

40-2 SWINGING



DOWN

A collection of some of our favourites from our thirty-nine year history

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GOING DOWN SWINGING

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1979

2019

Twenty-one wild new works that look towards the future of *Going Down Swinging*

\$35

GOING

DOWN

40-1 SWINGING

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This book was edited, produced and printed on the stolen lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, whose sovereignty has never been ceded. We acknowledge and pay our deepest respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

EDITORIAL

This is the fortieth blow as we go down swinging.

When Kevin Brophy and Myron Lysenko wrote the first *Going Down Swinging* editorial, they were battling their own demons. Two punky poets from Melbourne, they were in debt and broken-boned. Still, they spent eighteen months putting #1 together, knowing the gravity of bold writing that prods at norms and tests how we think.

We doubt they thought we'd still be going down swinging four decades later.

Going Down Swinging #40 collects some favourite pieces from our history and commissions twenty-one new works that look towards the future of *Going Down Swinging*. When we read through our previous thirty-nine editions we found stories of underdogs, stories that broke our hearts and made them feel full again, stories that made us cry with laughter and stories that caused arguments, stories that stood the test of time and stories that have dated terribly. Australian literature is not what it was twenty years ago, let alone forty. This edition interrogates the differences, celebrates the similarities and makes us excited for what will come next – after all, we all know a good story when we read one.

Since its birth, this publication has been a haven for good and fierce and important writing, not only to those who read it but to those who make it possible.

Earlier this year, as the editorial team planned out *Going Down Swinging #40*, we felt we'd reached an impasse. We found ourselves with no general manager, no office and no meeting space, with a team already stretched thin. We planned to meet at a CBD bar. It turned out the bar was too stuffed with punters for us to properly talk, and so we roamed the streets in search of a place to gather.

We found that place, eventually, in a Nando's. On a drizzly nighty, over cheap white wine and rubbery tacos, we nussed out a plan for the next year. We knew we were working on a milestone edition, the responsibility looming like a dark mass over the fluoro-lit chicken shop.

Over the next few months, we took the storms one by one – job and health and personal problems and, at one point, an actual storm that managed to seep through our stockroom and into some books.

We don't tell this story to elicit pity. Making this edition has given us a stark and appreciative perspective on exactly what it takes to make an edition of *Going Down Swinging*.

For forty years, our editors have gathered in bars, offices, libraries, living rooms and chicken shop chains to make each edition happen, and in the gaps between have produced events, built an online community and provided a space for young and emerging members of the arts scene to grow and thrive.

And for forty years, they've squeezed all that into their spare time, juggling the cluster of duties in their personal and professional lives with the duty of making this book. We thank them for it.

What a feat it is that the legacy is still going strong. ●

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SNAKESKIN

Every time I call her, and her voice comes in and out, sometimes loud, sometimes soft, she says
Haven't seen the tree snake since you were here.

Sometimes loud, sometimes soft, she says
Haven't seen the tree snake since you were here.
The snake hasn't been in the tree since you were here.
When you're coming back home.

The English word, snake, comes from the Old English *snaca*, from the Proto-Germanic *snakon*, from the PIE root *sneg*, to crawl, and the Old Irish *snaighim*, to creep.
I've been creeping and crawling many places, snaking, making patterns, shedding my skin.
I've been creeping and crawling many places, snaking, making patterns, shedding my skin.
Reptiles periodically shed their skin whole.
We are in a constant state of shedding. A whole external layer of skin over twenty-seven days.
I am in a constant state of shedding my skin.

I travel far.
I go to Darwin, to Canberra, to Wagga, to Calgary, to Hong Kong and Tokyo.

While in Tokyo, I meet Nara who dreams of snakes every night.
I'm dreaming of coming home. I creep, I crawl in my sleep.

She calls me to say
Haven't seen the tree snake since you were here.

Tokyo is sensitive and everything I eat, I eat chilled. Nara and I are always moving away from the main group to get ice-creams and wifi.

She texts me to say
Haven't seen the tree snake since you were here. →

On Monday, the temperature in Tokyo peaks – it has been declared the hottest day on record. Sweat decorates my hair, my lips, my feet. I follow Mum's advice she gave me when I was very young and don't attempt to climb the hill to the castle in high noon like some of the others.

I worry about those who are vulnerable and unlike me, who has the privilege of going into an air-conditioned room at night.

Nara and I are both lacking sleep.

I stay up and draw in my notebook. A breeze kicks in outside my window. My fingers are smudged in graphite.

I find out at about 10.30 p.m. that Nara has been taken to the hospital for heat exhaustion. I stay up worrying but I'm told she will make a full recovery.

There is a typhoon coming in two days. And the city changes its focus to prepare for another weather event.

I spend the morning scrolling Tokyo news Twitter feeds. My eyes scan for information only Baime can bring.

The snake hasn't been in the tree since you were here.

When you're coming back home.

I look at flights on my phone. There is one incessant thought in my mind: I want to go before the typhoon comes. Big tears roll down my face as I realise it won't be possible.

I sit squashed up against commuters on the subway. I don't know why I'm crying. Again, my privilege keeps me safe as the typhoon moves closer in a big cloud, but I can't stop the memories of 2011 coming to me in big body chunks as I sit in the lobby of a large central hotel I don't have a room in, with many others, mothers and their children. We sit still for hours as the typhoon passes.

I feel the tide rise through my body and seven years of storms.

The next day I say goodbye to Nara. She is looking much better and tells me her spirit has returned. I catch a train to the airport. I board a plane out of Tokyo, but I'm not going home.

I'm working, working, Melbourne, Canberra, Melbourne, Perth, Bendigo, Sydney, Melbourne. Lecture rooms, train stations, theatres. And outside rain, rain, hail that is not hard. Bank balances, bills and unknown purchases.

As I teach my students, I hope I am being a good student.

I forget to call, I forget to check my phone, I forget her voice comes in and out, sometimes loud, sometimes soft, I forget she says

Haven't seen the tree snake since you were here.

Snake shows return rain freshwater saltwater opening

Swimming in my own body in my own vein.

I work late nights and sometimes catch glimpses of my ancestors on my shoulder.

And why are you working, who are you working for?

Bub c'mon there. You can do this.

I ask myself impossible questions. I ask of myself impossible tasks. And I worry that I will no longer fit.

But I remember that our skin is always shedding, every minute, every hour, every day, we just can't see it. And maybe I am leaving my skin behind for you. And maybe I am growing new skin to receive and see and to heal.

The sun dips over those familiar roads.

The wind loops round thick trees.

The body is more fluent in words than lips.

I am the forest floor and nothing here is not home.

I creep, I crawl, back to where I belong. And she says

I see the snake, I see you, you are home. ●

It was the autumn of 2018 and I was hot on the trail of Australia's most notorious drug lord, L. Chapman. I'd first caught wind of his exploits while haunting Sydney's gin bars: his was the only name on the hipsters' lips. There were whispers that he was the mysterious king of the newest drug on the Sydney scene, Blank Verse, also known as Blank. I was keen to discover more. But little did I know that in investigating Chapman's story, I would plunge down the proverbial rabbit hole into a murky world of fraud, break-and-enters, disappearances, sexual assault and slam poetry.

I wanted to meet the man himself. My initial leads came to nothing – people were afraid to speak to me. But I had a stroke of luck one day while out smoking with a tattoo artist in a Dulwich Hill car park.

“L. Chapman?” he said. “Mate, he’s a friend of a friend. I’ll hook you up.”

Thirty minutes later, I received an anonymous text summoning me to an address in Marrickville. It was the premises of a catering business. I stood out front. Suddenly, there was a sack over my head. My phone was snatched from my hand. I was bundled into a vehicle.

“Mind your head or you’ll soon be dead,” a man said.

I lost my bearings after the vehicle turned right. Next thing I knew, the sack was off and I was on a yacht. My eyes adjusted to the light. Green and yellow ferries glided in the distance. It was difficult to figure out where I'd ended up – I could've been anywhere in the world. I swore at myself. If Chapman killed me that day, no one would be able to find me.

I realised there was another man on the yacht – a twenty-something silver-haired dude in a tailcoat, pantaloons and cravat. He was lounging on the deck with his arms draped around two women in bikinis. He winked at me.

“Nice day for a sail,” he said. “The Holy Grail.”

Chapman wasn't your run-of-the mill drug lord. He was also a well-known spoken word poet, and was clearly keeping his vow of only ever speaking in slam poetry.

The women giggled at the rhyme. I sat down across from them. I sensed strength but also a kind of vulnerability in Chapman – the fragrance of sadness we've come to expect from the great creative geniuses. You could picture him having a cup of chamomile tea with your grandma, holding her hand, listening to her lament the deaths of all of her old friends.

Chapman refused to talk about Blank that day. Instead, he lit a pipe and expounded on his fashion aesthetic and its relationship to his poetry.

“I / am an ageist, anti-ageist / colonial, anti-colonial / sartorial nutter. I / am the intersection, I / am the bellwether, I / am the conduit / from the heights to the gutter.”

I was already familiar with his taste in clothes. In gin bars all over Sydney, drunk slammers had told me he was “lit” – that he went barefoot to “stay connected with Mother Gaia” and otherwise dressed like an eighteenth-century dandy. They said he'd taken to carrying around pinches of Blank in a rotating collection of antique snuff boxes. →

SLAMMIN' WITH THE POET KING

The practice had inspired a revival of snuff boxes, pince-nez, pocket watches, duck-head walking sticks, and tartan waistcoats.

In his capacity as a poet, he was most famous for his pro-monarchist, anti-racist poem ‘Slammers Stan Meghan Markle’, which received three standing ovations at the Sydney Opera House. In the wake of that performance, *Slamograph* called him “[o]ur newest bright star and the epitome of radical geek genius – Australia’s answer to Lin-Manuel Miranda, or even, dare we say it, Carlos Wieder.”

On deck, Chapman recited lines from his Markle poem, explaining to me that it was written when he was in his “astronomy phase”. He began: “I am not your / dark matter, your / black hole, your / brown dwarf.”

I had just started to protest the offensiveness of these lines when the bag dropped over my head once more, and I found myself back at the Marrickville address, having met the racist, anti-racist Pied Piper who was drawing a whole generation of susceptible slammers into his charmed grasp.

There’s a grainy video on YouTube of one of Chapman’s winning performances at Sydney Town Hall.

In it, the MC growls into the mic. “Give it up one more time for L. Chapmaaaaaaan!”

