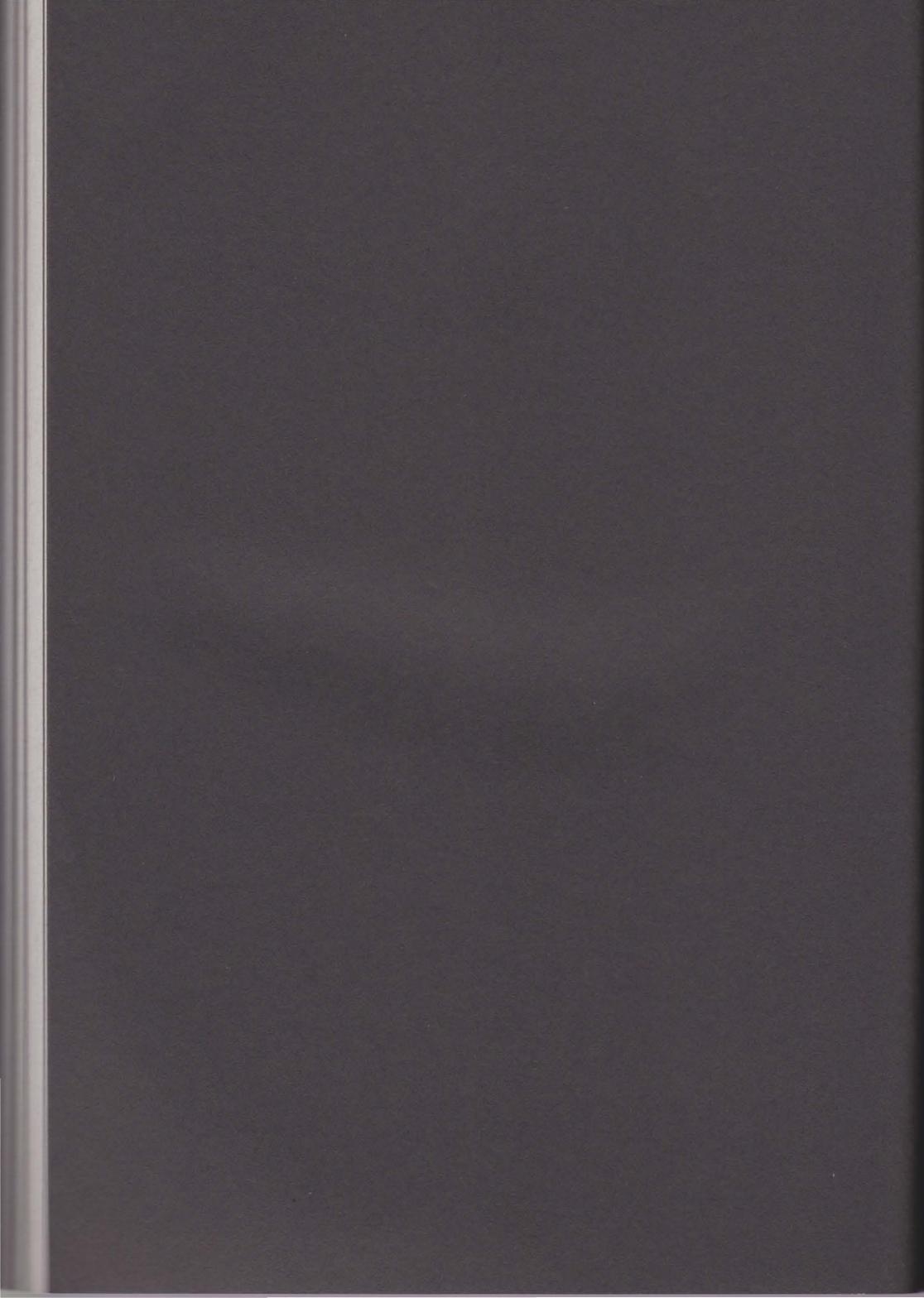


To prop up his subjectivity
the young philosopher assembles
a line of bananas
end to end on the coffee table:
just ripe, margarine yellow.

You are objects, he tells them.
He knocks one onto the carpet.
This is power, he tells himself.
He assembles

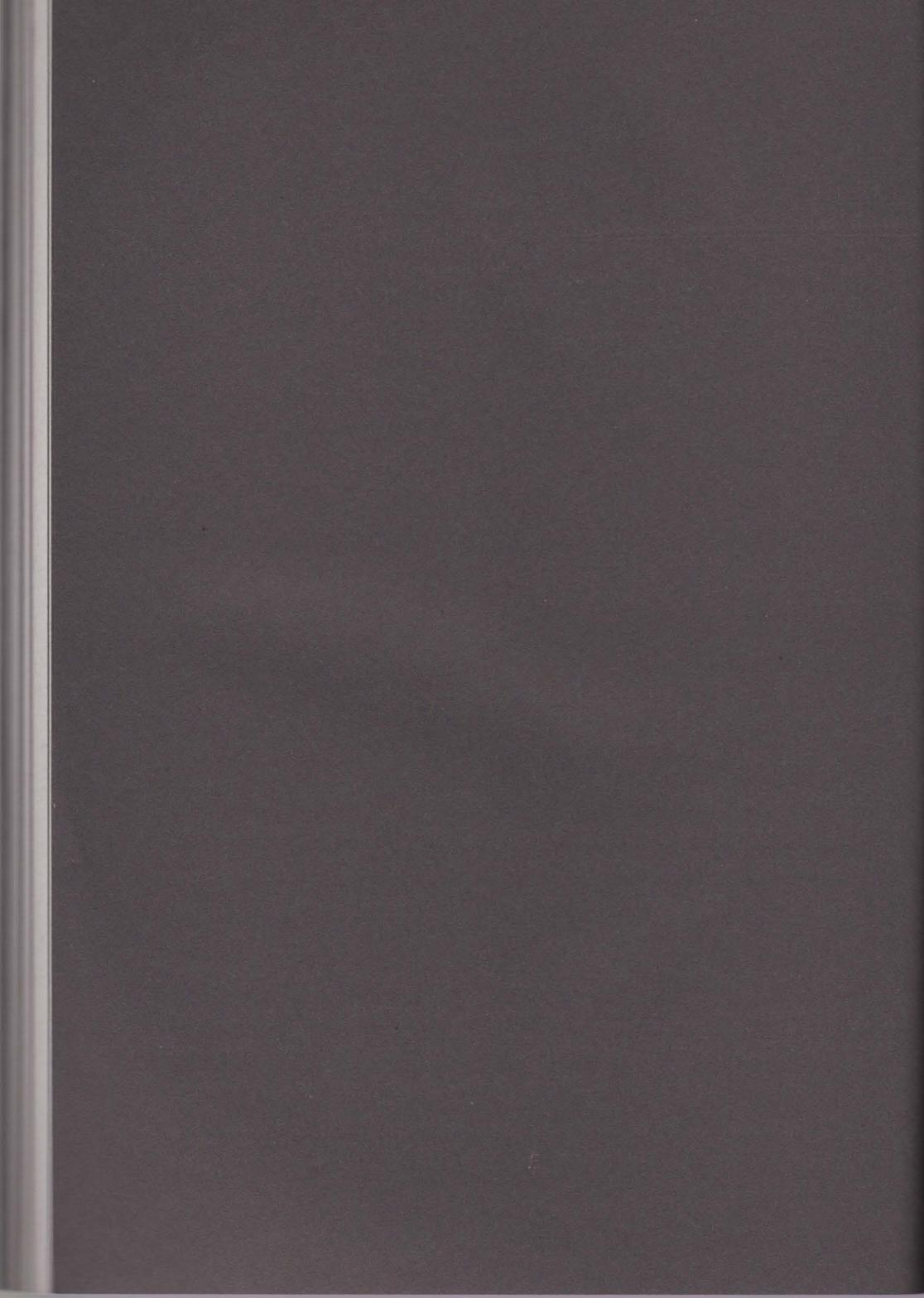
the bananas into shapes,
a circle, an S, a heap.
In a frenzy of creation
he tries to spell out his initials.
There are not enough bananas.

Meanwhile the banana on the carpet
is ripening slowly,
fibrous knots of protein
crystallising into sugar.



FORENSICS MUSEUM

ANDY
JACKSON



Siriraj Hospital, Bangkok

Behind glass are the bodies we are becoming.
Poorly preserved, shrinking inside
ourselves with every gaze. A family

wanders the labyrinth of cabinets.
The youngest and I look
at each other, curious, an incongruous

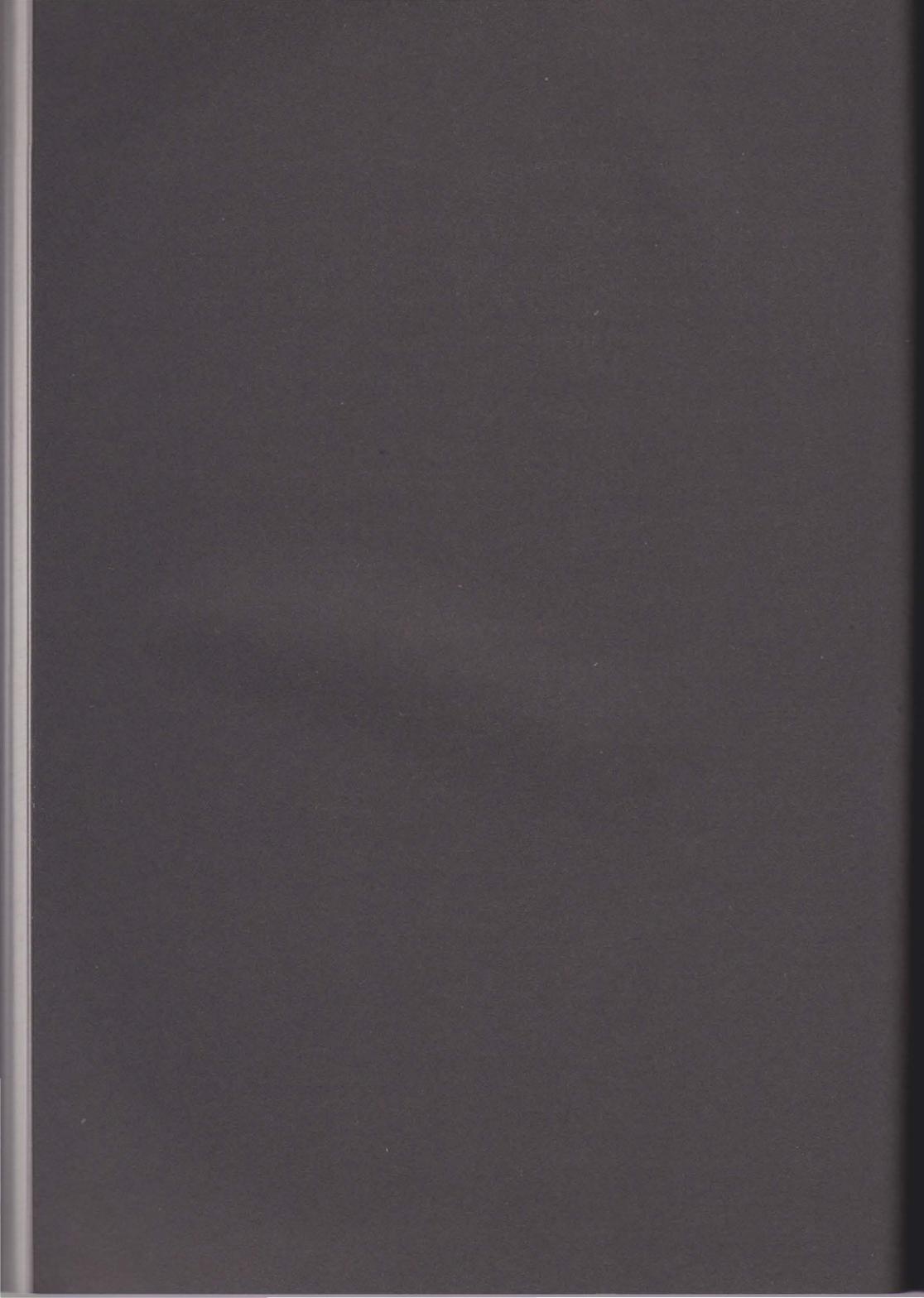
smile between us. Some of the screws
that fix the signs are rusting. Soft pink walls
close in. *Unidentified male,*

beheaded in a car accident. *Rape murderer
with death sentence.* Victims of gunshot,
axe, explosions, their own hand.