Chapman skips onto the stage. With his eccentric style, he stands out from his respectable-looking competitors in their pressed beige pants, collared shirts, white turtlenecks and long earrings. They read off greeting cards and iPhones. In contrast, Chapman has every word and gesture committed to memory.

“I call this ‘After the Revolution,’” he begins. He pauses to centre himself, then unleashes. “Here’s to the drifters, / the kids and the grifters. / Here’s to the politics, / the heretics and Coptics. / To Kaira and Katelyn / and Madelyne and Maia: / hush, my sweet nothings, / love is the answer.” At the word “love”, he places his hands on his heart. The audience murmurs and clicks. The wordplay increases in complexity. “Here’s to the Euclidean humanitarians, / the Promethean veterinarians.” He accelerates, gasps between lines. His delivery becomes frenzied, building to a final, cathartic shout.

The video offers a brief insight into Chapman’s charisma. It makes clear his uncanny ability to hold a crowd in the palm of his hand, making them feel the entire gamut of emotions in the space of just two minutes. They go wild. The judges hold up their clipboards – a record-breaking combined score of 29.7 out of 30.

I interviewed a poet who was at the Town Hall slam and who inadvertently got caught up in the Chapman whirlwind. He wants to remain anonymous. I’ll call him Tim Wood.

“When I met L., he was the style icon of the Sydney slam scene. I’d gone to that slam alone, just to watch. When he got offstage, he picked me out of the crowd and introduced himself. He bought me a Young Henrys.

He really listened – it felt like he cared. At the time, I was an accounting grad at one of the big four firms. I was coasting along, pretty unhappy. I was like everyone there that night – a lost soul, disenchanted with my middle-class life, wanting to touch Heaven with my poetry, like Perseus or Andromeda.”

It was clear that these city slammers were easy targets. Chapman took advantage of their earnestness and loneliness, seducing them with his clever lines.

“He could cast a spell over anyone,” says Wood. “We were all so vulnerable to his charm. It was as if his lips uttered spells that curled around our ears and burrowed into our brains. For all we knew, it could have been subliminal messaging.

- “That’s how he got us into his poetry movement, NiuFrontEar, or NFE. We all got pocket watches engraved with: ‘I didn’t choose the slam life, the slam life chose me.’ He was our Merlin. His poems were incantations for the Potter generation.”

The movement’s ‘eManifesto’ included a commitment to spreading slam poetry to the masses online. The first principle was: “Daily life is a continuous slam opportunity.” NFE poets made videos of one-on-one slam battles that they conducted as they brushed their teeth in the morning, or shopped for sanitary pads in supermarket aisles, or swaggered through the Broadway food court, gesturing at the camera while queuing for Nando’s.

These are Chapman’s most talked-about lines from the Nando’s slam: “The leaders of the world, / designer loafers stuck / to the cement like / tuckshop toffee / while the rest of / humanity toils. / All of us / holding open their / hotel doors / flushing their / designer toilets / wiping piss off their / porcelain floors. / My brothers, / my sisters, / grab resilience by the wrist. / Stop the tears and abuse, / the taboos, the obtuse. / Cry out your pain! / Our words shall pierce / the air.”

Chapman united NFE not just against the wealthy but also other Sydney slam collectives, like the Deconstructibles. He dismantled them all, consigning them to slam history.

He had a particular hatred of the prominent Sydney academic and written-word poet, Caleb Andrews, targeting him in a one-sided feud that involved toilet-papering Andrews’ house once a fortnight. Chapman called it “a battle of the ivory tower versus the street”. Andrews called it “just very annoying”.

Wood says that at any one time, Chapman was sleeping with at least six women in the group.

“He held what he called ‘viewing parties’ where he’d line them up naked in a row and stare at them from the couch. They told me they felt ‘extremely seen’. One of them, Madelyne, went viral with the poem ‘I Wanna Be Your Cho Chang’. The women began living with L. out the back of his Marrickville warehouse, next to a commercial laundry. He’d hold slam poetry heats in the warehouse car park and get us all tripping on Blank. He told us it was harmless – all organic, nothing synthetic.

“I got into some fucking weird shit when I was on it. Someone said that one of the other poets, Basil, helped me break a cherry picker out of a construction site. →

We drove it over to Marrickville Town Hall, and I went up in the cherry picker and licked the bum of that Winged Victory statue out front. You know, the one that commemorates the local people who died in World War I?”

I wanted to find out more about Blank – what it was made from, and whether it affected everyone in the same way it affected Wood.

I met with Dr Eda Gunaydin, the world’s foremost expert on Blank and the head of Sydney’s Alcohol and Other Drug Research Centre.

Gunaydin confirms that the first known use of Blank occurred among Sydney’s slam poets in mid-2016.

“It has gained some traction as a party drug because of the various ways it can be taken,” says Gunaydin. “The drug has been crushed into a glittering dark green powder, then worn as eyeshadow and licked off the lids. It’s been applied to lips, so that individuals can get high on just one kiss. It can also be mixed into cocktails or dispersed into the air for others to inhale.”

Gunaydin says that scant information is available on how Blank is made but in light of its abundance in Sydney, she believes it could be derived from a plant native to Australia.

“The public would probably expect something this potent to originate in South America. But my guess is that it’s made from, say, a native wattle or fungus. They can have psychedelic properties.”

This tallies with Wood’s assertion that although Chapman was secretive about the source of Blank, he once mentioned a supplier in Joondalup, Perth, who was also a dilettante forager.

Gunaydin says that according to anecdotal evidence from users, Blank allows a person to hallucinate their deepest desires. “This gives Blank the potential to become the most popular drug in the world. One of its side effects, however, is that some users only partly come out of a trip, remaining in a permanent semi-lucid hallucination. Reports regarding these hallucinations suggest that the drug can irreversibly activate indiscriminate religious fervour in an individual.”

Those affected have been found worshipping the first thing in their line of vision after half-waking from a trip. “Of course, that’s extremely concerning,” says Gunaydin, “especially if the first person they see doesn’t have their best interests in mind.”

Gunaydin adds that fatalities from Blank have been recorded. “We don’t have enough data yet but based on discussions with toxicologists, the risk to the public may be extensive. Our understanding is that one exposure to a miniscule amount of the drug can cause death. And that’s alarming for us all because death can arrive before a user even has the chance to get addicted and enjoy a long career throwing down the most tragic rhymes of their era.”

Chapman provided a never-ending supply of free Blank to his followers.

Although no one knew where he got the drug, everyone knew how he raised the cash for it. With Basil’s assistance, he produced crowdfunding campaigns for extravagant slams that never eventuated. All of the proceeds went straight to Blank.

“He got us all hooked,” says Wood. “The police mostly let it slide. The drug was so new, and it was popular only among slammers. The authorities were more concerned about ice.”

The poets spent weeks high in Chapman’s warehouse, dreaming they were rapping with Tupac, jumping rope on Jupiter, and flying solo over the Andes just by flapping their arms.

“Probably the saddest story from that period was what happened to Kurt and Greg,” says Wood. “Those guys had fantasies about being the greatest stalkers of all time. One night, Kurt followed Greg home, but Greg thought he was following Kurt home. They got confused and pulled knives on each other. It ended in a slam duel. It was off the hook. In the end, they broke down and held each other and emoted in the middle of the road through the spoken word, saying shit like, ‘Dip me in the glow of / your embrace’ and ‘Conflict is a sword / sliding between / the shoulder blades of our / heady bromance’. They clicked at each other’s lines in the dark until a car ran them over. It was streaming live on Facebook. We had to pull the video. But we did do a live slam battle at their funeral, which kind of made up for it.”

Around that time, Wood began to suspect that Chapman was supplying the drug to his acolytes in order to siphon millions of dollars from them.

“Everyone was highly suggestible while on Blank. I saw L. getting people to sign all sorts of documents transferring their money to NFE. I mean, these were amateur slammers – they had big savings accounts from their lives before NFE, when they had full-time jobs. He made sure he was the first thing they saw as the high wore off. He was hoping they’d start worshipping him and some did. He was trying to develop a new version of Blank with his supplier that meant the drug activated religiosity not just sometimes but *every time*.

“There were rumours he was taking the money for himself and funnelling the proceeds offshore. When he eventually approached me for my savings, I confronted him about the fraud. He got into a massive rage. Called me ‘a traitor to the slam life / a harbinger of strife’. It really cut. It was all too much. That’s when I called it a day and pivoted away from NFE. It takes all my effort now not to alliterate or speak in slant rhymes. It brings back too much trauma.”

Wood was one of the lucky ones – he got out before the shit really hit the fan. Now reformed, he’s become a fringe player on the Sydney comedy scene. His TikTok pranks only get a handful of likes but he insists he is the most fulfilled he has ever been.

Given the devastating effects of Blank, it’s just as well that Chapman, who was still testing the drug on NFE members, didn’t let it leave slam circles – except in one high-profile instance. Tabloids reported the sorry tale of Magenta Sheridan, a blond oil heiress from Texas, who had somehow crossed paths with Chapman. She had been reported missing by friends while holidaying in Australia. One afternoon she was found lying on the deck of a yacht drifting through Sydney Harbour. Naked and delirious from Blank, she reportedly writhed in the throes of a continuous orgasm occurring as part of the greatest orgy ever to take place in a person’s mind. →

If Chapman championed the poetry of the street, I wondered if I could track down the exact thoroughfare where he was born. I thought it could give me clues to the kind of childhood he had, and how the wounds of that childhood, if any, might have shaped the character he ultimately became.

Chapman disclosed few details of his formative years to those in his circle. He'd told Wood once that he had rowed in the First VIII for Cove, the elite North Shore private school for boys, but no one I contacted from that year's cohort could recall him.

Wood remembers Chapman bragging about cleaning out his dad's house in Vacluse. "He stole hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of wine from the basement cellar. He said his mum had taken an AVO out against him to stop him running a hoverboard over the tulips in her front garden every spring. She hated having to get her driver to take her to Floriade instead for her annual tulip hit."

This is where the story really takes a turn. I happened to mention the wine theft to one of my drinking buddies – a retired police officer. He said that it matched the widely reported break-and-enter of a mansion on the Crescent in Vacluse in 2016. The thieves, never found, reportedly emptied the cellar as well as the entire house.

The owners of the mansion in question were Emrys and Dynasty Whitehall, respectively, a prominent financier and homemaker. Both were unavailable for comment. They also happened to be the parents of Julie Koh, the flamboyant performance artist and former author, known for her comprehensive character sketches.¹

"This sounds absolutely crazy," says Wood, "but I reckon [Chapman] avoided talking about his childhood because he was, in fact, the artist Julie Koh."