A smoker's lungs, greyish blooms
only our innards recognise. The floor
groans as I turn and move towards the dark

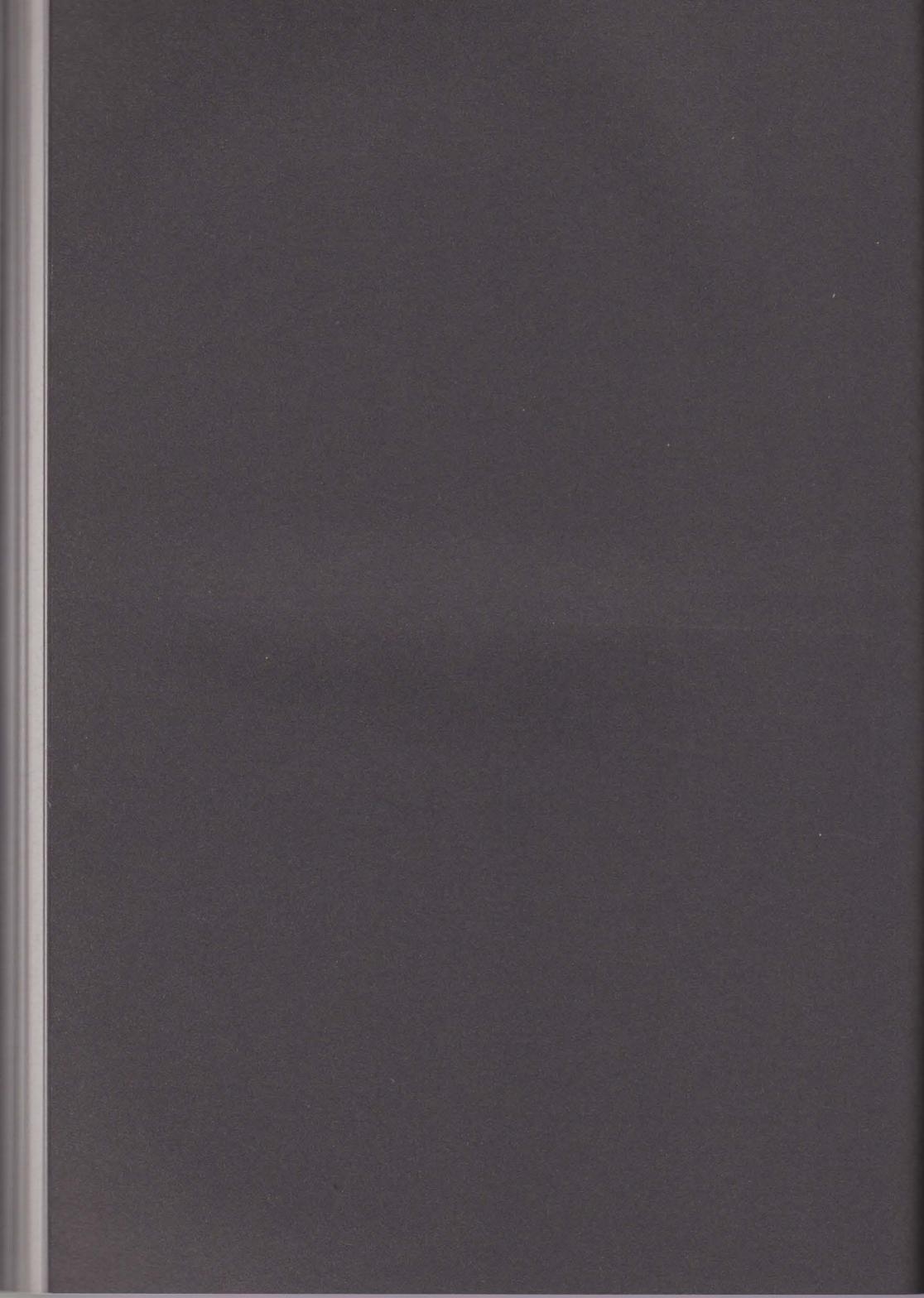
corner of the museum. My skull
is bisected, opened,
a book in a language no one will speak.

The river has burst its banks.
Outside, nurses stride calmly through puddles.
Sandbags cover the mouths of shops like hands.



DISSOCIATION

STUART
BARNES



*Australia's Grim Reaper commercial
first screened on April 5, 1987*

The waiting
lane: a ten-pin's
set, then rocks and
strikes the waxen pine,
snatches
at a metal frame:
a tiger-lily orange
five-pin
obfuscates
raised lesions:
three candlepins,
cheeks milked of fat,
roll psychic eyes
to lifeless walls
forget forget forget
black bowling balls
and silver scythes
the doctor's
stiff like Wet on
Wellington's
artificial
marble gods:
and I, this scene
too close to the bone,
a classical bystander also.

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

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

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

Lie me down, I close my eyes. Stand me up,
my lids flick open. I take something in.
I keep my secret tattooed on my skin.

3. book beauty treatment

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

Scolded for ~~crackling~~ *crackling* ~~mess~~.
I tried to cut it straight.
But my hair would disobey.

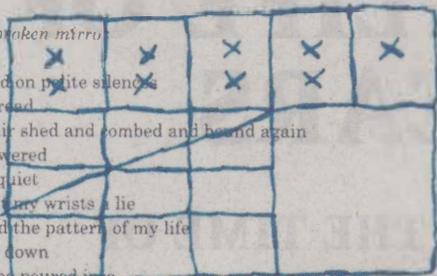
Drag my finger against my skin
and up my cheek reverse
time. inexorable wreck wrinkles
go back slack muscles tighten
frown lines disappear from my
eyes the crow unsteps its feet
mistakes are unmade my young
self returned to me again

more lines than freckles
a mouth that smiles less

uncrossed unstained
no bruises no pain
all blood inside me

4. *replace broken mirror*

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



5. *find locksmith*

black blades of grass
sharpen underfoot
undulled by falling dew

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

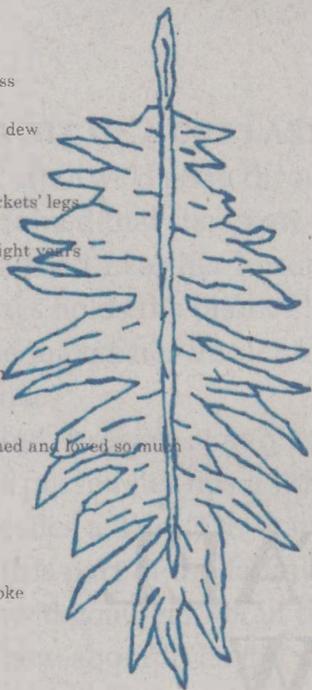
6. *get advice*

his eyes on my skin
two slugs silvering

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

failed Amazon

you can't break
what is already broke



**THE
HALF-LIFE OF
TEARS**

**LOVE IN THE TIME OF
THYROID IODINE**

**RAFAEL
S.W.**

Essay

“I HAD A BIT OF A CRY LAST NIGHT,” my grandmother told me, after we’d gone through the typical preamble and I’d ascertained that she knew which of her grandsons it was. I could almost hear her lipstick. Blood red and bone dry. She always holds the phone slightly away from her face, and the angle makes her harder to hear, older and more fragile by distance.

“Why? Are you okay?”

She pursed her lips a little before answering, a pucker that precedes a kiss. “Oh don’t worry about me.”

“Is this part of the falling incident?”

“How’d you hear about that silly business?”

I knew about it, as did the rest of the family, because they all spoke about each other more often than they spoke

to each other. I knew most of the story, but didn't say so. I thought she might take it as impolite. She was the kind of person who would feel hurt if the people serving her at the supermarket didn't acknowledge her as an individual. She didn't write angry letters, she just felt disappointed.

"Mum just mentioned it. Is everything okay?"

"Yes yes," she took a sip of tea. "One of the builders left their materials around. I don't know, tools and stuff. Anyway, it was all so sudden, Jane said I should sue them, but I can't think of a worse hassle."

"Well okay, sure, but what happened? I mean, once you fell over, then what?" And there was silence on the other end of the line while she collected her thoughts, or took another sip of tea.

→

My grandmother is a strong woman. I guess you have to be to go through the complexity of raising four girls, followed all too quickly by the energy drain that is five grandsons. But she never showed any strain. At least not until recently. While this kind of slow-motion collapse occurs in anyone who lives long enough, it's still strange to see the ways it can happen to someone you love. Like a lot of things about getting old, it's gradual, almost unnoticeable until it's right there. Like the morning you look in the mirror and realise there's more salt than pepper, and you've lost the ability to taste salt.

→

“Well I fell, and I thought I was going to die. Of embarrassment of course. It’s been happening more and more often, but this was the worst. One of the builders even came rushing over to help me up...”

→

If I had to pinpoint a moment, I would say it came when she could no longer carry her own bags. Of course she’d already countered this in her own way by shopping daily in smaller amounts. But when necessity meant she had to carry something slightly larger than some fruit, soy milk and the newspaper, she asked me to help. I was young, with more arm muscle than social awareness, and I couldn’t understand how she wasn’t able to carry a watermelon or a few books. I gladly helped, but concern about bone density was entirely alien to me, as were the treatments she was undergoing.

“After the fall they took me to a hospital,” she exhaled. “Just for a check-up, routine stuff.”

“And was everything okay?”

“Yes,” she said, almost annoyed that my concern was getting in the way of her story.

“So why were you crying?”

“I wasn’t crying over that. God. No, it was my thyroid.”

“What? What’s wrong with your thyroid?”

One of the many things that can go wrong with the

human body occurs in the thyroid gland. It can sometimes become imbalanced, which essentially screws with its hormones. Hypothyroidism affects between three and ten percent of adults, with a higher incidence in women and the elderly. My grandmother was both.

“And so at the same time I asked the doctor, and he recommended that I go in for a check-up. Of course the testing process involved radioactive iodine, which I was against as my naturopath had said...”

“Hang on,” I interrupted. “Radioactive *what?*”

→

It was known as thyroid scintigraphy, which is the process of using radioactive iodine to get an image of a thyroid. My only experience with iodine was on school camps where they used the less radioactive version to make our water safe to drink. Their measurements were off, kids complained about the taste, and by the end of camp everyone’s breath smelled of hospitals. But other than feeling like I’d been sucking on a Warhead lolly made of rust, there were no ill effects. My grandmother had it much worse.

“I had to go into hospital for it. I didn’t really have much choice in the end. I’d always tried to avoid taking these kinds of things. You know me. I don’t want anything unnatural in my body. I’m still uncomfortable about X-rays for God’s sake.”

Despite a lifetime avoiding things as innocuous as pain-killers, she’d agreed. But it wasn’t even the typical hospital

that she knew. Thyroid scintigraphy is performed in the nuclear medicine department. If you ever have grandparents who remain wary of technology and what they see as the wholesale acceptance of dangerous ideas, try to not let them see the 'Department of Nuclear Medicine' sign on the door as they walk in. It probably has a different ring for those who were alive around WWII, though the terminology signifies the radioactive emissions used to see the shape and tissue activity of the thyroid gland.

"I wanted to see it," she said.

"See what?"

"The image. I thought it would be like an ultrasound."

"And was it?"

"No."

→

The gland will either be normal, 'hot' or 'cold'. Hot means it's overactive, but cold is sometimes an indication of non-functioning tissue, which could turn into thyroid cancer. Hers was only hot, but the solution wasn't clear, and the side effects of the testing were bad enough.

"I can't go on public transport. I can't be in groups of people. Elevators are advised against."

"Why? Because they're worried you'll fall over?"

"No," she said, trying to retain a bit of the old indignation. "They're worried about other people. It stays in your system for days. The radiation. Comes out in my sweat

apparently. And urine. But I'm not supposed to be around other people. I can't even sleep with anyone. Not that that would be a problem. Who'd want to sleep with me?"

"Oh hush," I said, thinking as I said it that she'd probably still take offence, even as I tried to make it sound like she could still be loved.

"I know, I know," she said. "But it's scary. How long lasting this is."

I tried to remember how old she was.

"I have to wash all the sheets. I have to flush the toilet twice. My clothes just spin round and round in the washing machine constantly."

"Jesus," I said.

"Anyway, I was having a bit of a cry with myself last night. And I thought it would make me feel better, that I would get it all out of my system. But I was wiping my tears when I looked at the tissue and realised that the stuff, the radiation, would be in my tears as well."

And she laughed, and I tried to laugh too but there was an edge to it. Instead I mumbled reassurances. She seemed to have cheered up a little. I tried to work out when I would see her next. And if she would hug me. And if I should let her kiss me on the cheek.

I said goodbye, glad she was only on the phone. I hung up relieved and hated myself for it.

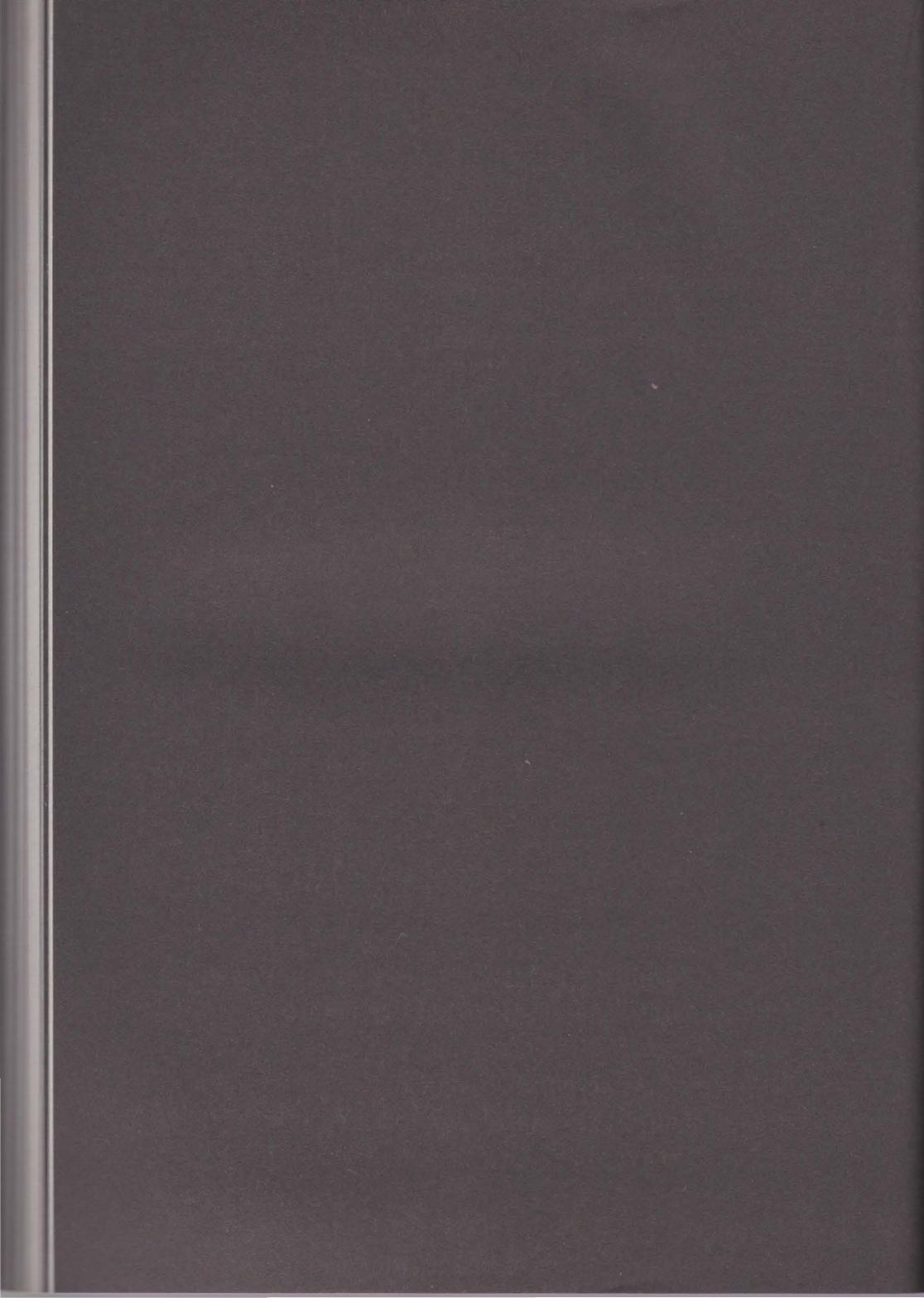
→

I didn't hear much more about it, which either meant she'd stopped telling people her medical updates or that everything was fine. The only thing that changed was that I glared at a labourer next time I went round to her apartment, and I held out my arm to help her walk downstairs. She called me again a few days afterwards though, late at night.