Wood shows me the exhibition catalogue featuring Koh's 2019 installation artwork, *My Apartment*. He points at one of the photographs included in the work, which captures the artist as a young girl with a friend on a superyacht in Monaco. The friend's face has been scribbled out with pen. Wood says there is cause to believe that this childhood friend is the heiress Magenta Sheridan, whose ghostwritten autobiography confirms that she met Koh in Monaco at the age of eight and took an instant dislike to her.

If Wood is right, and Chapman really embodied an iteration of Koh, then it follows that Koh had been moonlighting as Chapman as far back as 2016, even while developing a public persona as a woman author and performance artist. It would also mean that Chapman didn't grow up on a working-class street but a lush crescent in Vacluse with a heated swimming pool out back and a pier leading out to the harbour.

"Robbing one's parents is just one method by which a child might obtain their inheritance early," says Associate Professor David T. Smith, clinical psychologist and bestselling author of *Is There a Psychopath in My Family?* and its acclaimed follow-up, *Am I the Psychopath in My Family?* Smith is convinced that Chapman, or Koh, is a psychopath. "You'll find them in every profession. Slam poetry is surprisingly no exception."

Among other things, he points to Chapman's manipulative nature, grandiosity, callousness, deceptiveness and lack of remorse. We could also add Chapman's criminal versatility: Wood says that his nefarious exploits include not just break-and-enter but strong links to organised crime.

"People were afraid of speaking out in case L. ordered a hit on them," says Wood. "Two of his lovers, Maia and Kaira, went missing from the warehouse and no one ever found them. I heard L. was dabbling in sex trafficking, so maybe that's why. On a regular basis, poets like me who challenged L. saw his charm morph into one of his famous rages."

A secret audio recording that Wood made while drinking with Chapman confirms his links with the underworld. He boasts: "I'm a socially conscious criminal, / a troubled man come good. / I'm bringing it, / I'm sending it, / right into the 'hood."

- It is difficult to reconcile the extreme personality Wood describes with that of the sensitive young man I'd met that fateful day on the harbour. It seemed that while Chapman might indeed have tea with your grandma, he'd probably then take her to the bank, get her to transfer her life savings to him, and then have her accidentally drown in the bath, sinking her Maltese terrier in the process.

No clearer was his lack of remorse than in relation to the #MeToo accusation from the former NFE poet Katelyn Critchlow in an interview in *alt-slam*. By then, his sexual relationship with Critchlow, one of his several lovers, had soured. In the interview, she accused Chapman of groping her breasts without consent during their slam duet at City Recital Hall. She alleged that the groping occurred at the exact moment that the choreography required Critchlow to face away from the audience, while Chapman performed a line about depression, migration, colonisation, climate change and patriarchy, followed by: "It's not what one does / with one's silver spoon / but the veracity with which / one uses that spoon / to spoon others."

In response to the accusation, Chapman sought advice from a friend's father, Patrick Geraghty QC, and threatened to file a defamation suit against both Critchlow and the *alt-slam* zinemaker. For reasons not made public, they did not proceed, though an email from Geraghty to his no-estranged wife, which was leaked to the press, said that "[t]he accusation of assault was simply not plausible. No man has the capacity to deliver a sexual assault *while simultaneously* delivering a complex spoken word duet."

Legal action abandoned, Chapman vanished. He re-emerged a month later in London on a "UK tour".

"I felt called to this great land, / home of Ed Miliband," he told *Slamwerk*. In a podcast recording of a slam heat in Shoreditch, Chapman can be heard performing a poem in free verse, attacking wokeness and cancel culture. The poem sounds a lot like an unprepared rant.

Sadly, for Chapman, his poetry didn't make much of a splash in London. He did, however, manage to get Londoners hooked on Blank, through a network of amenable poet dealers. Blank became the preferred party drug of the rich and famous. It was soon detected in the Thames at levels rivalling those of cocaine.

In September 2019, at the height of the Blank craze, I came across an alarming news story. Chapman had been tasered by police officers on a road in London. →

They'd been called to the scene following reports that the poet, under the influence of Blank, had gone to Piccadilly around midnight and smashed department store windows with a sledgehammer. He'd sat himself down in the middle of the picnic-themed display, sipping air from a floral teacup.

When the officers arrived, Chapman reached into a picnic basket, pulled out a fork and stuck it prong-deep into the thigh of the closest policewoman.

The squad fell on Chapman. He went into cardiac arrest, which police later maintained was the result of "excited delirium". As he laid dying, he gazed at the painted blue sky on the ceiling of the display and improvised his last spoken word poem, exclaiming how lovely it was to draw one's last breath while out in green pastures.

Chapman hadn't had the foresight to ask anyone to film the performance for the NFE channel, and the only proof that the poem had even been uttered was a vague recollection in a tabloid by a luggage sales assistant who had watched Chapman's demise from across the road after "a night on the grog", and who was angling to be a witness in the ensuing coronial inquest.

Debates raged in Sydney warehouses long afterwards as to whether a poem that existed only as a vague recollection could be listed in the NFE video canon.

After Chapman's death, Sydney's remaining NFE poets engaged in copycat homages, trying to recreate his last performance for their online audience. Using Chapman's improved version of Blank, every single one of the poets ended up in a strange state of worship.

Some appeared in picnic-themed window displays, kissing the plastic feet of the mannequins, apologising to the artificial grass, and praying to the blades individually, believing each to be a complete manifestation of Archangel Gabriel. Others bowed to pigeons and prostrated themselves in front of *Il Porcellino*, the bronze boar on Macquarie Street. One poet was seen wading into a fountain to suck water from the penis of a small statue of a child that he was convinced was baby Jesus.

A handful of poets saw their own shadows as the Blank wore off and found peace believing that God was following them every step of the way through their lives.

Within three weeks of Chapman's death, the drug had wiped out the entire generation of NFE devotees.

"It's just me and Katelyn now," says Wood. "The ones that got away. The rest either died or completely checked out of reality. No one has the heart to hold any more slams in Sydney, except in their own hallucinations."

NFE was over. All of the money Chapman had raised had vanished, and the man at the centre of it all was dead. Or was he?

Rumours still abound of sightings of Chapman – building sandcastles in Cronulla, or even buying fish and chips in Gerringong. It may well be that a body double or twin filled in for Chapman on that dark night in the windows of Piccadilly. Knowing what I know about Chapman, I wouldn't put it past him.

When I think about the day I decided to pursue the man whose name was on every hipster's lips, I had no idea how deeply sad I would feel at the end of my investigation, not only for the victims but also for Chapman – a total enigma, possibly even to himself.

Not everyone, however, was devastated by the demise of NFE. In fact, it brought a smile to the face of Caleb Andrews.

"When I heard the news, I pulled out my notebook and traipsed into the backyard with my old dog. It was a beautiful day. I sprawled out on my wicker recliner, put opium in my pipe, and drifted straight to Xanadu."

●

1. See H. Baker-Smith, 'Reinvention in Six Parts: Meditations on Julie Koh's *Asia/Australia*', Liminal [website], 18 June 2019, <<https://www.liminalmag.com/perfection/baker-smith>>, accessed 13 September 2019.

Scan the QR code or follow the URL for spoken word and animations.

FURY
ILLUSTRATION BY MAEVE BAKER

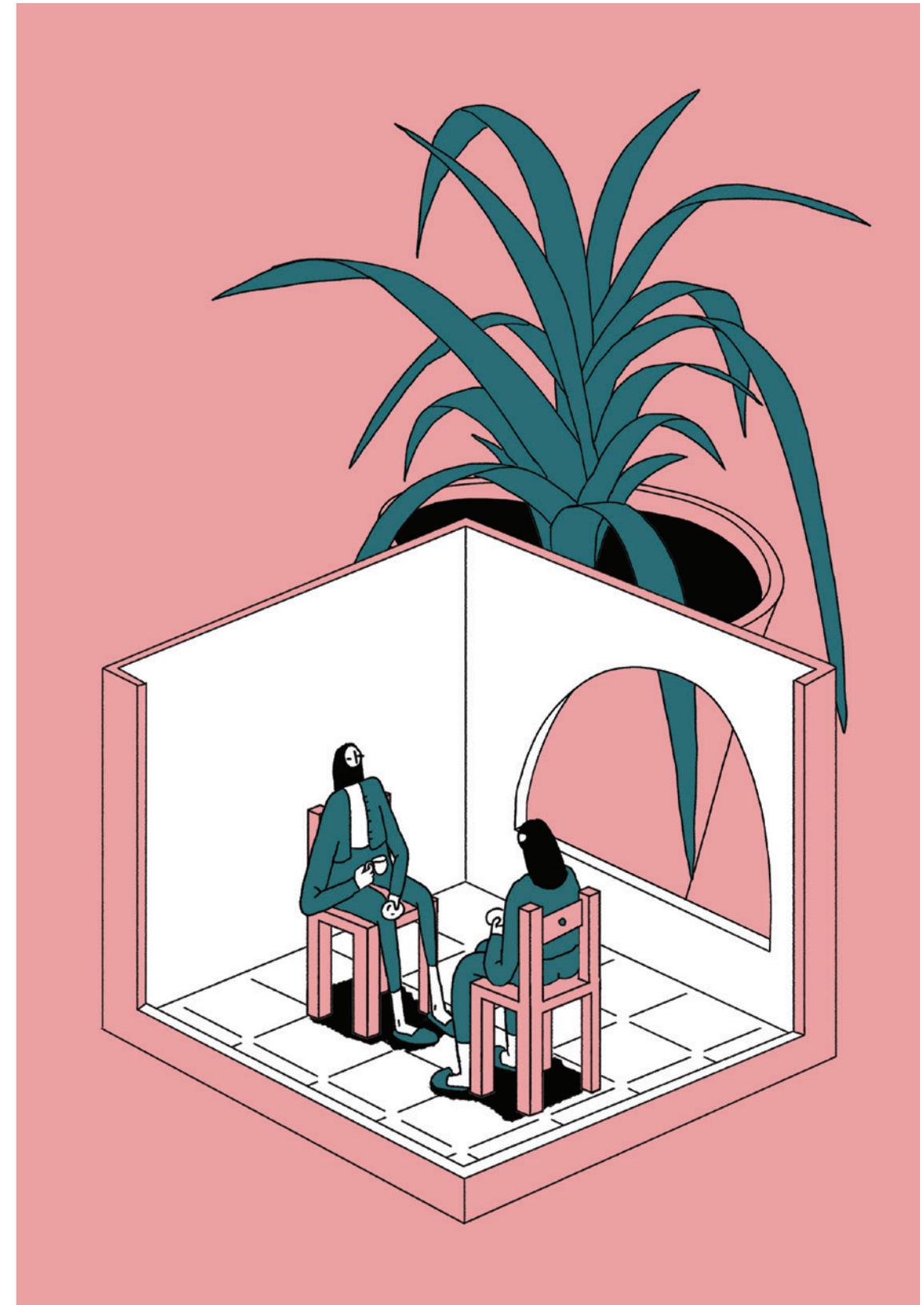


STILL LIFE IN SEPTEMBER, TWO YEARS ON

[GOINGDOWNSWING.ORG.AU/STILL-LIFE-IN-SEPTEMBER](https://goingdownswing.org.au/still-life-in-september)