She said, "It hurts just to stay alive." And I knew she was crying even though she took it stoically, silently.

"Oh," I said. "Hey." And tried to think if eighty year olds still got drunk. I thought of her eyes being red from tears and then how they were red-rimmed all the time anyway. She said that she'd stopped sleeping five years ago. I didn't know how much of that I believed. I couldn't think of her at a time when her hair wasn't white. Had I known her then?

"It's just..." she said. "It's just... it's..." I could hear her tears like heavy water. I looked at my watch. It was three a.m. The glow hurt my eyes and briefly made my bedroom feel underwater, alien.



**PERSEPHONE
GOES TO NIGHT
SCHOOL**

**CHLOE
WILSON**

Persephone nervous at first,
at the border, flipping
through her fake IDs –
Proserpina, Kore, Queen.

Persephone dressed in sunglasses
and a headscarf puts her foot
to the floor, ploughs over
the meadows that separate her

from the metropolis. Persephone
rents a one-bedroom flat
where trains shake the walls
and unsettle the crockery. Persephone

shocked at how night is floodlit
in the city. Persephone takes two jobs
at minimum wage – peddling dresses
she could never afford, delivering drinks

while on roller skates. Persephone
queues at the college office,
fills out the forms, pleads her case.
Persephone accepted

into the study of law – its torts,
its damages, the price it extracts.
Persephone relaxes into her advantage –
she's already experienced

with contracts. Persephone attends
all relevant lectures. Persephone anxious
at the end of spring, while she waits
for results to come in. Persephone

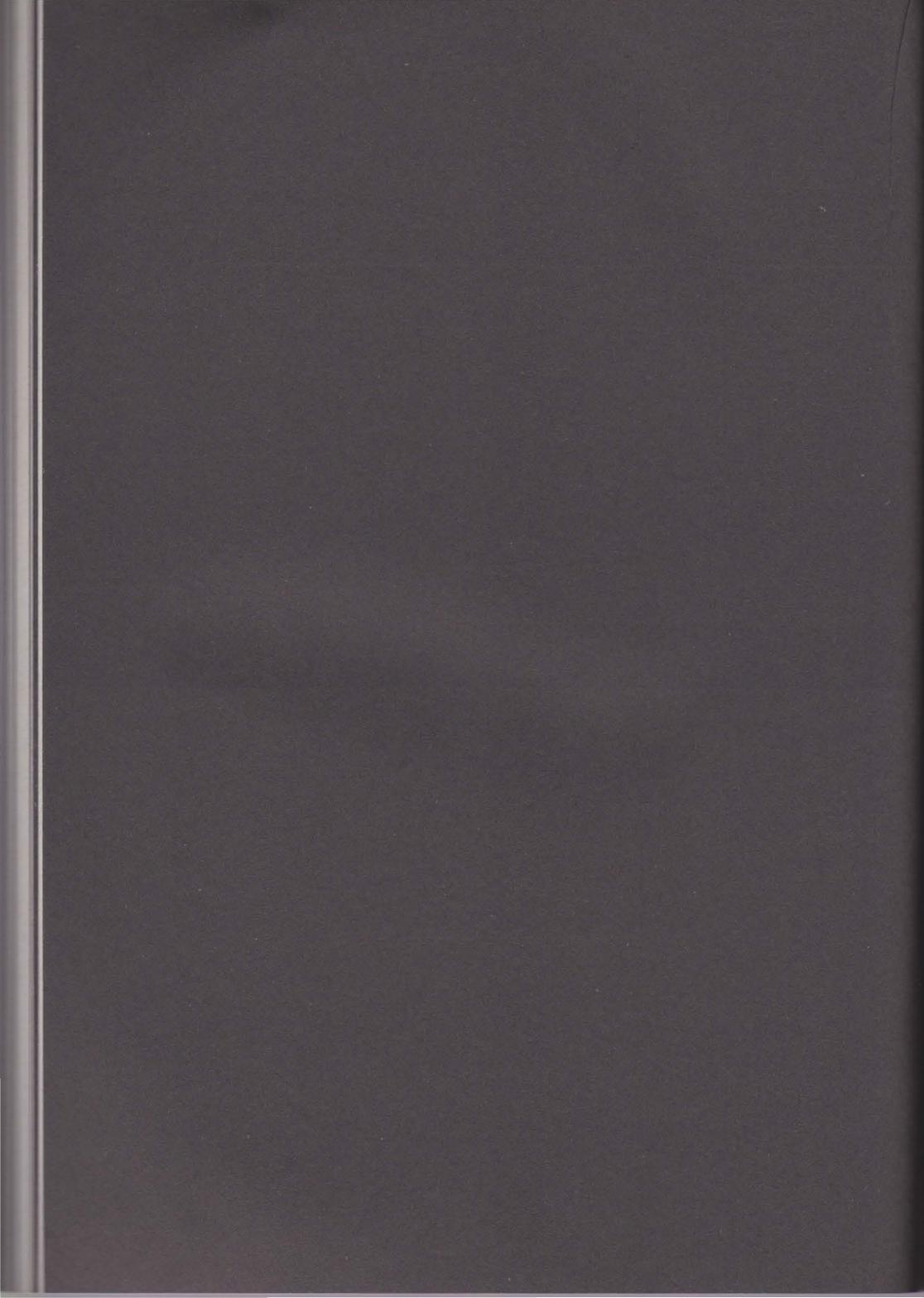
collecting her certificates. Then
it's Persephone in sensible pumps,
Persephone making photocopies, Persephone
covered in papercuts. Persephone

in the office late Friday night
after everyone else has gone home,
the whir of the vacuum cleaner
reminding her of her mother –

what was it she used to say,
you can't exchange one fate
for another. And even later,
in her own chambers, Persephone

is still waiting for Hades –
she has learned that the past
only seethes away
to swarm back in like the tide –

but on her desk next to the annulment
order, see the knife, the flare,
the ten boxes of toothpicks –
this time, she'll be prepared.



THE TRIBES

GEOFF
PAGE



The church is large and Anglican,
filled with those who knew him better:
colleagues, fellow sportsmen,

friends all guaranteed to smile
at witty revelations.

The family up front

is feeling it the most,
three sons and a one-week widow,
his death too early but at least

the biblical allotment.

The eulogies are of a piece:
the rugby games, the keg to follow,

the heady schooldays unforgotten,
stalwart of the Old Boys' Union,
Liberal Party, local branch,

though not the preselection.

The hymns are "pleasing unto God"

The Lord's Prayer is recited

with no one holding back.

They sing 'Jerusalem'

with music by Sir Hubert Parry,

Victorian exemplar,
composer to an Empire.
A world is what they have in common.

Only one year younger than
the man we've come to praise,
I wonder, as his hour goes by,

what happened to my own assumptions.
Rugby was the first to leave,
Third XV instead of First,

the slushy fields, the frozen sky.
The Church of England went more slowly,
its Articles, all Thirty-Nine,

somehow too numerous.
The party of Sir Robert Menzies
departed not long after,

its muscular simplicities
another sort of faith.
The other side was simple too

but had a milder list of givens.
Which maybe was the reason I
sloped off and skipped the sandwiches,

hoping not to be much noticed
although my name was there among
the signed condolences.

Those who saw me walk away
would have their handy explanations –
a bit of pop psychology

to do with chip and shoulder.
All rituals require a tribe –
and, fifty years or so ago,

I found I'd joined another.

KUJIRAGATARI (WHALE STORY)

**JONATHON
LAWRENCE**

**TRANSCRIPT FROM MENTAL DIARY
OF ANOMALY No. 008, SALVAGED FROM
SHIP CLASS AKAGI MARU No. 3.
TRANSLATION STATUS: INCOMPLETE.**

He is covered in the blood and smell of *honyūru*. This is usual. Takeshi-senpai returns to our quarters as I wake, his green work overalls soiled. He says, *I was too tired to bathe today, Ichiro-kun.*

I nod and say, *Takeshi-senpai is often tired. Perhaps they are working him too hard.*

Perhaps they are working us all too hard, he says. He hits me and laughs. His laugh is like a barking, angry *inu*. Takeshi-senpai undresses. He says *Oyasumi* before climbing

into his sleep pod, which is at eye level. Before his shutter closes I see his screen light up and blind his eyes. Takeshi-senpai does not like the screen.

I wait for Yuki-kun to exit the sleeping pod below mine before we walk to the cleansing bay. I follow him down metal corridors which do not rust, and we climb staircases in sync. Our comrades join us, falling into line as they exit their quarters. Each one houses three men: two day workers and one night. Our bare feet slap the catwalk gratings. In the cleansing bay we strip from our bedclothes at our lockers, donning our green work overalls and peaked hats. We make our way to the deck to exercise in rows, as the sun rises off the port side.

Solo piano and instructions from the loudspeakers to breathe deeply, stand up straight, arms by sides. Raise perpendicular *ichi, ni*, return to sides *san, shi*. Twice will get the blood flowing. Bouncing on the balls of the feet, swinging arms in circles, *go, roku*, crossing in front of your body, *shichi, hachi*. Finally, open out your chest, bringing your arms out to port and starboard. *Kaze o kanjiru*, says the announcement. *Itami o mushi*.

Yuki-kun and I maintain and clean the equipment at our starboard work station. I am *daini no mori*. I repeat the mantra, *Bunsekisuru, ii hiraku, utsu*. My job consists of:

- 1— Analyse. Has Yuki-kun successfully made the initial shot? If *mori* has penetrated and tip has exploded, assist reel and net crews.

- 2— Justify. If Yuki-kun has missed his initial shot, or if *mori* has not fully penetrated, validate a second shot.
- 3— Shoot. Harvest the quarry to the best of your ability. If *mori* penetrates and tip explodes, assist reel and net crews. *Bunsekisuru, ii hiraku, utsu.*

Once we have captured the animals, we drag them up the slipway and place them on the blood-letting drain, which periodically lowers into the nocturnal workers' quarters. A team will move them off before raising it again. We spend the day harvesting the quarry. In this way we reap the waves. In this way we capture *kujira*.

→

Today the sun is a dull orb, as bright as the screen above our faces when we sleep, and I miss every shot I have to make. Many of the animals escape, and soon the reel and net crews are mocking me. Yuki-kun simply looks at me with an eyebrow cocked. During a lull in activity he asks, *Why did Ichiro-kun become a sailor?* I cannot think of a response because it is something I have not thought about in a long time, and I cannot get the keening of the whales from my mind. *I do not know why I am here, I say, I cannot remember. Neither do I,* he says, before his eyes light up and I follow his gaze towards a school of *honyūru*. We ready our equipment, and I mutter *Bunsekisuru, ii hiraku, utsu. Feel the wind. Ignore pain.*



I hire a car for the night. Although people in my neighbourhood seldom have reason to drive, it feels right to pick up a date in a car. The girl at the rental place is very knowledgeable. Her favourites are the Toyotas and the Mitsubishi's, and she talks faster around them, her chest rising and falling. They are the only ones she ever ends up renting out. I decide on a plain black sedan. *Simple yet stylish*, the girl says as I sign the paperwork. I know she only says this to make me feel better about myself. As she drops the keys into my palm, she clasps my hand around them and says, *Take good care of me, onegai*.

The car handles well, but it has been a while since I have driven one. My foot feels heavy on the brake. Arriving home, I undress and step into the shower. I shave slowly, taking the time to cut each and every small black hair which has grown on my face. I dress in a light cotton shirt and ironed chinos with brown loafers. As I close the sliding door, I smell spice on the air. It will be a good night.

On the way I drop into a convenience store and pick up a six-pack of beer. *How can I enjoy the orchestra without a little buzz*, she had said. I don't feel the need for it as tonight we are going to listen to Mozart and I want to devote my undivided attention to the music. She is waiting outside her house in a small black dress and navy heels. *Simple yet stylish*, I say as I open her door. She doesn't blush, but hides her face behind her black clutch.

We are driving and she is drinking her second beer. *I feel just like I'm falling forever when I'm drinking while driving*, she says, *like the world has swallowed me whole and left only beer for my brain to marinate in*. She smiles and keeps sipping. The concert hall is further away than I anticipated, but it is of no matter. It feels like we have known each other for years and yet I only met her a few weeks ago, at a bar in Kōtō-ku ward. She had a black bob cut and her eyes were the sea. Now her hair is long and flowing, her tresses gently dabbing at the condensation on her beer can.

After parking, she encourages me to help finish the six-pack. *After all, Ichiro-kun bought it*. I have two cans and she has four, and she stumbles as we climb the stairs to the balcony. We are seated in the concert hall. The orchestra and audience and she and I are waiting for the conductor, and as he walks onto the stage we applaud him for it.

As the violinists raise their bows; as flutes are raised to mouths; as the conductor's baton pierces the air above him; the world flickers and shifts and we are underwater. The orchestra drifts through their movements, yet the strings reverberate, their first notes tentative and drawn out. The drowning violin chorus is undercut by the keening from the choir. Their voices reach my ears... slowly... I hear their cry and the flute's howl and the bass' unwavering thrum and I look over at her and her bob cut is restored by way of her neck being cut through by a man sitting next to her. Her skin is pale and clammy, wrinkling in the water. I look at him and he is covered in the blood and smell of *honyūru*.