SPOKEN WORD

GOING DOWN SWINGING #40



AN EPIC
POEM
FOR JASE.
LOVE, MEDEA

i. he came

he cleaves across the sea
his back kingdom-light

here

he cuts across the water
following the call of his inexorable future
(he thinks)

here

he came for gold, gleaming
when he lands he is blinded, briefly

hello

he looks again it is a girl—

blood-in-my-future
blood-in-my-past

—just a girl

where are the men he asks

oh,

she smiles

they're around. come, meet
my brother

your brother?

he loves me very much.

he follows behind, thinking
this is easier than they said it would be

she thinks: if he were a snake
i could feed him to himself

he follows behind, watching her
he thinks

when he arrives, she thought,
oh

oh,
deliverance

is that it? →

ii. he saw

bleeding fingers scratching against cold marble
 floors cold as ice cold slamming against
 (brother)
 blood on marble is
 (brother please)

easy to clean

he follows behind, thinking of
 gold gleaming
 he blinks
 the air, he thinks
 must be strange here
 his vision flickering bright
 caught in the corners by light

she smiles at him,
 wide, true
 warm no ice

take me

sorry?

take me from—

from

take me

what's the biggest greek tragedy of them all?

he promises her a place on his ship

it's that i live by the sea
 and cannot swim

he promises her his kingdom

they say if you slaughter twenty goats for Circe
 she will keep you afloat until you reach her

he promises her his children

it's not true

he promises her everything

my mother still sank

he is sexually attracted to her inability
 to swim

right to the bottom

i'll teach you, he flirts

i am not afraid of the sea

i'll hold you above the water

i am afraid that if i look

i'll hold on tight

i might see her
 drowning,
 eternally

he came for the gold
 (focus, bro)
 how are you supposed to plough a field
 when your cows are on fire

fire is not something
 you can tame

he is not a farm boy and she is not—
 he blinks
 the sun here, he thinks
 it's blinding

she touches his hand
 covers him with oil
 all over

he blushes at her immoderate touch

blood-in-my-future
blood-in-my-past
warmskincoldfloor

he came for the gold
 how do you fight soldiers who grow out of the earth

throw a stone

a stone?

a stone

he shrugs

men will kill each other over a stone

men are easily distracted

she smiles
 yes
 they are

she caresses her only friend's
 giant wings
 as he settles into eternal sleep
 quiet smoke drifting up

up

up

up

hush, little baby,
don't you cry,
mama's gonna buy you a golden fleece
hush little baby →

iii. she conquered

we're nearly stopped by

her ruthlessness i—

who knew she could

the blood

the guts

s c a t t e r e d

she really.

my brother, i love him

i love him

so much, he loves me

so much more he loves he

loved. me.

rent: allow someone to use something in
exchange for payment

rent: the past participle of rend, to tear something
into pieces

an eye for an eye,
brother absyrtus

she does not watch
her father's back bending for her brother
head bowed already thinking of funeral

she does not watch
the army come to a perfect
mournful halt

she does not watch
their horror at arm then leg then.
eventually,

head.

she does not think about her own body being
trampled beneath their feet and hooves
her father's back too proud to bend
if her face was
separated
from her shoulders her ribs her heart

she has my heart i know it now

he boards his ship
the gold gleaming on his back
blinds him he blinks
he looks at her he blinks
he blinks

oh, he thinks
what have i here?

he presses into her back its red-hot glow

he follows behind

blisters in her heat

my veins rush with sun-god-blood

she steps into his arms

she twirls him and he, surprised—

he allows himself to be led. ●

Recently, Wilson, a Chinese-Australian writer, asked to hang out with me. He wanted to collaborate on a work that explored class, race and toxic masculinity in Western Sydney. We agreed to meet at Volcano's Steakhouse in Parramatta. I'd seen him around online and, because he was Asian, I gave him the benefit of the doubt. When I met him in person, he was wearing Nike TNs and an Off White-brand bum bag slung over his shoulder. His outfit was riffing on lads, a Western Sydney subculture made up of young men from low socio-economic backgrounds. Lads draw inspiration from Black American hip-hop, British chav and Dutch gabber cultures, with interests in rap, hardstyle, graffiti and sneakers. An Australian sense of irony ties these together – in the early days, they dressed in Nautica polos tucked into tracksuit pants, bent-brim dad hats balanced precariously on the crowns of their heads. Lad-speak includes words like 'shank' (stabbing) and 'eshays' (Pig Latin for a pot-smoking 'sesh'), and thus lads as a subculture are associated with criminality.

Wilson, on the other hand, had clear skin and a squishy baby face, like a Hornsby Asian. It reminded me of the private school boys who started dressing like lads in the late 2000s, recognising that lads' reputation of being hard gave rich boys licence to behave recklessly in public. Working-class costume is also not an exclusively Australian phenomenon. Sarah Thornton in *Club Cultures* (1998) cites the example of rich young people in the UK affecting working-class accents as a way of playing down their access to generational wealth, which occurs within a broader scope of signalling their independence as young adults. This working-class costume has little impact on their social and economic mobility.

As we waited for our food, the Lebs a couple tables over were finishing up. One was telling a story about road head:

- "Remember when we went to the aquarium in Year One? There was a touch pool, it was, uh, urchins? Nah, not the spiky one, the one all like pwup pwup. Yeah! It was like, farrk, she had anemones at the back of her throat. I came so hard she choked, shot up. →

MUNDANE GLORIES

She bumped the gearstick, my legs went mad stiff, hit the pedals – VWOOM – next thing I know I’m swapping numbers with the gronk in front of me. Fucken shitbox Commodore – swear he’d get everywhere faster if he just walked – now I gotta buy him a new car, basically.”

Wilson scrunched his nose up. I raised an eyebrow. He said, “The, ah, dialect...” My stomach tightened. Our food arrived and we discussed the collab. The conversation moved to other topics, and my doubts grew. It turned out that Wilson’s mum was a psychiatrist and his dad was an actuary. He came from money but dressed poor. To top it off, he actually was from Cherrybrook: he identified as a Westie since starting his Masters in Creative Writing at Western Sydney University. He wasn’t even from here.

Even as Wilson’s outfit fetishised the poverty, criminality and violence associated with Western Sydney, he recoiled from the stories told by people that actually lived there. I suspected that Wilson’s project was interested in designating particular forms of masculinities as ‘toxic’ against one he deemed ‘healthy’, rather than examining how race, class, sexuality and geography informed multiple ideals of masculinities. Wilson’s relationship to Sydney’s badlands is symptomatic of Australian literature’s romanticisation of otherness in race, class and gender.

Using my own experiences as a writer, mentor and teacher who has worked in Western Sydney for the last seven years, I explore literature’s obsession with writing the Other as an act of empathy. But writing itself isn’t inherently empathetic: without self-reflexivity, the writer may well reinforce beliefs of dominant cultures and refuse to acknowledge the complexity in stories from the margins. Like bum bags and TNs, the stories and voices of Australian literature today are only echoes from Western Sydney.

Western Sydney is complex. It is the most populous region of Australia, with the highest count of people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, refugee, migrant, and non-English speaking backgrounds. Economic variance means that there are suburbs chock full of new money or no money: dole-bludgers, casual workers, wage slaves, dodgy tradies, white collar wannabes,

predatory business owners, drug dealers and CEOs of the School of Hard Knocks. The stories from this urban margin are inherently nuanced, exploring how communities both come together under and contribute to intersecting axes of marginalisation.

But complexity requires effort to understand, and we are rarely given the time of day. Sensationalist media and opportunistic politicians instead flatten issues around inequality, infrastructure and accessibility to make diversity itself the problem, even for progressive causes.

In an interview with radio station 3AW after 2017’s marriage equality postal survey, then-prime minister Malcolm Turnbull blamed Western Sydney’s Muslim population for the 38% ‘No’ response:

- “[T]he biggest No votes were in electorates with a large migrant population, and in particular with a large Muslim population, like several of the seats in western Sydney and in Melbourne...In some of those seats you’ve got a very big Muslim community who are very conservative on issues like this and very little support for same-sex marriage.”

Turnbull leveraged immigration against marriage equality, constructing cultural diversity as a hindrance to Australian progressiveness. Yet, as Arab-Australian writer Omar Sakr observes in his essay ‘Any Percent of a Heart is Still a Heart’, the homophobia his family exhibit only echoes the politicians and media:

- “[I]f my family is guilty of anything, it’s of being utterly assimilated into Australian culture. How else to explain the ease with which they parrot the ideas espoused by major newspapers such as *The Australian* and *The Daily Telegraph*, and by so many true blue private-school-educated politicians?”

Sakr inverts Turnbull’s suggestion that the Muslims of Western Sydney are un-Australian in their reaction against marriage equality: they are in fact very Australian in their parroting of White politicians and journalists. →

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By positioning Western Sydney Muslims as inherently conservative, Turnbull highlights White Australia's own progressiveness. Western Sydney, it seems, is stuck in time, raw data that White Australia can cite and distance itself from in its own narratives of Progress.

The idea of Western Sydney as a reactionary, lawless dumping ground can be a sexy symbol of authenticity. Wilson's outfit, for example, drew upon the imagery of Nike TNs and bum bags as staples for lads, who are associated with criminality. It's simplistic imagery that equates underclass masculinity with criminality, a bodied recklessness that says poor people are too stupid to know any better, which Wilson wielded as a form of 'authentic' because 'toxic' masculinity. Outsiders impose and wield stories of Western Sydney to empower themselves at our expense.

Opportunities for Western Sydney to tell its own stories are limited by the concentration of resources for emerging writers in Melbourne. Jonno Revanche calls this the 'Melbourne voice', a phenomenon where the majority of literary outlets for emerging writers are located in inner-city Melbourne and are thus subject to the tastes of "cis, heterosexual white men who have industry connections or access to cultural capital". It favours writing that is "overly polished, ironic, flowery or 'clever' on the surface" with "superficial engagement with the big ideas favoured by the city's writing community".