→

Today the clouds are a deep grey, reaching over the edges of the ocean like a blanket falling out of a sleeping pod. The sun spears through a cloudy skull, sockets and throats shining. I think I see another ship on the horizon, but that would be impossible. I adjust my green peaked hat and stare at the waves once more and I see it. Yuki-kun sees it too and there is electricity between us. This will be more than *analyse*, *justify*, *shoot*. Challenges are few and far between. He readies himself behind his *mori jū*, mouth in tense lines and brow reaching forward. I watch him for a second as he prepares, and look back at the animal coming up for breath. Scores of harpoons protrude from its dark skin, the shafts slicing the waves as the large tail beats the water. I feel my finger on the trigger, and brace myself for Yuki-kun's attempt. I hear it keening, the pitch so low it rumbles between my ribs.

Both our *mori* pierce the beast, but neither tip explodes. In the aftermath we help the reel and net crews, but need to ask assistance from the other crews on deck. It takes until the sun is peeking from behind a gap between the horizon and the clouds for us to have it on the blood-letting drain, the embedded wood and metal scraping against the slipway on ascent. The droning wail continues, echoing in my head. Never have we captured one alive; they are always dead from our precision and equipment. This one lives.

→

I cannot sleep. I focus on the screen but the keening stays within me and I wake up sweaty, hours early, with slow music in my ears. Salt is on the air as I open the metal door to the deck. It has been so long since I have seen night; the sky is unfamiliar. I have never seen these *hoshi* before, but I see the constellations. There, a warrior, raising a *mori* above his head, ready to strike a school of *kujira* flying through the darkness as easily as they do through water. I stare with my neck bent back.

All I hear now is the sound of wave and wind, giving me a second skin of salt. In this calm nothing, I hear the noise of them. An animal, men, and a barking *inu* laugh. The sound comes from the blood-letting drain, where a light shines below. My bare feet carry me toward it and, lying prone on the cold metal, I peer through the grate.

Through the holes are the shadows of the night workers and another large shape. Each of the three human figures around the larger form holds something in his hands. *Look at this kujira baka*, someone says from below, and I hear a scraping sound and more keening. *A live one*, another voice says, and there is the barking laugh again. I'm sweating, my abdomen twisting, and there is bony creaking as one of the shadows raises an instrument. The wail is constant, thrumming through my chest. *Oyasumi, kujira*, a familiar voice spits and I see a *mori* thrust forward with a thud. I leave my body behind as I run back to the deck door, slamming it.

→

We are walking down an alley in the entertainment district of Kōtō-ku ward. Fluorescent signs advertising restaurants, theatres and bars armour the buildings; buildings that stretch so high above us that they almost touch at the top. My vision is blurring. Takeshi-senpai says, *Didn't think they'd let you in did you*, and I must smile because he smiles back. *Perks of the job*, he says, before leading me into another bar. As I drink more and more, Takeshi-senpai simply sits and smokes. We go from bar to bar, chatting up women, eating food. We live a bit.

Outside a bar we are face to face with a group of girls, all senior high-school students. They point Polaroid cameras at us, asking, *Could we get a few photos, onegai?* Takeshi-senpai grabs me around the shoulder and draws me in, smiling and laughing his barking laugh.

I ask, *Why would they want photos of us?*

He says, *Don't you remember, Ichiro-kun? Today was the selection.*

I say, *Selection?* All the signs in the street flash and morph and read *ikari no hi* and I remember what today was; a day of wrath.

We are shin-ningen, he says.

New humans, I repeat.

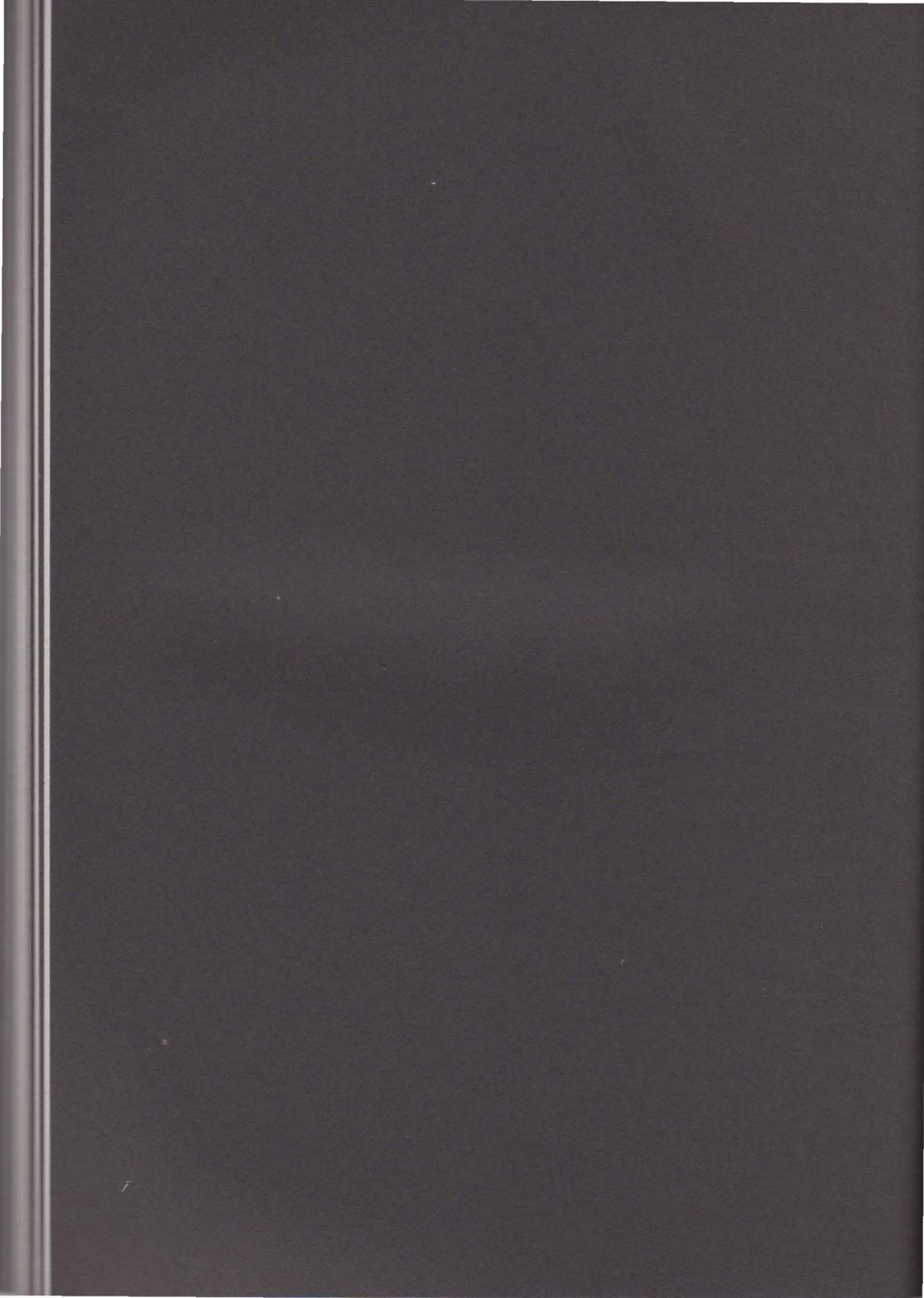
Takeshi-senpai shakes the film and shows me the photo. In it I see him smiling, but his wool jumper is stained a deep rose and his eyes and throat have been cut out, leaving muscle behind. My image in the photo flickers, and there are suddenly more of me, and more, until the whole background

is me. Then Takeshi-senpai shakes it again and we are captured arm in arm, and we are friends.

→

I run back to our quarters, rummaging through the mirrored cabinet across from the sleeping pods where Yuki-kun rests behind his shutter. I find my straight razor. My feet slap the gratings as I open infinite doors below deck, a wail piercing my sternum, my ears. In the nocturnal area Takeshi-senpai has his back to me. He stands next to the animal I caught with Yuki-kun. One of its eyes faces me; through it is a harpoon. Dark lines streak its already dark body. A slit runs down where a human throat would be. The other two shadows are not here. Takeshi-senpai hacks at the beast's baleen with a bone-saw, placing it in a metal crate beside him. The fluorescent lighting reflects in the blood. I walk over, warmth gelling between my toes. He doesn't hear me. He continues hacking and I begin.

In the dream I can't tell the difference between the night sky and the ocean, but as I drift further and further lights start disappearing and I am one with ghosts.



**AHAB'S CREW
LOOK FOR
THE WHALE
THAT
SWALLOWED
GOD
ALMIGHTY**

**GREGORY
HORNE**



Finding silences in the liturgy, seamen
look out over the linen sea and pray
wholeheartedly to see something from legend.
As they toil at rough lines, spray
from an uncaring Southern Ocean portends
the end of days. At least they are in agreement.
But the wisest, least literate heathen among the men
jabs fresh ink into tattooed maps of faded grey.
Kātahi nā ka tika! Your god is sunk but you're still here.
He laughs and throws his absurd harpoon
clean through the green of the very next day.

**HELL ON
A
LONG DART**

**ALISON
FINN**

Essay

IF THEY'RE OLD ENOUGH, most towns have a trade. An industry that, constructed in service of a community and having given it work and wealth, is now itself served by the place's romance with its own history. You would have seen maps or globes that represent each location with a cartoon icon, as if you would find nothing there but a monstrously large sheep, or pick-axe, or spool of yarn.

A whaling town owns a trade like no other, and having now only the ghost of an abattoir, retains all of an abattoir's ghostly pall. The closure in 1978 of the last whaling station in Australia, at Frenchman's Bay, shuffled off an industrial fossil: an archaism with equipment and methods barely adapted over three centuries. The bay is at the end-point of Western Australia, where the Southern Ocean begins to

unroll itself over the underside of the globe, where the country's brink bobs inward, as if for breath, before making a caracole towards its eastern states. It is part of a larger natural harbour, the King George Sound, host to the inaugural British visit to the state, when George Vancouver formed his first poor impressions of the strand.

It is a fierce coastline, despite the calm climate. The white, white sand that marks the crescent of the bay is the kind that squeals under bare feet, and its clinging scrub is spiny and useless. The ocean scours the shore. Ribbons of dry seaweed build papery embankments on the beach, blown by a wind that whistles in the windows of houses set back from the rising cliffs. These houses have emerged by stealth, as mushrooms bloom in autumn soil while an upturned face yet expects the sun. At a distance from the beach, the bay's scraggy flora becomes a repertory of reeds, grasses and shrubs, all parted and tunnelled by the passage of rabbits and snakes. All is worn, salt-smooth, all expressing struggle rather than symbiosis.

Soon after settlement, the whaling ships arrived. Melville wrote in *Moby Dick*:

That great America on the other side of the sphere, Australia, was given to the enlightened world by the whaleman. After its first blunder-born discovery by a Dutchman, all other ships long shunned those shores as pestiferously barbarous; but the whale ship touched there. The whale ship is the true mother of that now

mighty colony. Moreover, in the infancy of the first Australian settlement, the emigrants were several times saved from starvation by the benevolent biscuit of the whale ship, luckily dropping an anchor in their waters.

By other accounts, the whalers visiting Frenchman's Bay in those early years, mostly Norwegians, made a rowdy crew whose benevolence extended to aiding the escape of convicts from the colony. The whaling station abutted the craggy eastern cusp of the bay, where a broad wooden platform stood on raised supports and extended over and into the water, sloping downward like a sinking pier.

Unlike the extended deep-sea whaling voyage of Melville's record, the whalers of this station hunted only across the continental shelf, thirty or forty kilometres offshore, returning nightly to haul their catch, each monumental slumbering pod, up the platform with steam winches. Bay whaling is often assumed to have been an invention of Australasian whalers, but there is ample history of a similar process in the Bay of Biscay from the ninth to eleventh centuries, using the unique Basque system of whale-spotting from tall towers built around the shore from Bilbao to Bayonne.

The hunt would begin just after daylight in the mornings between March and December, when the cold is sharp and still and shocks like a drink taken neat. Rabbits, purple-grey on the gleaming dunes at this hour, diligently harass the scrawny grass. Everything bristles in the early thaw. A whale chaser would go just over thirty metres long and

about six metres beam: a long and narrow vessel unusually high at bow and low at stern. Its forecabin was elevated in service of a raised gun, replacing the hand-hauled lances Melville observed, and which was the only significant innovation to occur in the craft over time. Even its efficiency was limited since the gun's harpoon, crowned with four fearsome barbs, was the size of a tall man and made of heavy iron, and couldn't be pitched more than twenty metres with any accuracy. At the centre of its fishhooked fountainhead, the newer weapon had a pointed screw-on cap holding an egg of black gunpowder. Steaming out from her inlet moor, a chaser would head towards the ocean shelf, where the bottom drops out of the earth and the sperm whale slinks in deeper, colder waters.

Spotting a whale – a job done by a man in a tub on the mast – requires all the alertness of regular fishing, but instead of staring fixedly at a float or fly, mesmerised with the possibility of tiny movement, a spotter needed to take in the emptiness of entire horizons. He was waiting for a sleek dark whaleback in the water, an inky wave moving amongst the others. A whale is only marginally easier to spot if she spouts, her short exhalation of whitish vapour dissipating quickly into the sea air, especially on a foggy day. The other signs are the whitewash of her breach, and her glip – the oily pool emitted before her descent.