The people who most readily offer resources for new writers are demographically homogenous and centralised in Melbourne, and thus favour writing that is homogenous in content and form. Western Sydney, with its multiplicity of stories and voices, is ill-fit for the Melbourne voice when the latter is, as a friend put it succinctly, "just a poor man's NYC voice". This writing is boring because it latches onto American fantasies of cosmopolitanism by way of Netflix and Jetstar and tries to convince readers that the writer and narrator are good people.

In a recent workshop at a high school in Liverpool, made up equally of Vietnamese and Lebanese students, I asked students why they'd never read or written stories about hanging out at Krispy Kreme Orange Grove, or the housing commission of Miller, or about the difference between neighbours who yell when angry and neighbours who yell because they're ethnic.

"Cos it's stupid," muttered a boy who had turned his head to face the wall opposite me. I asked him to repeat himself louder. Though he hesitated at first, he eventually did. I asked the rest of the class to raise their hand if they agreed with him. Half the class did, as did I.

Jason's blunt response is worth unpacking. It's not that people from Western Sydney are unworthy of contemplation. By 'stupid' he meant that stories from and to Western Sydney appeared to pale in comparison to the Western canon, where Shakespeare addressed 'universal concerns' or John Marsden's *Tomorrow* series displayed extraordinary imagination and empathy for teenagers (it's worth noting that the 'invaders' in his books were coded to be Asian, and these books were published after he'd witnessed White students bullying Asian students as a teacher at Knox Grammar School). The stories from Western Sydney that got the most attention were criminal like Salem Majaher, culinary like the *My Kitchen Rules* team of Laotian-Australian Betty Banks and Vietnamese-Australian David Vu, or inspirational like Anh Do, while everything else was mundane.

- Western Sydney is not 'stupid' because our stories are simplistic. The self-serving gazes cast from White Australia, the media or Melbourne literati instead flatten the complexity, irony and self-mythology of our stories. In this devaluing, we see ourselves as they see us. In a word: stupid.

For Western Sydney-based writer and teacher Felicity Castagna, these simplistic narratives are inherently disempowering. In her essay in *Sydney Review of Books* 'Hopefully the Future is Dark', Castagna cites a student in her university creative writing class who "had written a story from the perspective of a seven-year-old girl who carried herself like Tupac and had guns in her house and used phrases like 'fuck this' and 'shit white people' over and over again." When Castagna explains that the "character doesn't feel very authentic", the student bursts into tears and agrees. The static image of Western Sydney as a place of guns, rap music, and swear words is stale and not 'authentic'. Its hostility to a White, middle-class audience is disempowering because it doesn't allow us to centre ourselves in our own stories.

But stories of Western Sydney criminality can be self-reflexive and complex. In 1998, a White Australian media frenzy demonised Lebanese-Australians as violent gangsters who brought gun and knife crime to White Australia following the October stabbing death of 15-year-old Edward Lee in Punchbowl and the November drive-by shooting on Lakemba Police Station. A *Daily Telegraph* front page story fed into this with the November 1998 headline, 'DIAL-A-GUN: Gang says it's easier than buying a pizza'. The 'gang' pictured is a group of young Lebanese-Australian men throwing up gang signs, covering their faces with FILA jackets and Nike hats, one young man blinking and smiling. In 'Lebs and Punchbowl Prison', Michael Mohammed Ahmad points out that this 'gang' was more likely a group of friends who enjoyed the gangster rap of Tupac and Biggie Smalls and dressed as such. When the *Daily Telegraph* gave them an opportunity to speak for themselves, the boys got a kick out of pulling the journalist's leg, "convincing [White Australia] that Punchbowl was Compton, South Central LA and that we were all gun-murdering drug-dealing gang-raping ghetto gangstas". By embracing the fears of White Australia around Lebanese-Australian criminality, the boys derived a sense of personal empowerment against the structural disempowerment of coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds. They, in the words of radical Black feminist writer bell hooks, "became the monster", knowing fully well that they were helpless to change media narratives around them, and so leaned into them.

Understanding and weaponising sensationalist media, like these boys did, requires an extraordinary amount of cultural literacy that goes overlooked despite the controversy it generates. This kind of control over storytelling could be better understood as a form of fiction – not in the sense of being factually incorrect, but as a form of self-reflexive, creative storytelling that manipulates the textures of their lives. That's something important to note in more contemporary examples of storytelling from Western Sydney. The music video for 'Ladz from the Hood' from Pasifika Mount Druitt drill group OneFour closes with member Spenny14 walking past a man on a Mount Druitt street at night.

A blue BMW pulls up to the kerb, from which gang members spring out and beat the man. Spenny14 glances back then continues walking. OneFour emphasise that violence, though random, is mundane in Western Sydney.

Writing for SBS Voices, Tongan-Australian writer Winnie Dunn stresses that OneFour's music and videos are the result of artistic decisions intended to shock: "Put simply, young men from minorities perform the 'gangsta' because it is empowering to scare racist white people." If these stories are simplistic, they are deliberately so, the mundane joys and rhythms of life cleared out to glorify stories about gang violence.

These stories may not be factual, but they do speak to greater truths about how the tellers want others to see them. In this sense, Castagna's criticism of inauthenticity is problematic because it assumes that authenticity is earnest and cannot exist alongside the irony, hostility and playful hyperbole that actually makes up stories told in Western Sydney. This singular definition of 'authenticity' is contentious when it applies to culturally and linguistically diverse people, with parallels in the food industry. In the essay 'Yelp Reviewers' Authenticity Fetish is White Supremacy in Action', Sara Kay writes that Asian and Latin American restaurants:

- "...end up losing either way: stay 'gaudy' and authentic, and receive lower ratings; or update and be 'not authentic' and receive lower ratings... The language directly supports a hierarchy where white, Western cuisine is allowed more creative latitude to expand, explore, and generate profits than its non-Western counterparts."

Whether in restaurants, storytelling or life, White people appoint themselves judges of the 'authentic' to avoid the deeper difficulty of engaging with people of colour and ultimately themselves, outside of their comfort zones. Castagna's idea of an 'authentic' Western Sydney story, then, is concerned with what is palatable to middle-class White readers. It misses the multitudes of ways that we use storytelling to inform, provoke and entertain, often at the same time. →

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Storytelling has always existed in Western Sydney, whether in dress, conversation or song, and a lack of access to publishing will never change that. The mundane glories of Western Sydney, however, will never be fully understood by outsiders who use us as counter-examples for their own agendas.

All the same, literature is alive and well here. Events like Bankstown Poetry Slam present a compelling outlet to publishing, where storytelling becomes a community event, while SWEATSHOP Western Sydney Literacy Movement, of which I'm proud to be a part, fosters a community of writers with an emphasis on literacy and critical thinking. bell hooks emphasises literacy as a foundation for social change:

- “We cannot begin to talk about freedom and justice in any culture unless we are talking about mass-based literacy movements. Because degrees of literacy so often determine how we see what we see.”

As writers like Sara Saleh, Shirley Le, Omar Sakr, Winnie Dunn and Evelyn Araluen demonstrate, when we focus on building narratives together, when we examine the oppressive structures that shape our lives and build new ones at the margins, the centre takes note.

Until White Australia learns to listen to Western Sydney, it will continue to see finger guns as actual guns, music videos as documentaries, and diversity as homogeneity. ●





BY THE TIME I WAS TALL ENOUGH TO SEE MY FACE IN THE BATHROOM MIRROR, HE'D STOPPED COMING BY.



4 the skux I bought fresh sneakers
 every month.
 Let my hair curl real trip hop.
 Fed my ass fat with slutty foods
 pineapple and cranberry juice. Still
 down for a feed tho. Proud
 of how cute I can act while splitting a bucket,
 because Gigi and Bella Hadid
 pretending to eat In-N-Out burgers in blue convertibles
 is big dick energy and I'm happy
 committing to the image that I'm always
 finger-lickin' good. Got my nails done
 in the colour 'true Kardashian neutral'. Smoked up
 until I was chill chill chill
 and basically brain dead. Left him
 on read. Played hard to get until I copped that
 CCV code like a bad bitch. Placed online orders
 on Fashion Nova, skinny tea and waist trainers just so
 he might lick my blunts real haka style and step
 other dawgs out like a gentleman then
 betray me with a white bitch so white hot
 that nobody talks about the fact that she wears
 foundation a whole colour wheel darker.
 Doesn't matter.
 There's still plenty of fish and lizards and demigods
 to crush between my thighs and at least
 with my indigenous sunkiss
 and foreign shapewear
 I still look well sculpted
 like Hineahuone, so →

HOT GIRL
 SUMMER

4 the daddy I demanded fresh frangipanis
 every month.
 Learnt to hot roll my hair real *Paradise Edition*.
 Wore ridiculous lingerie sets with serious
 conviction. Considered taking up cigarettes for
 a proper vintage look. Practised
 making significant eyes in the mirror. More
 honey-come-hither and less kapa haka.
 I read poetry in public places and
 kept paperbacks in my Louis,
 to use like fans to accessorise my
 Antoinette-style heaving. And in the evenings
 I tore at steaks with all my bad teeth and
 I cannot stress this enough it was
 extremely fashion-forward.
 Whole civilisations applauded.
 I latched onto this and developed
 an insatiable taste for elaborate
 cocktail umbrellas. Hoarded
 invitations to swanky lobotomies
 where I sipped Dom Pérignon and rolled
 my eyes in divination. Had revelations
 that the future is essentially
 a hundred dollar bills
 in a tight white fist exploding
 against the automatic ass of
 an AI stripper. Yes, even the robots
 are programmed with excessive desire.
 Well, what did you expect?
 It's the 20s again and all I wanted,
 like Daisy Buchanan, like a beautiful fool,
 was for him to fly me out and put me up
 in a bougie-as mansion
 then go die in the pool, so

4 the atua I asked fresh forgiveness
 every month.
 Let my hair curl real east coast
 with all the furls of the whenua.
 Got my reggae on
 to Rua Kenana and chanted
Tūhoe, prophet of Te Urewera
 every weekend, in a garage
 like a ritual.
 Started wearing my lipstick on my chin
 and the places I thought
 were too fat I now thought were too thin.
 I ate off the land. I lived by the moon
 because that's where I thought I'd see him,
 down by the river while I was having my
 monthly hallucinations,
 bleeding into the whenua
 paling holographic
 and waiting for him to appear.
 In the coldest parts of nights like this,
 when my body was nothing
 but a hot summer
 making the water
 steam and levitate towards the sky,
 it was clear
 that even God was ghosting
 my messages, my prayers.
 And I thought of Mary Magdalene,
 and her beautiful hair and how
 degraded she must have felt.
 Doesn't matter
 that it was Jesus.
 All men think they're God's gift. ●

God is mean. This is what I remember. My father holds my hands and leads me towards the church steps that open onto a stage, which is surrounded by pews and pews of Tongans. Dad has dragged me from playing Tips with my cousin, Keisha, across the road from Tokaikolo Church in front of the low steel fence of Granville East Public School. I watched my father walk over in all black, with *ta'ovala*, a type of Tongan mat, tied around his waist. The *ta'ovala* arched above his head like the gold halo I see in pictures of Jesus. My father's eyes were rimmed red, right down to the corner of his thick black lashes. His thin black hair was spiked up with gel and I knew the stubble on his pale cheeks prickled. Keisha, the first daughter of Uncle Tale, my dad's stepbrother, pinched my arm and yelled, "You're it!" I saw a smudge of dirt on Keisha's cheek, barely visible because her skin was the same hue. But before I could get her back, Dad lifted me up from my waist and carried me away in his wide arms as strong as *fonua*, the earth. His breath smells of Long Beach Yellow.