When a whale was spotted, the ship would whip around and steam in the quarry's direction. Anyone who has been on the sea knows the sensation of a fast-moving vessel: the suddenness with which you become acutely aware of every

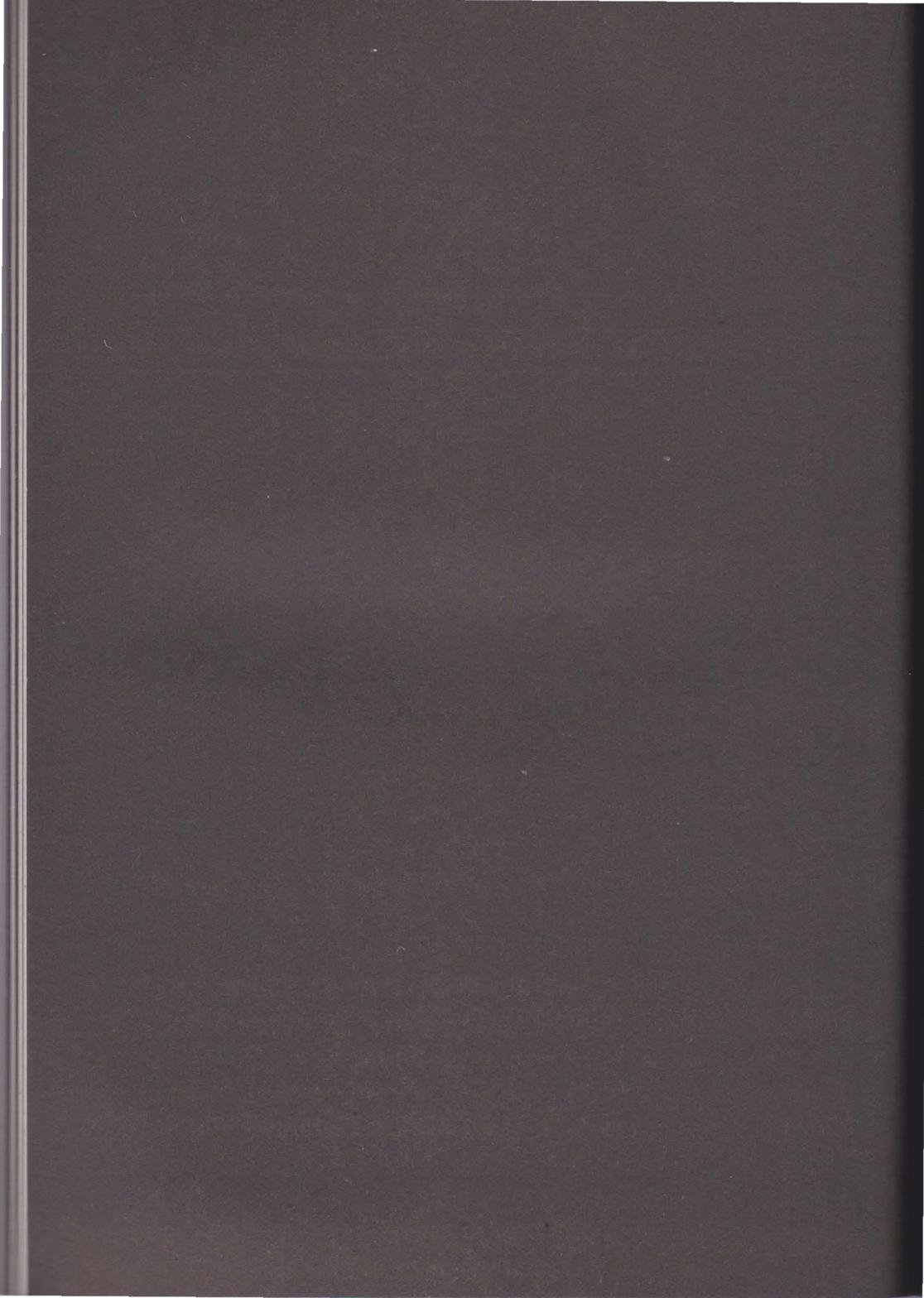
exposed part of skin, as if the wind might at any moment remove it. The chaser would course over the water, vigilant for the next emergence. The shorter a whale's time at the surface, the sooner her next appearance, until finally she'd rear close enough to the boat and the harpoon would fire, trailing a serpent of thick rope. This massive spool held two dangers: a whaler could be embraced by a coil in an instant, hoisting him overboard or severing a limb; while its break-neck unravelling around the loggerhead created such friction that crewmen had to wet the timber to keep it from bursting into flames.

Affixed to an iron needle, the animal would often sound – flukes up, diving horizontally in a dark column of whale hundreds of metres down. But sometimes she'd swim skittishly through the water, like hell on a long dart. There followed a flurry, an excited churning of the sea by the wounded creature, streaming scarlet at the spiracle, succumbing to death in a showy revolution that would reveal an unblemished white underside to her spectators. Dead, she would be hoisted to the bows of the chaser tail-first, as any fisherman or woman holds their catch aloft. A chain was passed around the narrowest part of the flipper for the flukes to be cut off, unhinging like car doors. The whale's belly was pumped with air, as a butcher would inflate a scorched pig's bladder for a football in the early years of the game. Finally the giant balloon would be set adrift, marked with the chaser's flag to be picked up on return to the whaling station.

The bodies were processed for a catalogue of uses that to a modern view are sad fripperies. The bony plates of a baleen whale's cartoon smile became the fractured architecture of parasols and corsets. The sperm whale's bulbous head, ugly as an oyster shell, was full of a liquid wax that made candles, soaps, polish, cosmetic creams and ointments. Ambergris, for centuries a potent fixative for perfumes, has its incongruous origin as a black slime that congeals around indigestible squid beaks. These precious elements aside, the creature was mostly reduced to oil and stockfeed. In the late 1970s, when outmoded products no longer justified the near extinction of the species along the southern coast, Albany's outpost packed it in, folding its long steel barbs back into shore.

The foundation of the old station are still visible on the beach at Frenchman's Bay, and the landscape isn't sunny enough to allay their eerie aspect. A museum operates out of there now, running whale-watching cruises for tourists. You might think that the global movement to protect the animal represents a reversal of prevailing attitudes at the time of whaling, but it doesn't seem that way. In the stories of Australian hunters, truly or not-so-truly told, you hear a deep reverence for their prey, and no small degree of wonderment. The two commercial realities of their time, whale hunting and whale conservation, tessellate; the one appears to unfold from the other. Now out on the rocks of the bay, vacationers haul in the occasional twitching, translucent squid. The squids blush, vomiting black ink, and are carried away by their tentacles in a dangling bouquet of bruises.

o
n
y
r
n
l
y
s
l



**THE WILL
OF
WATER**

(COCOS KEELING ISLANDS)

**RENEE
SCHIPP**

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

*When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.*

– Rumi

Out beyond the reef
beyond the horizon, beyond
the breakers
there is a space
that will break
that will break, that will
unmake you

out beyond the breakers
beyond borders, tankers
customs, freighters
out beyond sight and the light
of conscience

hear the timbre of strain
sing a low song
this vessel was never meant
to contain
such weight

out in the middle of
we will decide who comes
and the thick of the circumstances
every fear
of each imagined ending
will engulf you, for
we are a land that will not
a line that will not
a law that will not
give

out where mothers
are grasping for children's limbs
we are losing patience with pity, turn away
we will not witness, it will not stick
for we did not see
heard no screams
let me wash my hands in the
they are not my deeds in the
I know nothing of the
will of water

out beyond the ocean
and all its undoing
you had a dream. I will meet you there
for when life is at last allowed its living
the world will be too full
to write about

**THE MOST
NORTHERN
SOUTHERN
CITY**

**KAVITA
BEDFORD**

WE MOVED TO BALTIMORE the year the Ravens won the Superbowl. The city was decked out in purple. People screamed and cheered in the rain-slicked streets. Every conversation began with “Can you believe it?”

I was fourteen when my mother was offered a job at John Hopkins University. The long scorching Sydney summer that loomed ahead was swiftly replaced by this Gotham City with a raven-shaped saviour. People told us constantly that Baltimore was the most northern Southern city in the United States. Others would correct them: “No, it’s the southernmost Northern city.” Looking up Maryland on a great colourful map of America before we left, I couldn’t work this out. Only later did I realise they were referring to a sensibility. It was a city that prided itself on voting Democrat and looking to the

East Coast. But the Old South still lingered in the air. Food critics praised cosmopolitan Baltimore while people flocked to diners advertising hog maws and chitterlings. Confederates and Unionists mixed. I learnt the word 'segregation' in Baltimore, its hardened syllables heavy in my mouth.

Everything in Baltimore seemed to be called Charles. The apartment was on loan from Charles, an anthropology professor on sabbatical. It was crammed with carved masks, Mexican weaves, and photographs of a tall red-haired man in exotic locations, beaming in grass skirts and other local attire. Our new home was Charles Village, advertised as the bohemian hub, a convenient distance to John Hopkins and downtown. In reality though, we lived on the cusp of a divided city. The parameters were laid out using Charles Street as the major corridor. Here it was determined if you fell into the category of east or west, north or south. Inner Harborplace was a sparkling seaport in the arm of Chesapeake Bay, selling crab cakes and souvenir tea towels. It had been the third largest port for European immigration to the US. Nearby was downtown: derelict warehouses, crime rates, assault; one more place you just didn't go, according to the girls at school.

The houses swelled in size as you travelled up St Paul Street toward the Northern District. The row houses of Charles Village gave way to palatial white properties with smooth lawns and wide driveways. Cypress trees lined the avenues. Months later, a schoolmate would invite me to one of these palaces; they had phones on each landing in case

you needed to talk to a family member in the other wing. Driving home in her SUV, she became agitated as we crossed a block and drove through West Baltimore towards my apartment. “Lock the doors,” she said. I kept talking. “I’m serious,” she screamed. “Lock the doors!”

Wherever we’d moved around Australia, there had always been backyards. Flat green suburban plots of land for cricket; sharing an inner-city fence with our Greek neighbours’ shouts and passionfruit vines. Sprinklers churned in the summer, children shrieking between the jets. Hot-pressed jacaranda underfoot, a blazing trail of purple. Backyards that plunged into open gullies. Here, in the apartment, the sounds of the neighbours bled into the walls. The scrape of furniture from the young couple upstairs, the coughs of the Pakistani man next door, the squeak of the main door. Despite our proximity, a quick nod or cursory glance on the stairwell was all that acknowledged it. The winter trees were bare, the rooms dim and cold. Across the hall was the cat lady, Phyllis. A padding of bedroom slippers and the wet sour smell of her pets signalled her arrival. When I first saw her, in the laundry room, she gave a loose, lopsided smile that hinted at senility. Two cats, eyes shining, weaved around her legs. I stuffed clothes into our basket and pushed past as hurriedly as any of our neighbours.

→

I started school a week after arriving. Some of the Indian side of my family were scattered across the States, and pleaded with my mum long-distance to put me into private school. They belonged to a generation who had up and left India, taking their doctorates and credentials to gain better jobs in the States. “But we always support public school systems,” my mum had furiously argued. My school in Sydney was on Parramatta Road wedged between Rick Damelian car dealerships. Banners screaming ‘Howard, stop the aircraft noise’ hung from unused football posts. Petitions demanding school funding were passed out at the gates. The school prefects were twins who wore pleather miniskirts and listened to grunge. My parents had chosen my school based on a rousing socialist speech from the principal on open day. “It’s different here,” said my mum’s cousin over the phone. “You can’t let her go to those schools. It’s Baltimore.”

The principal at Roland Park Country Girls was a polished, glamorous woman. Her office had a Dalmatian lying out the front. A sign by a lolly jar said, ‘Take one, and remember: these doors are always open.’ She was accommodating and intimidating. My mother explained we didn’t have a car and asked about a school bus route. “We don’t have a bus,” the principal coolly replied. “We do have a car-pooling system here amongst the parents. I’m sure we can manage something. Where are you living?”

“Charles Village.”

Her eyebrows rose ever so slightly, but she didn’t miss a beat. She patted her ash-blonde bob.

“I’ll ask around.”

It was arranged that one parent could give me lifts until I got my bearings. “Unfortunately,” the principal told us later over the phone, “you are not on the routes of any of the students that attend Roland Park.”

→

On the first day of school I was allocated a guide. A girl with dishevelled pig tails and tracksuit pants under her skirt bounded up. She smiled through the principal’s introduction. Sarah was the captain of the hockey team. She was on the student representative council. She belonged to the Christian choir. “Sorry you had to get me,” she said seriously. “I’m not the best to show you around.” I wasn’t sure what to say. “I’m pretty cynical, you know,” she explained. “I lack school spirit.” She cheerfully greeted a passing teacher by first name, following up with a high five. “That’s our English teacher,” said Sarah. “She’s rad.”

It turned out everyone, cynical or not, gave high fives at this school.

I got immediate attention for being Australian, drawing the glares of a girl from previously exotic New York. At lunch I was given a chair to sit on as twenty sophomore girls sat on the ground firing questions about my country.

“I watched a documentary about opals. Is it true you live in caves?”

“Have you ever worn koala bear droppings as earrings?”

“Is it true people can ride kangaroos?”

“You’re so lucky. Is everyone in Australia as tanned as you?” I explained my mum was Indian. “Oh. But you look like, white. But tanned.” I explained my father was Anglo-Australian.

Looking around my new cohort, I was perplexed to notice I was the only non-white girl. Not that I’d never noticed my ethnicity in Australia – far from it. It just wasn’t mentioned. In Sydney, I would watch girls with shiny blonde ponytails at ease in the sun, and wish I looked more like them. I hated curls and oily brown skin. I would roll my eyes on shopping trips with girlfriends testing out Maybelline’s latest products in their white skin range. “Maybe she’s born with it,” we would sing. And I dreaded the weekend trips to the temple when it felt like everyone else on the continent was at the beach. In Australia, race was the undertow, a dangerous rip in our sparkling Pacific waters and beachside playgrounds. Growing up, you learnt how to read the currents. At the beach you’d see foreigners who couldn’t read the signs, lying coughing and confused on the sand, hauled out by lifesavers proud and colourful as parrots in their red and yellow plumage. In outback pubs a silent apartheid saw Aboriginal and white people drink in separate quarters. The summer I left, the *Tampa* dominated politics. Kids called each other ‘queue jumpers’ in the school canteen, while adults spoke only of sovereignty and security. At home we squinted our eyes, hoping the colours would blur, hoping the heat haze would make them disappear.

In Baltimore, race was articulated daily. People referred to each other as white or brown or black. “Just play the race card,” said a white classmate when I mentioned applying for a scholarship. “Rhonda and Angel are doing it.” On the scholarship form a list of boxes read: Hispanic, African-American, Native American, Asian and Other. I uneasily ticked the latter. Rhonda and Angel were the only two African-American girls in the year. Angel’s black hair had gone stiff from chemical straightening. Shops lined the streets downtown offering artificial straightening, plaiting and bleaching. A harsh, burning smell spilled from their windows. Rhonda was still saving for the treatment. She pulled her hair back tight, trying to harness the heaven-bound springs.

Miscegenation laws in the States previously required the legal system to define racial categories. Anyone with so much as an eighth of black ancestry was classified ‘negro’. Having one black great-grandparent made you black, but seven white ones couldn’t make you white. Decades later, Barack Obama was heralded as America’s first black President, but has never been called its forty-fourth white one. In this world, you could have one identity. Jew or Catholic. Tutsi or Hutu. Australian or Indian. Never both. A few years before I arrived, attorney Lani Gunier was President Clinton’s nominee to head the civil rights division at the Department of Justice. She described herself as black, but the *New York Times* said half-black. Was race cultural or biological? How, people asked, can the same person be black and half-black? In algebra, when $x = \frac{1}{2} x$, there is only one solution. Zero.



Half the girls at school had eating problems. Looking at the cafeteria, you understood why. Big doughy bagels, pizza bulging with yellow cheese, trays filled with options of fried or fried. The girls would walk past that selection, settling for a tub of yoghurt or nothing. After school, starving, I would buy sushi at the Japanese restaurant near home. It was always empty, the chefs busy prepping for the evenings, long knives quivering as perfectly sliced salmon was placed in a container. Not a word was spoken. As I rattled my keys I could feel the cats stiffen behind Phyllis' door. "What is it, babies?" she would say from inside. I imagined dozens of glassy green eyes turning my way, and rushed to get into the apartment.

With mum working until six each evening I always had a few hours alone. One afternoon I took my camera out for a photography assignment. It had just started to snow, light flakes that dissolved at the touch. Like magic. I walked past the brownstone houses, past the Charles Street corridor, into an alleyway scattered with garbage bins. As I crouched to take a photo, a man loomed over me, his grizzled beard flecked with white. "What are you doing, girl?" he yelled. A brick wall blocked off the lane. He looked like he was going to hit me. I flinched. "I don't care," he said. "It's too dangerous to be wandering around. It's Baltimore. Get inside now."

One weekend my mother and I visited the Museum of Maryland African-American History and Culture. "Schools were segregated in Baltimore until the 1950s," a plaque read –

that word again. After that time schools were still ‘districted’, essentially maintaining segregation, as students could only attend schools near their homes. Roland Park was one of the first planned suburbs. In the 1900s homeowners were forced to sign a contract that barred blacks – and later Jews – from owning houses in the area. *The Baltimore Sun* ran editorials supporting the zoning and all it implied: “A city built on tradition and civic pride, Baltimore is an American success story.” But the museum related that Maryland was a slave state. I couldn’t shake the idea. I would repeat it to myself before I went to bed. A slave state. Was this the same as Australia with its convicts? There were no indigenous kids in my school at home, was that any different? We had learnt about the broken bodies in the Australian bush thrown over the bridge at Myall Creek. Was all this part of that silent undertow?

The following Monday, I read back through Baltimore’s history. Back to the race riots. As I sat on the mottled green library carpet I began to picture it. A spring afternoon. The first shoots of green on the dogwood and maple trees. Some people crying. Others in shock. Many are tired, the kind of fatigue that starts at the skin but has gone on so long it has permeated their bodies, it now even shapes the way they walk. It is 1968 and Martin Luther King has been killed in Memphis. The memorial service ends. People walking back to their cars are stunned, but an anger stirs. Years of being patronised: “the attitude of an average Baltimorean toward colored people is one of helpfulness,” says the *Sun*. Traffic starts piling up. Horns build. Frustration mounts.

At five o'clock the first window is smashed by a young man at a hat shop in Gay Street, in the east district. Two hours later, hands bunched in ripped rags grab for things: those recorded in the papers, like clothes and jewellery and liquor; and those that aren't, like dignity and control. Young people throw stones at uniforms. The cops yell warnings about broken glass. The air has thinned. Flames are blazing. By nine a man described as a looter is shot dead in a bar on Lafayette Avenue. The city is polarised.

That afternoon we had a fortnightly class called Issues. Without a hint of irony, we were asked about our problems. One by one, each girl got something off her chest. Too much homework, family life was messed up, Libby was a bitch, boys were awful. All was divulged in earnest as the teacher nodded sympathetically. "Are you having any issues settling into Baltimore?" she asked when she got to me. My Australian skin crawled. Segregation. Adult and heavy. I shook my head.

→

At the end of the month the shiny car-pool mother picked me up for the final time. From now, Route 61's public bus would take me home. At school, Alexis was the queen bee. She was confident, spoke with authority, and shopped exclusively at Gap.

"You can't catch the bus," she said, more command than statement.

"Don't you know anything?" Kendell played backup.

“A man who was convicted of rape rides Route 61.” For her this was just another game, she liked creating drama. But the other girls were sincere, and their conviction began to spook me.

“Oh my god. Seriously, a paedophile used to get on that bus.”

“Do you have mace?”

“Or what about a gun? You have to get real.”

For the rest of the day, notes were swapped between class plotting how I could protect myself. It reached fever pitch. I locked myself in the toilets, sobbing. It was before the days of schoolkids with mobiles. I didn’t want to disturb my mother, and there was nothing she could do anyway. She would just have to ride that same bus with me – and then, I thought dramatically, we’ll both be dead.

After school the girls waved to me, eyes downcast. I was already condemned. I waited at the patch of grass down the road that was meant to be the bus stop. It had no signpost. The bus crawled up. Everything went still. The doors swung open. I hesitated. The bus driver yelled, her lilting accent punching out staccato words. “Hurry up and get in,” my mind eventually translated. The air snapped back, elastic. I splayed my house keys between my knuckles and climbed up.

It was only years later, when *The Wire* came out, that it was suddenly cool to Australians that I’d lived in Baltimore. At the time it had been the twelfth most dangerous city in the States. Omar and Stringer Bell had my friends relishing that reputation.

“Did they call each other playboy?”

“Was it violent, muthafucka?”

“Was it racist?”

The day of the bus trip, I walked into the apartment building sobbing. I could hear the cats scuffling and mewling. Phyllis opened her door and gently ushered me into her apartment. I was too upset to protest. Newspaper lined the floors. Multi-coloured plastic dishes clung to remnants of canned fish. The same sour smell filled the air. Pellets scattered the shores of her kitchen. She put something in my hands. I stared down. She had brought me a saucer of milk.

“Don’t cry. Sit down.” Her house was crammed with books, spines jutting out of the cases at odd angles like the ribs of a carcass. I looked at the pile next to me. *The Raven* sat on top. “That’s by Edgar Allan Poe. Do you know him?” I shook my head. “He’s a famous Baltimorean. Here.” She pushed it into my free hand. “You can borrow it.” Phyllis’ hand was still touching mine. She looked at me gently and her concern made me want to cry again. “What’s wrong?” And I thought about how the bus had been filled with schoolkids. Just kids. Most were younger than me. All from the public school down the road, across one of the hidden lines in Baltimore. Everyone on that bus had been black or Hispanic. And how Angel and Rhonda had been there, rolling their eyes at what the other girls had told me.

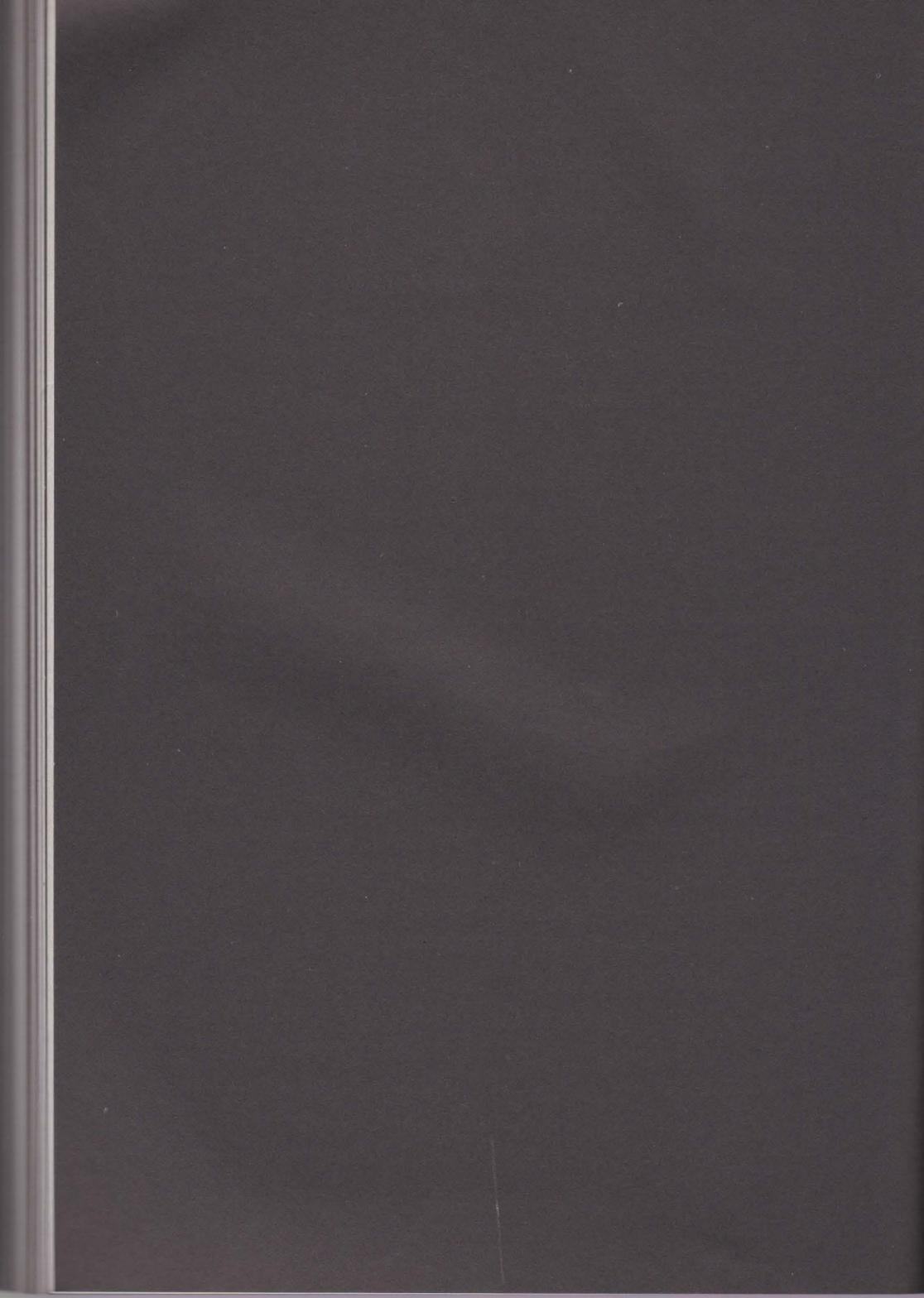
“We caught this bus our whole lives. We just don’t tell them. Anyway, you brown.”

I had looked aghast.

“You get used to it,” Rhonda had laughed. “Haven’t you heard?”

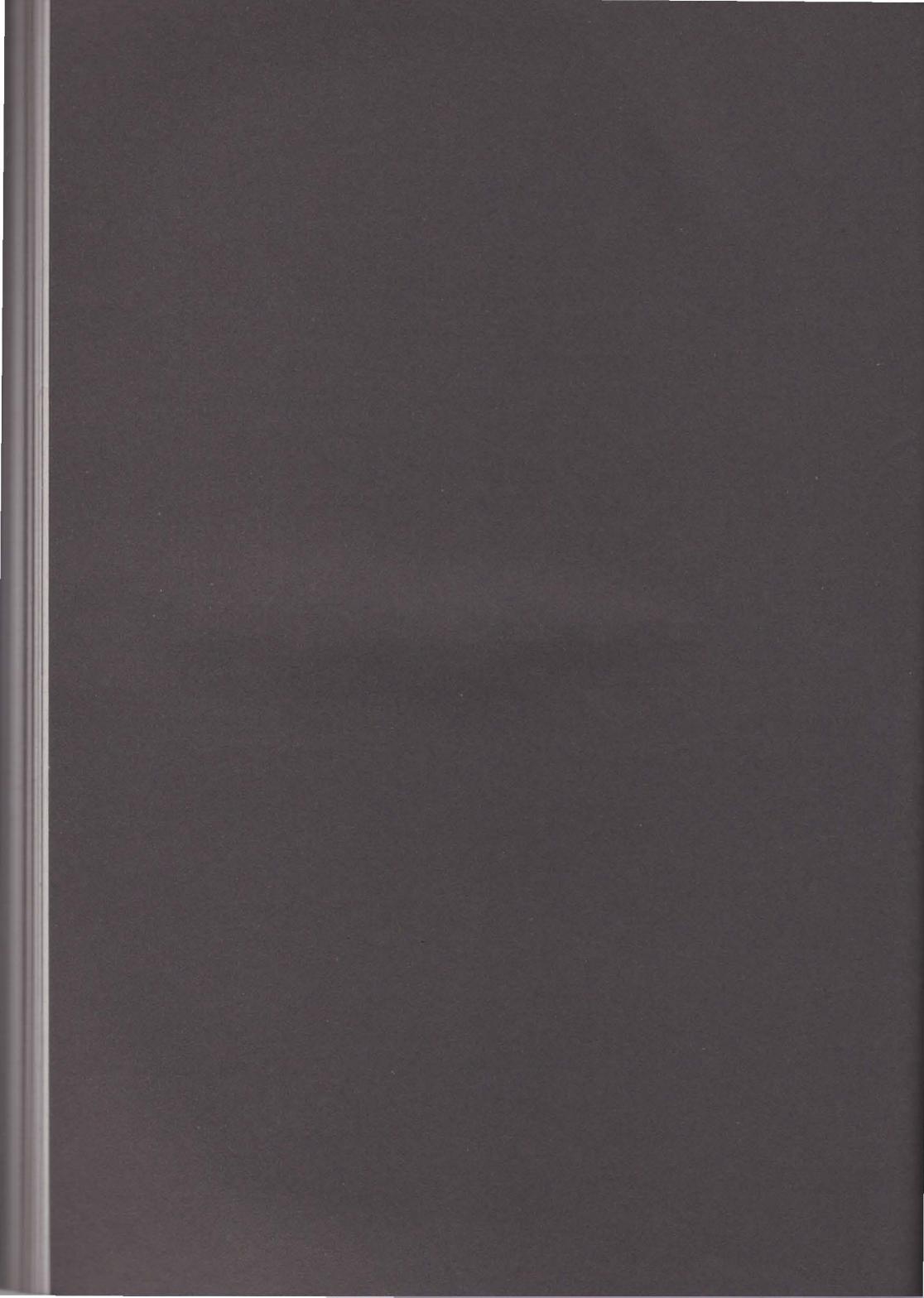
And how I’d asked for the first time about the divisions in this place. “It’s a confused town,” Angel had shrugged, pulling me down onto the seat next to her. “You know what they say. The most northern Southern city.”