"Little Bib, God is watching. We can't play right now." Then he leads us through the chipped white wooden doors of Tokaikolo, brushing off dirt stuck to the fabric of my purple stockings.

The stage, in the centre of the church, is where my mother lies sleeping. My father has said it – "She will sleep forever in the arms of God." I try to imagine how God's arms would look. God's skin would be a faded brown, covered in long black hairs. His muscles round and curved like rocks. Just like my father's. Are they the arms Mummy Le'o is sleeping in now?

Back in the hospital, surrounded by white sheets, my mother's body was made of wax. She was bald. Her black eyes and crooked teeth were falling out her skull. Her knees, her ribs and her collarbones were sharp and angular as they tried to break through her skin. It was Mummy Le'o's birthday. Me and Dad snuck into the hospital with a chocolate marble cake from Michel's Patisserie. Dad said it was her favourite. I remember climbing into Mummy Le'o's bed, kissing her on the cheek and running my hands over her scalp, which was veiny and cool against my palm. The grey machines around her bed beeped and flashed around us. When I sat between my mother's thin legs, Dad sung to us. I watched the flames of the candles that were pressed deep into the cream icing. I held my lips tight. Keeping in all my breath so that I would be able to blow the candles' flame into smoke. All through my father's singing, I felt my mother's thin fingers brushing the nape of my neck, her fingernails gently scratching my hair. I was four. I thought that being in hospital for months was something all mothers went through. →

ALL OF TONGA

Mummy Le'o's coffin is covered in *ngatu*, another type of Tongan mat. Dad told me a coffin is just like a bed. The Tongans of Tokaikolo Church, my family's church, are all dressed in black and dark purple, their waists bound in *ta'ovala*. The air is heavy and sticky with perfumed roses and sweat. My father still carries me in his heavy arms. We walk past the *faifekaus* in red ties and Grandma Fehia, who sits like an overbaked cupcake on an arched-back chair, which is covered in mats and surrounded by plastic-wrapped baskets filled with biscuits and expensive perfumes.

In my father's arms, I feel him climb the steps of the stage towards my mother. My back aches because the weight of my father feels like the fonua falling on top of me. Mummy Le'o is just sleeping. My mum is just sleeping. The pews creak in harmony as the Tongans of our church stand up together and sing, their voices loud and long in hymn, "*Oku ai ka ki'i fonua. 'Oku tu'u 'i 'Oseni. Na'e 'ikai ke ma'u 'Otua. Na'e masiva he lelei. Haleluia! Haleluia! Kuo monū'ia eni.*" "There was a small island that stands in the Ocean. It did not have God. They were poor in goodness. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! They are now blessed."

Before English people brought God to us in big white boats, my nana told me that Tongans lived in eternal darkness. As I got older and Mummy Le'o became a memory, I realised my nana was telling me that she believed that Tongans used to live with cursed ink on our skin and human flesh between our teeth. That we were slaves to our own kind. In turn, we enslaved others that looked like us from other islands. When *pālangi* came, their skin was made of light. On their tongues was a Being so divine and merciful and full of their light. We thanked *pālangi* for bringing us this light. God blessed us by letting us keep our land. Now everything we do, from singing to keeping our skin bare to only filling our teeth with gold, is all for God, our God, with His skin made of light. I remember how Nana whispered to me, her afro moving back and forth, a black cloud, "In heaven, we are all light." I told Nana that her skin already looked light to me and she warned me about being a *fie lelei* – a show-off.

- My father's chest is as hard as clay. I hide my face in the torn ta'ovala arched around his head instead of around his waist. This shows every other Tongan that my father's grief is greater than theirs.

Before Mummy Le'o went to sleep, Dad told me how they met. We were in Campsie hospital, sitting in the hallway. I remember many nurses in lilac shirts and pants stopping to pinch my cheeks. Dad explained that he met Mum at a relative's 21st birthday at Burwood Function Centre.

"Saw her straight away. Long, thick black hair, like yours, but she had a face like the moon," he breathed out. I wanted to know more but had to wait while a Filipino nurse with dyed-blond hair asked my dad if I was his little sister. Over the green plastic armrest of the hospital seats, Dad grabbed hold of my hand. His palms were calloused and rough. He continued, "Your mum followed me when I went out the front for a smoke. She asked me for a cigarette. When I lit one up for her and passed it, I touched the sleeve of her black velvet dress." Then Dad started smiling, his teeth white and straight. "It was then I heard God in my head, telling me to give my life to this woman. But before I could say anything, your mum took a big drag of my ciggie and coughed her lungs out." My father gripped my hands tightly and laughed, "I knew your mum was only tryna impress me and all that. So I got her number. Then God gave us you."

On the stage, in front of the pews and pews of Tongans, Dad presses his cheek into my forehead. "Kiss Mummy Le'o goodnight," he tells me, his deep voice breaking, his chest heaving. I lift my head to look at my father. There are marks of dried tears across his cheeks. Why is he crying? Mummy Le'o is just sleeping. I press my hand into his face to wipe the tears, my skin browner than his, even though, as I understood later, we are both half-Tongan and half-White. I cling onto my father as he sets me down near my mother's coffin. The lace of my black dress sticks to my skin. My shiny black shoes are too tight. I don't want to be here. Where is Keisha? Why can't we play? Mummy Le'o is just sleeping. She's just sleeping. The roses from the coffin are filling up my mouth with dirt and filling my chest up with petals. Mummy Le'o will wake up soon. I know it. I've seen her do it. We sleep next to each other all the time at home. Before she got sick. I remember when Dad yelled at her and punched a hole in the wall. I laid next to Mummy Le'o all night as she sobbed into my hair. She smelled of coconut oil. Her chest was warm against my ear. I listened to my mother's heartbeat until she murmured, "It's like I'm giving birth to you all over again, Little Bib." Her words made my eyes feel heavy. I blinked and blinked.

- "Look at us. You came out so brown. Not like me and daddy." She kissed my head and whispered, "God put all of Tonga in you." When I woke up the next day, I put my hand against Mummy Le'o's cheek, pale as the moon, even though we are both half-Tongan and half-White.

The singing of a hundred Tongans beats against my head as I pull at the lace collar of my dress. "*Haleluia! Haleluia! Haleluia! Kuo monū'ia eni.*" Mummy Le'o is just sleeping. Even though I know it's time to say goodnight, I keep my head up. I look around the stage, where curtains of black silk hang from the ceiling. The woman sitting closest to the coffin, also in a *ta'ovala* that arches above her head, is my Auntie Dottie, Mummy Le'o's older sister. Auntie Dottie's thick hair looks like mine, but unlike mine, her hair is cut above her ears at odd angles. I watched my Grandma Fehia, my mum's mum, do it. All the Tongans of Tokaikolo stood around Grandma Fehia and Auntie Dottie in a circle, with the women at the front and the men at the back. It took Grandma Fehia a whole half hour to get up from her wheelchair because her fat fell sideways and dragged her down. Grandma Fehia once told me that us Tongans are a proud hurting people. I remember how her tongue pressed in gaps between her brown teeth as she said, "The more we suffer, the closer we are to God." My Auntie Dottie's crooked strands shows us that she has lost something greater even than what my father has lost. Mummy Le'o was Auntie Dottie's only sister.

One time at McDonald's, Dottie whispered to me a secret.

"When I found out your mummy was pregnant, I wanted her to get rid of you." I looked up from my Sweet 'n' Sour sauce and squinted my eyes at my auntie. "Don't look at me like that!" she snapped at me, filling her mouth with fries. Specks of salt fell from her lips as she confessed, "I'm the oldest. I'm your *fahu*. I get to decide what happens to you." The orange sun reflected on the plastic of the Macca's playground behind her. "Oh Little Bib, she cried and cried that night threatening to kill me if I didn't look after both of you." →

When I asked Auntie Dottie why my mum would say that, she told me off for speaking with my mouth full but then she just sighed and said, “I helped carry your mum everywhere until you were born. Aren’t we lucky to be alive, huh?”

When Auntie Dottie looks up from the coffin and sees me, she reaches out and wails, “*Aue! Auuuuuue!*” and Grandma Fehia calls back to her in unison, “*Aue! Auuuuuue!*” I reach for Dottie’s hand, our skin the same colour. Did God put all of Tonga in her too? Why just us? Why did God put Mummy Le’o on the moon so far away from me? Auntie Dottie grips me so tight that my skin under her fingers turns white. My aunt’s round black eyes are filled with tears, which catch in the thick mascara that coats her lashes.

- Dottie drags me closer to her calling out to me, “You look too much like her. Too much. Too much. I can’t look at you. I can’t.” But my auntie stares into me with her black eyes all the same until she pulls me into her chest and kisses my hair.