“And the southernmost Northern city.”



MONOPOLY

ERIC PAUL
SHAFFER



Monopoly is a game for winners, not artless players like me. I rolled dice without thought or plan, aiming for exotic places like Oriental Avenue, which I would fail to purchase. I spent money and turns and favours on elegant gestures, like owning all the red avenues of Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, ignoring the opportunities where I landed. Or buying both utilities instead of keeping one eye on the market and the other on my cash, or bargaining for all four railroads. Not once did I win. Years later, my brother revealed he'd stolen thousands from the bank. That didn't surprise me since he was, in those days, a kid. What did was his barely repressed glee at his success in thievery and his joy in the undetected crimes.

On that board, I spent an age as short as a lifetime, circling the same square block on the same streets with only a thimble and a Scottish terrier as companions. I paid the rising rents to those who purchased first, income tax on the square I never missed, and luxury tax right before I got paid. Later, I watched stunned as cute, green neighborhoods fell to ranks of red hotels, and my cash dwindled to thin bills of yellow, pink, and white. I ended penniless and amazed, with one shoe and no direction, in the middle of a street of strangers,

one roll too far from another payday, sunk and glum beyond the smirk of prosperity, lost, mystified, and three bills from broke, counting the last of my cash into my brother's hand.

**WHEN IT
WAS COLD BUT
NOT
TOO COLD**

**OLIVER
MOL**

AT FIVE FORTY-FIVE AM, ALLEN WOKE UP on his sixty-fourth birthday, drove to Big Bear Ski Lodge and walked into the Lift Operations Meeting Room like he had every morning for the past thirty years, except he walked slower than had previously because his knees were hurting, which was something he didn't want the front-of-house staff knowing, the front-of-house staff who were always 'chatty', who would just love to mention to the mountain's new CEO Jade Julie that the dinosaur was looking tired, or might snap a picture of him mid-stride and upload it to some internet site where they would change his body to that of a dead sloth and send it to Jade Julie who would laugh, because he knew you could do that, the body change thing. He had seen a five year old staring at a menu in the mountain's new coffee shop where

no one remembered his name or offered filtered coffee for \$1.50 a cup but made lattes and soy cappuccinos for \$4.80, this little five year old trying to do something vaguely magical to the menu with his fingers, dragging them from the middle to the corners and then bursting into tears when nothing happened, his mother replacing the menu with some computer device, the kid tapping something and then enlarging a picture of an old man whose body had been replaced with a dead sloth. So Allen had walked confidently past the front-of-house staff, trying to disguise his grimace as a smile, even winking, but then turning his head as his wink kept on winking, a side effect of the prescription his doctor had given for his knees and other joints that now felt like concrete trying to unset inside his body.

Allen stared at the twelve young people sitting in front of him, at their blue staff jackets which the mountain had commissioned from Helsinki, a company who, as far as Allen was concerned, valued fashion over functionality, and he thought, Why does a jacket need so many damn pockets? He bet if he pulled one of the zippers the whole Helsinki ski jacket would unravel, and then who would be ‘cool’ when they were standing topless helping people onto lifts during a snowstorm when it was minus thirty outside not factoring wind chill? Probably Henry, Allen thought, Henry with his stupid beanie more than halfway off his head that barely protected his scalp let alone his ears.

Allen cleared his throat and tried to say “Good morning” except his mouth was too dry and it came out

as “Goachhh mor—”. The lift operators ignored him. Allen watched Henry chat up Susan, who was blonde and whose figure was accentuated by the slim design of her new Helsinki ski jacket, a girl who reminded Allen of Linda, his ex-wife. Allen stared at the whiteboard and recalled meeting Linda fifteen years ago at the beginning of spring when it was cold but not too cold to go on a snow hike when just enough snow had melted, where Allen had thrown a picnic blanket over a somewhat grassy area and said, “Let’s share the blanket,” before removing a single coffee cup and saying, “and a coffee cup.” He had smiled in a way that meant “Look at us sharing things. I want to share my life with you. We are drinking out of the same coffee cup. I love you.” Except he did not say any of those things. It was too early, probably, so they just sat watching skiers fly off jumps and land on some part of the mountain they couldn’t see.

Allen turned and went to his desk to search for his meds. He took two and put the rest back in the top drawer. He stared at his mostly receded hairline in the window for a while. He could make out Henry behind him and he thought, I used to be like you. Then he thought, No I didn’t. He wanted to fire Henry. Except he couldn’t fire Henry, not since Jade Julie had taken over the mountain, had specifically told Allen that any changes to the “daily schedule” were to be run by her first. Apparently Allen was “on thin ice”. This was something Jade Julie had said. She had said, “You’re on thin ice, Allen,” after Allen had muddled up the lift roster days, reading the new Excel spreadsheet vertically instead

of horizontally, and had placed his entire staff on the same run, delaying opening times and causing complaints, the mountain losing some amount of money that Jade Julie had probably made up. Then there was the skidoo he had crashed and the loss of licence thing but that wasn't even his fault, mostly. You wouldn't do that, Allen had thought when Jade Julie had said she would fire him if he ever so much as sat on a skidoo again. Except she would. Allen knew she would. But fire Allen? More like, fire Henry. Then maybe he could acquire some life experience like Allen had known, like when he broke his ankle working in a warehouse for less than minimum wage at sixteen and met his girlfriend who had worked at the bakery that he crutched to every morning, who had given him discounts on custard tarts and sultana bread.

Allen looked at the lift roster and noticed he had put Susan and Henry on Speeder's Run, the furthest lift, the one down by the woods that wasn't visited much, or at least not as much as when he had started, when people weren't afraid of a little adventure or even misadventure, before the mountain had developed an iPhone app that showed you exactly how to find each run, that analysed the sun, wind and snow factors and came up with a ! where the fresh, safety-checked powder was. He scratched Henry from Speeder's Run and replaced him with James, a shy boy with a stutter.

Allen sipped some water and walked to the front of the room. He cleared his throat. They were midway through the season and where once Allen had been shown great respect – for example people had called him 'Sir', they had said "Sir,

do you mind if I quickly go to the bathroom? I know I'm late and I understand I may disrupt the morning meeting, but I will pay better attention to the morning announcements not to mention your anecdotes, which, just quietly, are thrilling" – people now showed up late without having showered, some still visibly drunk, which made the Lift Operations Meeting Room smell like failing teenage livers.

"Well, I'm looking at the report here," Allen said, "and gosh haven't we had some snow? So we're gonna have to get the snow off the chairs and dig our platforms down, oh we're gonna have to dig them way down, you know, otherwise who knows what will happen?"

No one knew, especially Henry, who was busy showing Susan something on his iPhone, something that was making her laugh, and Allen imagined taking that iPhone and throwing it out the window, or even through the window, except then there would be an incident report and Jade Julie would invite Allen into her office and explain with a sort of smile why Allen didn't have the right to confiscate Henry's iPhone, that they had spoken about deviations from the daily routine and that maybe the discontent with Allen's work practices was justified, and she might say, "Thirty years at the mountain is a *tremendous* effort Allen, a *tremendous* effort, and don't think people haven't noticed all the good you've done around here, don't you think that for a second," tossing her hair back and laughing, though actually staring at Allen's original red lift operation jacket, at the holes Linda had patched when she had still been here, but then returning to

Allen's face and saying, "but it's time for us all to admit that your work is overtaking you, and none of us want that."

"Well, I'll tell you what'll happen," Allen said to the Lift Operations Meeting Room. "Some old man who's probably skied here for twenty years will be riding up the lift enjoying the heater packs in his boots and thinking about what to get his wife for their anniversary when he'll get to the top and *whammo*, his skis will dig into the down-ski platform because the down-ski platform will be five centimetres higher than normal, and he'll be pulled forward, trapped underneath the chair, and the lift will jam for a second and then un-jam, taking all the skin from his back before scalping him."

He waited for a reaction but the lift operators looked bored. What was wrong with these people? Had they been watching too many movies? Mostly his lift operators were Australian and he knew a little bit about Australians, or at least about their cinema, which mostly produced movies set in isolated places with crazy people doing horrible things. He and Linda had watched *Wolf Creek* on one of their weekly dates. Linda had been younger than Allen. Twenty-three years younger. Allen had picked *Wolf Creek* because it had said 'New Release', and also because he had thought horror equalled hugging. And it had equalled hugging, and even a bit of kissing in the middle.

Allen said, "Does everybody understand?"

No one spoke. Finally James stuttered, "Ye-yes."

It was seven-thirty. He told people what lifts they were working. "Oi Al," said Henry, "thought I was working

Speedos with Suze?”

“No Henry. You’re working The North American with Dave.”

“You sure there, Al-Pal? Maybe you should double check,” Henry said while winking, which made a few people laugh.

Allen thought about walking over to Henry, just walking over and headbutting him, maybe headbutting him in the teeth, because then good luck Henry at making smart-ass comments to people who are much wiser and have more life experience than you, but then he thought about his knees and neck and how in the mornings he heard his knees creaking on the way to the shower, and how initially he had thought it was a mouse, but since discovered it was actually his knees, and beyond that he imagined the incident report, imagined losing his job, imagined waking up and staring at the ceiling of his one-bedroom apartment and not moving for a while, just staring at the ceiling and wondering what the hell he was supposed to do next. He shook his head and thought, He’s not worth it, but while shaking he almost imperceptibly glanced at the lift roster just to be absolutely sure he hadn’t made a mistake, and was relieved when he saw Henry’s name scratched out and James’ name marked in beneath Speeder’s Run.

Allen clapped his hands and told people to move.

Slowly, people moved.

Allen stayed in his office. He made a black tea and tried to put his feet up on his desk except he couldn’t put

his feet up on his desk. He looked around. He remembered being younger. He remembered walking outside and firing up his skidoo. One year, the mountain had shut down for several days when some big movie company had shot a couple of scenes from *Faster, More Furious, On Ice*. Allen had watched Vin Diesel do a back flip on a skidoo while drinking a beer and checking out a female snowboarder riding down the mountain in a bikini. Even though the movie was eventually scrapped, the shoot afforded Allen and the mechanics new skidoos with heated handlebars that went over the snow very quickly. Allen remembered enjoying his new heated handlebars, revving his skidoo even faster when he made the wooded back trail, a trail that left the mountain and went over a river, looping way behind the ski lifts, which then, but not now, had been out of camera view of Jade Julie, because the mountain did have cameras now, cameras that were linked to satellites that could zoom in so close to a person you could make out their bald spots, cameras that had been installed after Allen hadn't been able to judge the distance between two trees, clipping one, the momentum tossing his body into a pocket of snow while his skidoo had sailed off the back trail and into the river.

He had overheard the head snowboard instructor talking about the cameras while trying to impress a slutty snow bunny, which was a term Allen had also heard the head snowboard instructor say to his friend when the slutty snow bunny went to order a \$4.80 soy cappuccino, and Allen had wanted to walk up to the girl who was probably

nice and who, even if she was slutty, didn't deserve to be spoken about behind her back, had wanted to walk up to her and say, "You deserve so much better than that jerk," except that day Allen could barely stand, tired and sore from walking down the hill skidoo-less, in pain, sort of seeing double, wondering how he had become a sixty-four year old without a wife, stripped of his skidoo privilege and most of his pay, the majority of his salary redirected back to the mountain, his only option, Jade Julie had explained, given his meds had cancelled his insurance policy.

Allen opened his eyes unaware that he had closed them and found himself staring at twelve radios sitting in their chargers, though not actually charging, because last night Allen had forgotten to switch the chargers on. He stared at the chargers and recalled the time that Linda had asked him to set an alarm because she was flying to Vancouver the following day, but Allen had passed out after having one glass of wine that had turned into two bottles because he had wanted to calm his nerves before asking Linda to renew their vows, a wish from his mother who was on her way out and worried that her son would end up alone as she had, and as Allen briefly thought about Linda he sipped his tea and immediately spat it out, burning his tongue as he noticed a note on his desk, now almost illegible, soggy and stuck to the wood. It was from one of the mechanics.

"Speeder's Run down till midday. Maintenance on the bullwheel."

He looked at the radios sitting dead by the far wall. Radios. They were a thing, or at least for now they were a thing, but probably not for much longer, probably they too would be upgraded to something modern and unrecognisable, thrown into some landfill next to other old things that didn't move quick enough, didn't—

Speeder's Run. He had sent James and Susan to Speeder's Run. Soon they would start the lifts. He had told them to do this. He had told them they needed to get the snow off the chairs and to dig the platforms down. But what would they do first? To get the snow off the chairs they would need to start the lift but to start the lift they needed Allen's approval, which they would get through the radio, but since he had forgotten to give everyone radios, and since there had never been an issue before, would they just start the lift?

They would just start the lift. James would say, "Ma-may-maybe we should wa-wait for Allen's app-approval," except, because of James' stutter and James' chattering teeth and also the wind Susan would hear, "We've got Allen's approval." She would smile and press the green button. There was no reason she wouldn't, and there was also no reason she wouldn't hear the low groan of the bullwheel as it began to turn, except maybe James would go inside the lift shack and join Susan, maybe he would turn up the radio and Cyndi Lauper's 'Time After Time' would begin playing, and each of them, isolated and feeling nostalgic, would look at one another and smile a little bit, neither of them hearing the screams of the mechanic as his arm snagged in the moving metal which would drag

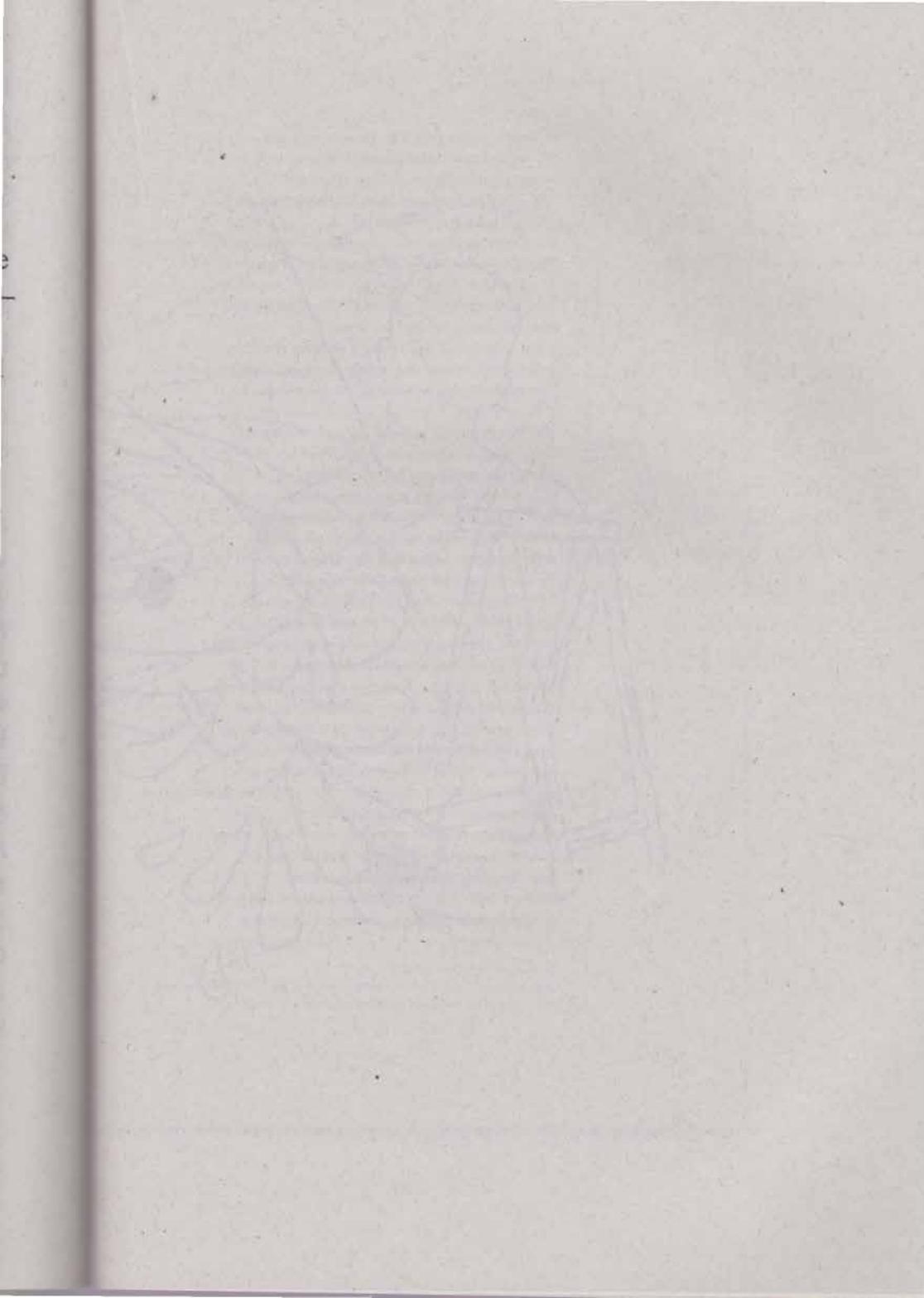
him from his platform and leave him suspended in mid-air. He imagined James and Susan inside the lift shack, James maybe beginning to dance for the first time in his life, and Susan beginning to giggle, and James thinking, could I kiss her? Susan would recall a boy once giving her a cupcake on her birthday and wanting to kiss her except being too shy. She would lean forward as James held his breath, and their lips would touch and they would kiss and mid-kiss the song would end and both of them would look up. Oh God. The mechanic. Susan and James. Their faces staring at each other, people coming—

Allen got out of his chair and ran, letting out an “Ughhh” as he connected solidly with his desk corner. He was falling very slowly toward something he couldn’t see because his eyes were closed, but then opening them he realised he was on the floor, lying on his back, clutching his knee to his chest. And then he was nineteen, standing on a podium where people were cheering and yelling as a gold medal was hung around his neck, his skis in one hand, his dad waving proudly as he smiled so wide down the barrel of a television camera. And then he was sixty-four, and his recall began appearing in short, vaguely spaced bursts, like a faulty slide show in a cinema with him at the back craning his neck guessing at images he thought were maybe his wife, maybe a trip to Guatemala one summer where they had held hands floating down a river on an inner tube, just holding hands, leaning back, letting the sun—

And then staring at the ceiling, a pain shot through his

knee and he screamed, rolling from side to side, “Fuck, fuck, fuck you motherfuck!” He clenched his jaw as he got to one knee, grunting and breathing heavily out his nostrils as he balanced his weight on one leg, making whimpers as he sort of hopped towards the door. Outside in the snow he placed weight on his broken knee imagining his wife on one of those satellites just zooming in on his old, ugly body, just watching—

And inside the mechanic’s garage he hobbled onto a skidoo, twisted the key and sparked the ignition. He reversed out of the garage and went down the hill staring straight ahead, his knee screaming every time it banged back and forth against the engine, passing, perhaps, Jade Julie, who was screaming too, but he kept going, disguising his grimace as a smile, moving so fast that he didn’t need to think, not really thinking but repeating “I can do this, I can do this,” and as he made the wooded back trail he revved as hard as he could and thought, Let me fix this one thing, please. Let me do this and let everything be okay.



mechawked girls they'd never seen expiring
on the highway under yesterday's sun;
singing songs of hope on New Year's Eve
We, who'd fled the war abandoning dreams saw
death straddling the full moon,
the future annihilated by the 60s myth of revolution achieved,
Oh to burn it all down those mythical artefacts of peace,
to grind Lennon's face into the bloodied streets and
beat Richard Neville around the head till he bled
but amongst the bile of our despair,
a bus abandoned, so reciting Proudhon we drove
into Sydney to help put paid to another lie for it was '88,
commemoration and mourning for genocide.

We, human moths communing with the moon
sleeping and fucking and hiding from the day
in national parks and highway stops
to be sucked into the night's anonymity,
picking up boards still moist to dry as we slept,
Mama's sweet roller of cigarettes and
crazy funny conversations, the driver's angel of wakefulness
on those long dark nights of snaking lights,
who returned alone to the battlefield
found dead in Flinders St station toilet
the fit a bloodied teardrop welded to her arm
finally we reached the Promised Land
sacred site Aquarius Festival*, a snap frozen town
of style and politics where patriarchy wears tie-dye shirts and
the revolution created a brave new world, a potty lie down
No Punks Allowed unless in mask and brassiere
in a hamlet in the town of infamous madness
we found a home, a place to rest and smoke in the rainforest
and dream of more than survival;
on hole days we eat tofu chips drink passion pop
collapse in wasted pleasure at Palm Park
to make plans of bands and magazines
we'd get fucked up on any drug we could and crazy
tales were told of Bronny's rotting buttocks.

*A colloquial term for "syringe"

The Aquarius Festival was Australia's answer to Woodstock, and was held in 1973 at Tuntabale Falls, just outside Nimbin

three days in a coma on rainforest compost
or how Johnny Wardscreen found his name
but still the headlines screamed, RAT PEOPLE.
liturgies of lies recited amongst tabloid hysteria,
doors closed, *de ja vu*, our dreams began to crumble
once more into the breach dear friends".

3. DEATH

Cicadas screaming, still heat, running as if in a dream,
guided by an ungodly hand (I can't believe exists)
through purple blossomed viney lantana
up rickety gallow stairs;
Sid almost kneeling but hanging, Dead.
I breathed into him, Dead.
Brendan with Sid's child, running, running
dusty road for help, a car, a phone,
I breathed into him, Dead.
Cars screaming, heaping blind corners,
thin roads, small bridges, clear creeks,
forest then paddocks, blur,
cradling blonde head,
weeping don't die,
I breathed into him, Dead.
Hospital goodbye on steel bed
white sheets all around.
How do you tell a mother the father of her child is dead?
Not while she plays in the forest on mushrooms,
I did, then ran back to the city a shell: the living dead.

4. ILLUSIONARY ESCAPE

I slept with Mother, long years to forget the pain.
Travis Beckled me, I am an debris
in the drunken puddle of water,
clicking meter chewing time, spitting out life,
customers wept tales of regret, of people they'd met.

Robert De Niro's character in *Taxi Driver*

**LIGHT AND
AIR AND
THEN NOTHING
HURT**

**AARON
BILLINGS**

YOU FRAME YOUR EYES with soot from the fire, standing on a wastepaper basket in your parents' ensuite. Your fingers tremble as you apply a rose lipstick, making sure you place it back exactly where you found it. You slink out of the room like a possum treading a power line, down the upstairs hallway to your bedroom. You think you hear helicopters outside but it's just a rusty pipe being beaten by the wind. You make it to your room under cover of darkness and say your prayers in front of an open book. You say something like, "Please take me tonight, I want to go on your beautiful ship." This has become a ritual.

You put your best dress on, push your bed closer to the open window, check your laces are tied and ready, then pass into a deep sleep. As you sleep, fruit bats and seagulls

scratch maps of stars into gum trees, a homeless man hobbles down the centre of your street muttering incantations, seven or more stars die.

You wake to your 5:45 alarm and pretend you have just been levitating, pushing up your midsection, legs bowed and arms outstretched. You know you were flying because you can see dust from the lightbulb on your fingertips. Silently you begin your morning routine: pushing the bed back to the middle of the room, removing your makeup with moist cheesecloth. You unbraid your hair and close the window. It's been three months and you still haven't been taken. It will be your tenth birthday in a week, they must be waiting until then.

You know exactly how it will happen.

At school you look at huge books with pictures of red giants and turquoise nebulae. You make lists in the back of your textbooks of the distances between each planet, calculating how long it would take to get from Jupiter to Neptune. Charting route maps with protractors gets you in trouble in homeroom, and known around the school as being weird.

Friday morning, five days before your birthday, is when you get their signal. They have hidden an asteroid in the sand-pit, two feet deep. It has crossed the solar system, left trails of fire through deep space, deftly avoided planets just for you. It broke through the ozone layer and held itself together to land for you. You hold it above your head, late light in the clouds behind it. It is grey and peppered with craters like a tiny moon. On one side it is burnt from its atmospheric entry. There are no pockets in school pinafores so you hide your

gift in your underwear. The sky that day has a tint of green, the moon half visible by the belfry.

On the way home you practice floating.

On the fourth day before your birthday, your mother finds scuffmarks on the bed. You tell her you must have had a nap with your shoes on. From now on you will scrub them before bed. You want to tell her about what will happen to you. A few times breath has almost left your mouth in the shape of words. You want her to question the dust under your nails so you can tell her you run your fingers over all the bulbs in the house.

When you go she will chalk you up as another thing to happen to her. She will swallow your memory and keep it in her stomach. She will turn to her computer and spend her nights with it.

Your mother has never known happiness in a place. The house is devoid of art or food or any real care, your confirmation picture leant against the skirting board. The sofa has been lugged back and forth in shipping containers. The last trip from her birthplace to here exhausted the money and now you are stuck. It is two days before your birthday and the sky is a pane of glass that must be covering the whole world, slowly making its way to earth.

The night before your birthday you have collected the treasures you want to take with you. A mossy stick from a wattle that felled a steel bridge, a star atlas, pinecones from Ireland, gumnuts from Melbourne. You take your meteor from your sock drawer and place it at the centre. Closing your eyes,

you imagine the rocks you will bring back, when so much time has passed you won't have to be a child anymore. You will bring them to the milk bar and show them off. There might even be a parade.

Time moves toward midnight. You hear two things: the clicking of computer keys muffled by walls, and the violent screams of possums. The sky grows darker still, till the eerie feeling of no sight eclipses even the thought of possums mating.

It is midnight. Nothing is happening. Maybe they've forgotten, you whisper to yourself. It is worse to hear out loud. You think of returning to school and how you will bury the gift and have to live out life chronologically like everyone else. Your eyes grow tired and sink into the back of your head as you stare at darkness, at what must be the ceiling. Beyond it are stars and beyond them black holes and time warps exploding and fusing. Tears might have appeared in your eyes if not for the beams of light that punch like lasers into your headboard, broadening. Your arms are outstretched and your midsection pressed up, but now your ankles don't touch the sheets, your wrists are wrapped in a film of air.

You are lifted, there are lights.

All your limbs are wrapped in air, all your insides wrapped in light.

Angie Hart, Adam Gibson, Anis Mojga
Bass Elefant (Rok Poshtya, Toe-Fu, Da
Geoff Page, Chloe Wilson, Nick Sun, I
Bridget Lutherborrow, Andy Jackson, S
Jennifer Compton, Kia Groom, Tom W
Tineke Van der Eecken, Aaron Billings
Sean Goedecke, Kavita Bedford, Laur
Amaryllis Gacioppo, Luke Farrell, Kev
Jonathon Lawrence, Upulie Divisekera
Rafael S.W., Jacky T, Laura Vitis, Zoe

ni, Darren Song, Benezra,
rren Sirbough, Rory Toomey),
Patrick Lenton, Eric Paul Shaffer,
Stuart Barnes, Luke Johnson,
alker, BN Oakman, Oliver Mol,
, Dawn Sperber, Renee Schipp,
en Aimee Curtis, Justine Poon,
in Riel, Lucy Mackay-Sim,
, Alison Finn, Gregory Horne,
Dzunko.