I try to wriggle out of her arms. Mummy Le’o is just sleeping. I push against Dottie’s thin chest but she just holds onto me tighter and wails, “You even smell like her. I can’t. I can’t stand you. Get away from me. *Auuuuuuue! Auuuuuue!*” From above my aunt’s shoulders I see my father kneel at the head of Mummy Le’o’s coffin. His *ta’ovala* is bent down towards the top of his head. He nods slightly at me, towards where Mummy Le’o is sleeping. My father’s chin wobbles before he begins to cry into his shaking hands. I look out onto the pews and pews of Tongans in front of me. In the front row are the *faifekaus*, the ministers, who wear all black except for their red ties. One of them is my grandpa, Tata. He has his back to the stage, but I can tell it’s him because of his hair, black with patches of grey that is brushed into neat waves. Tata leads the choir, who stand behind the *faifekaus*, by blowing into a harmonica. Three Tongan women, who have the same afro as my nana, lead the choir in harmony, “*E ‘Otua māfimaafi. Ko homau ‘eiki koe.*” “Oh, almighty God! You are our Lord.” The rest of the choir, who are so dark skinned it looks like God put all the Pacific Islands into them, follows in belting melody, “*Ko koe ko e falala ‘anga. Mo e ‘ofa ki Tonga.*” “It is You, the pillar. And the love to Tonga.” Off to the side, my grandma Fehia shouts in tears above the choir pounding her chest with her fist, the halo of *ta’ovala* around her head shaking. I see my little cousins Pongi and Hiva, their afros braided into neat rows, crawling on their hands and knees towards the baskets, trying to take a look at what’s inside so that they can steal a good one. Why all of this? Mummy Le’o is just sleeping.

Auntie Dottie releases me from her grip and pushes me towards the coffin. My tight shoes smack against the wood, briefly interrupting the hymns. My legs ache. My back aches. My eyes ache. My head aches. Auntie Dottie moans, “You have to look. Look. Look. Look for me. I can’t do it anymore. I can’t.” Dottie sways on her knees, her face in her hands, just like my father. I grip the side of the coffin tightly. Mummy Le’o is just sleeping. She’s just sleeping. She’s just sleeping. I hang my head low and in front of God and Tonga I look down at my mother. Her moon face is blue. Tiny red veins spread over her eyelids. I stare and stare.

If she opened her eyes now, I know that one of her pupils would be off-centre, always looking somewhere else. Once, I watched Mummy Le’o put in her contact lenses. With a finger in her eye she sighed to me, “Oh Little Bib, there are too many pieces of me.” I stare and stare.

Back in the hospital, I helped Mummy Le’o put make-up over all the bruises she couldn’t reach. She told me her bruises were from all the needles. She was so sore all the time. I stare and stare. In my mother’s coffin, a wig covers her head, the dark locks spreading over her neck and into her white lace dress. She almost looks like before, from before she was sick. I remember Mummy Le’o’s slim palms massaging my scalp with coconut oil, her soft tummy warm against my back. Her fingers moved through my hair, separating my tangles, weaving each strand into plaits.

“Little Bib,” Mummy Le’o hummed to me, “Promise me that you’ll keep your hair long. For me. Just for me. Even after I’m gone.”

This is what I remember.

- “Muuuummy!” I scream so loud that the choir stops mid-song. “*Auuuuue! Auuuuuue!*” My father is pulling away from her. I push against him with my arms, my shoulders, my legs.

“Stop! Stop! She’s gone!” he yells. My feet stomp on the stage in echoing thuds. Everyone is still. I feel all their eyes.

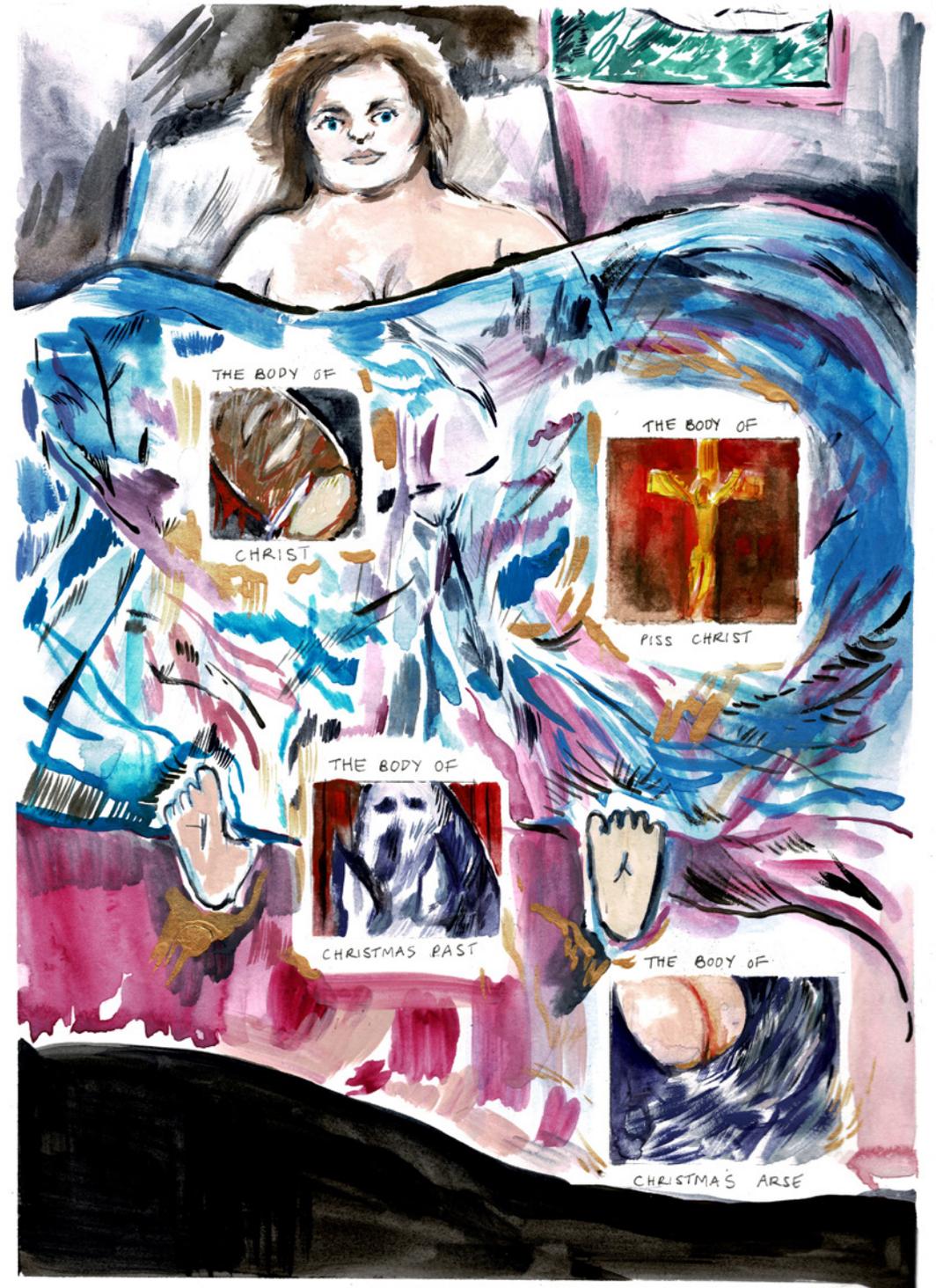
All of Tonga, the Tonga that Mummy Le’o told me was inside me, weighs me down and keeps me here, in a place where I can’t be with her. God made us different so He could take her away from me. I elbow my father in the stomach, he drops me and I fall on my knees. I crawl to my mother and begin climbing into the coffin with her. I can’t fit. I pound my small fists onto her chest. Each hit lands with hollow thuds. She sleeps through it all. This is how I know she is dead. I call for my mother. My father pulls me up by my hair with one hand and with the other he pulls up the lid of the coffin. The wood panels smack against each other as the coffin closes, shaking the walls of the church. ●

“Muuuummy!” I scream so loud that the choir stops mid-song. “Auuue! Auuue!” My father is pulling away from her. I push against him with my arms, my shoulders, my legs.

“Stop! Stop! She’s gone!” he yells. My feet stomp on the stage in echoing thuds. Everyone is still. I feel all their eyes.



ALL THE REAL THIN BODIES TRAPPED
INSIDE MY FAKE FAT ONE





MY FAKE BODY KEEPS MAKING ALL THESE MORTIFYING MOTIONS



IT STANDS MY REAL BODY'S HAIRS ON END



IT MAKES MY REAL BODY JUMP OUT OF ITS SKIN...

... IF IT COULD

MY REAL BODIES' T-SHIRTS:





HOW WE'LL
REINSTATE
THE
MATRIARCHY

'Fuck Australia. I hope it burns to the ground.'
- *Tarneen Onus-Williams, (26 January 2018)*

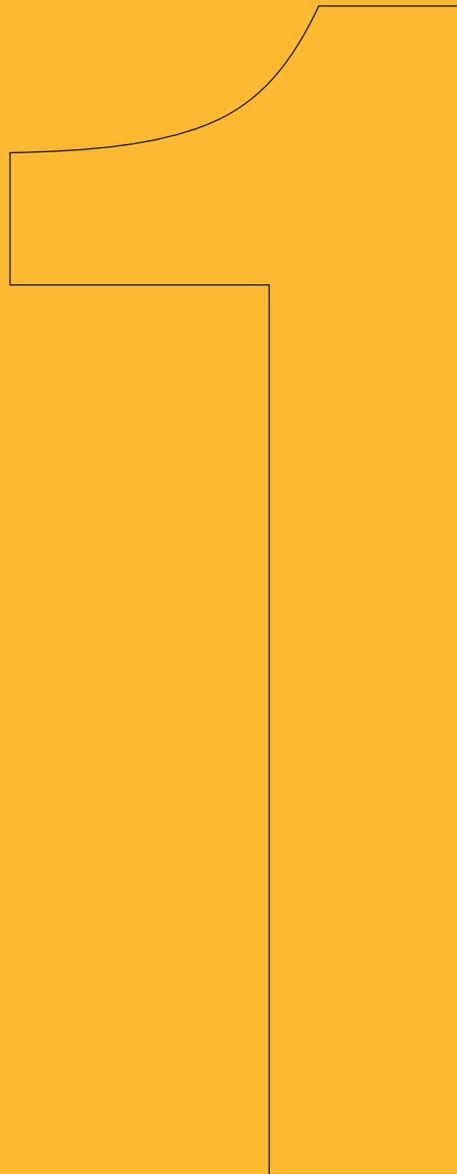
australia burns
to the ground. aunties crawl
from banksia: slow and
sure as gugaa climbing the mountain
to whet the cracks in our lips. bilirr carries down song
and ceremony; leaves us soaking
in self-healing seed pods, sharpening stones
in our bellies—each movement,
every sound: umbilical.

water travels down mountain tops
to fill our creeks and rivers.
we relearn their currents, their songlines;
reach down and pluck names
from the continental ashes, settle them inside our mouths
until we spew them out with tiddalick lungs
and plant mangroves to keep them
from eroding again.

→

help me lather my skin
 in wattle-soap for gunggubal to come
 and feast. bring him close, cut him into pieces,
 sink the pieces into lakes, and watch him
 multiply. see maliyan fly. watch her
 emerge from the charred blackness of the land: dark as soot
 against blue and yellow sky. she lingers and
 longs, looks on as we gather earth and possum skin,
 fan down the flames: rebuild the matriarchy
 from australia's remains.

Wiradjuri-English glossary:
 gugaa – goanna
 bilirr – black cockatoo
 gunggubal – Murray cod
 maliyan – wedge-tailed eagle



ONENESS

'To be abandoned is to deny the intimacy of your surroundings.'
- *David Whyte*

When I confess loneliness,
I am taken
to the window
to press elbows to aluminium,
witness the trees
and see

rashed trunks | youth | old scars | deep roots | smooth leaves |
earthy truths of infestation

and, with deeper observation -

| spirits |

akin to mine,
the divine returned in this lifetime
as a guide
to remind
that there is never a time
to feel alone -

oneness has
many homes. ●

IN THE BELLY OF THE TROJAN HORSE

THE DIVERSITY LIE

When those in the literary scene talk about what may be wrong with modern Australian literature, we start and end at diversity. There's talk about how hard it is to change the space, a recognition of the lack of prominent representative bodies. There is no conversation around access, and who has access to this space. Instead, we suggest it's simply the addition of those bodies that will counter the reasons they weren't able to exist in the literary space to begin with.

When I hear answers like this attempting to address the complicated problems of inclusivity, I'm reminded of Gayatri Spivak's article 'Can The Subaltern Speak?'. In the work, Spivak writes of how despite the most well-meaning efforts, the production of western academia is to perpetuate western economic interests.

And the reality of Australian literature is that, despite the most well-meaning efforts, the production of Australian literature is to perpetuate its whiteness.

Spivak unpacks how certain knowledges are disqualified and ghettoised in specific spaces of our culture, creating 'a whole set of knowledges' that have been categorised as 'inadequate to their task'. This can be realised in ways as simple as undermining the expertise of someone because their entry point isn't the same as the clear path of the white middle-class writer. It is the soft touch of self-doubt toward the diverse writer; they lack expertise to comment on anything outside of their 'lived experience'. Instead, the white writer positions themselves as better suited to write on and respond to a range of topics, implying that the diverse writer's knowledge is not legitimate outside of their communities. Rather, as Spivak writes, the diverse writer presents 'naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.'

In Australian literature this comes through in the realisation that it is imperative to seem more diverse. This realisation is a two-pronged process of manipulation and curation of acceptable knowledge from diverse bodies. →

The keen interest in publishing memoirs, trauma porn, of child soldier narratives about immigrant African diaspora Australians, is the narrow lens through which we understand Africans, and the status of Africa as a continent. The objective of diversity is met but the displaced Other is still regulated, in a condition that is more palatable to a tradition of imperialist, white-supremacist Australian literary society.

In our industry, this type of representation works as a Trojan Horse; our discourse is not focused on the type of representation but the sole existence of representation. Diversity becomes a defence against dissenters, while carving out what is and isn't acceptable knowledge through the expression of bodies. Media representation is the way we communicate bodies, media diversity is the way we order bodies, and diversity is the outcome of how we communicate those bodies. And even when our books and media are represented by diverse bodies, those bodies are moderated by those who set the tone of acceptable knowledge, writing and expression. In our media and publishing companies, processes still exist to streamline work through a monoculture of editors, producers, assistant producers, reporters, writers, reviewers, etc.

But the answer isn't just a pure representational politik; it requires recognition of a culture that exists to perpetuate a disqualification of knowledge. Maxine Beneba Clarke wrote in 2015 in *Overland* about how publishers had rejected her award-winning short-story collection *Foreign Soil* because of its difficulty. She wrote about her submission to the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards that springboarded her ascent into the mainstream, how she felt her submission was not as easily accessible as the other shortlisted entries. As Clarke says, her submission was written in 'patois, broken English and many different vernaculars, with challenging subject matter and primarily black characters.' This was punctuated by the idea that diverse literature simply 'doesn't sell'.

The judges for Clarke's award weren't racially diverse. Her work was appreciated for its experimentality, though it contained 'difficult subject matter'. But for the work to be recognised it necessitated, as Clarke wrote, an 'openness to content and form'.

For a future Australian writing space to evolve, and allow for this diversity that's become the buzzword of the decade, there needs to be a shift away from a purely representational politik: the kind of politics that looks for totems and figures, as opposed to material change. Because the question of 'how to solve centuries of Australia's whiteness in the literary space' cannot simply be answered with 'with diverse bodies', there needs to be an understanding of what these cultural and literary institutions have meant for most of their existence: a space for white people. The onus must extend beyond the handful of diverse bodies in the building, and move away from passively accepting that every diverse body is an expert. There needs to be infrastructure that stops relying on shortcuts.

CONSUMPTION

The personal essay has become a space rife with exploitation. The young, diverse writer's experience is to be consumed by predatory editors who often pay much less than the story is worth. The call-out for diverse writers is too often to express trauma and relive experiences.

This seems to happen like clockwork after traumatic events: terror attacks, political dog-whistling. I recall drafting a piece for an editor who used my position within community as a means to extract information. My proximity to them was transformed into a means of collection.

bell hooks explores the consumption of the Other in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, recalling a time when a group of white male students walked by her:

- "Seemingly unaware of my presence, these young men talked about their plans to fuck as many girls from other racial ethnic groups as they could 'catch' before graduation... To these young males and their buddies, fucking was a way to confront the Other, as well as a way to make themselves over, to leave behind white 'innocence' and enter the world of 'experience'. As is often the case in this society, they were confident that non-white people had more life experience, were more worldly, sensual, and sexual because they were different."

The writing space seeks to consume diverse writers. It is done through the same actions denoted by Spivak with regards to creating acceptable and unacceptable knowledge in our obsession with a representational politik. This consumption of the diverse writer in the mode of acceptable knowledge is an attempt at monolithically viewing a community. The figure becomes representative of their community, no matter how large, and will speak on behalf of all.

The diverse body is shopped for like one gathers one's groceries. We shop for the opinions, mining for the experience. We reduce their bodies, their opinions, their thoughts to objects viewed under a lens of whiteness. In hooks' story, the young white men's desire is to dominate, but similarly, our media seeks to dominate discourse through the use of these bodies.

We need a future where we escape bubblegum wokeness, the strategic placement of diverse bodies in public spaces in a tokenistic effort to showcase diversity. Otherwise, the future will become a process of searching for an authentic voice of representation that is curated by whiteness. Diverse bodies will become nothing but caricatures.

INFLUENCER WRITER

In our current culture of Hot Take Opinions Now, Analysis Never, there is a need for reflection. We need to once again define what good art – and in this case, good writing – is. For that to happen we need to examine the way we consume writing, and what we expect from those writers we read.

At present there has never been more self-awareness over what a writer's 'brand' may be. The audience is no longer being served, but pandered to, with work responding to whatever the audience might be most amenable to. It is the same insincerity we see of major brands, crowbarring social justice into their advertising in an effort to engage with an emerging young demographic interested in, say, climate change.

The point is, we are now professional marketers. We are feverishly working on our Twitter personas almost as hard as we are working on what ends up on the page. →

And then there is the anxiety of whether the writing will result in more followers. This epidemic is inextricably tied to our influence culture, where the writing is almost secondary to the performance of the writing lifestyle. It is more important to be invited to writers' festivals than it is to create the work that eventuates in that invitation.

With the popularisation of figures like Caroline Calloway, whose fallen book deal has reduced her writing to Instagram captions, we have invited conversation about the blurred lines between influencer and writer. In *The Guardian*, Allegra Hobbs explores that tension, and mentions how Calloway identifies herself as a writer, as opposed to how another journalist has described her as an 'Instagram blogger'.

Hobbs writes, "...perhaps Calloway could be forgiven for conflating the work of writing with the work of marketing oneself as a writer. After all, to be a writer today is to make yourself a product for public consumption on the internet, to project an appealing image that contextualises the actual writing."

Our conceptions of how to rise to prominence as a writer usually start with the question, "are you on Twitter?", not "what have you written?", or "what are your ideas and what are the topics you'd like to explore?" It is first-year journalism students being told to gain exposure on Twitter to raise their profile. And as Hobbs writes, "in the way that the influencer uses her image to sell her swag, the writer leverages her life to sell her work, to editors and audiences."

This is why Ta-Nehisi Coates' *We Were Eight Years in Power* is so powerful. It shows a candid account of the life of the writer; the insecurity, unemployment checks, the financial irregularities and more importantly, the work needed to prosper. It is an answer to the snapshot glances we are fed from influencer writers: it shows the moment before and after the picture.

The book is made up of eight essays written during Barack Obama's presidency and, between each essay, chronicles points of Coates' writing career during that period. It is a book that doesn't try to be polished or pretend the journey was easy, it does the complete opposite. It taught me what not to be as a writer. →

It is the soft touch of self-doubt toward the diverse writer; they lack expertise to comment on anything outside of their ‘lived experience’. Instead, the white writer positions themselves as better suited to write on and respond to a range of topics, implying that the diverse writer’s knowledge is not legitimate outside of their communities.

To separate the ideals of fame and inflated importance from your work. To be comfortable in the knowledge that your work may be unread. This is ultimately what I have come to believe good art and, by extension, good writing does. As Coates explains: “Art was not an after-school special. Art was not motivational speaking. Art was not sentimental. It had no responsibility to be hopeful or optimistic or make anyone feel better about the world. It must reflect the world in all its brutality and beauty, not bring hopes of changing it but in the mean and selfish desire to not be enrolled in its lie, to not be co-opted by television dreams, to not ignore the great crimes all around us.”

On the surface, this may read as a statement of writing as a political imperative. That is true, but when I read this I also think about the lie of the writer’s public persona, the performance of what that life is: the need to mould your work on the whims of hopeful ideals, to placate the self-aware brand the writer has built.

Whether we like to admit it or not, as Hobbs writes, “...there is functionally little difference between a lauded writer with a recognisable avatar and a prominent social-media influencer. The only difference is in the way each metabolises the experience of influence.”

And in this era of influence, we need to hold onto our work’s purpose more than ever. ●

ELEANOR JACKSON
ILLUSTRATION BY MAEVE BAKER

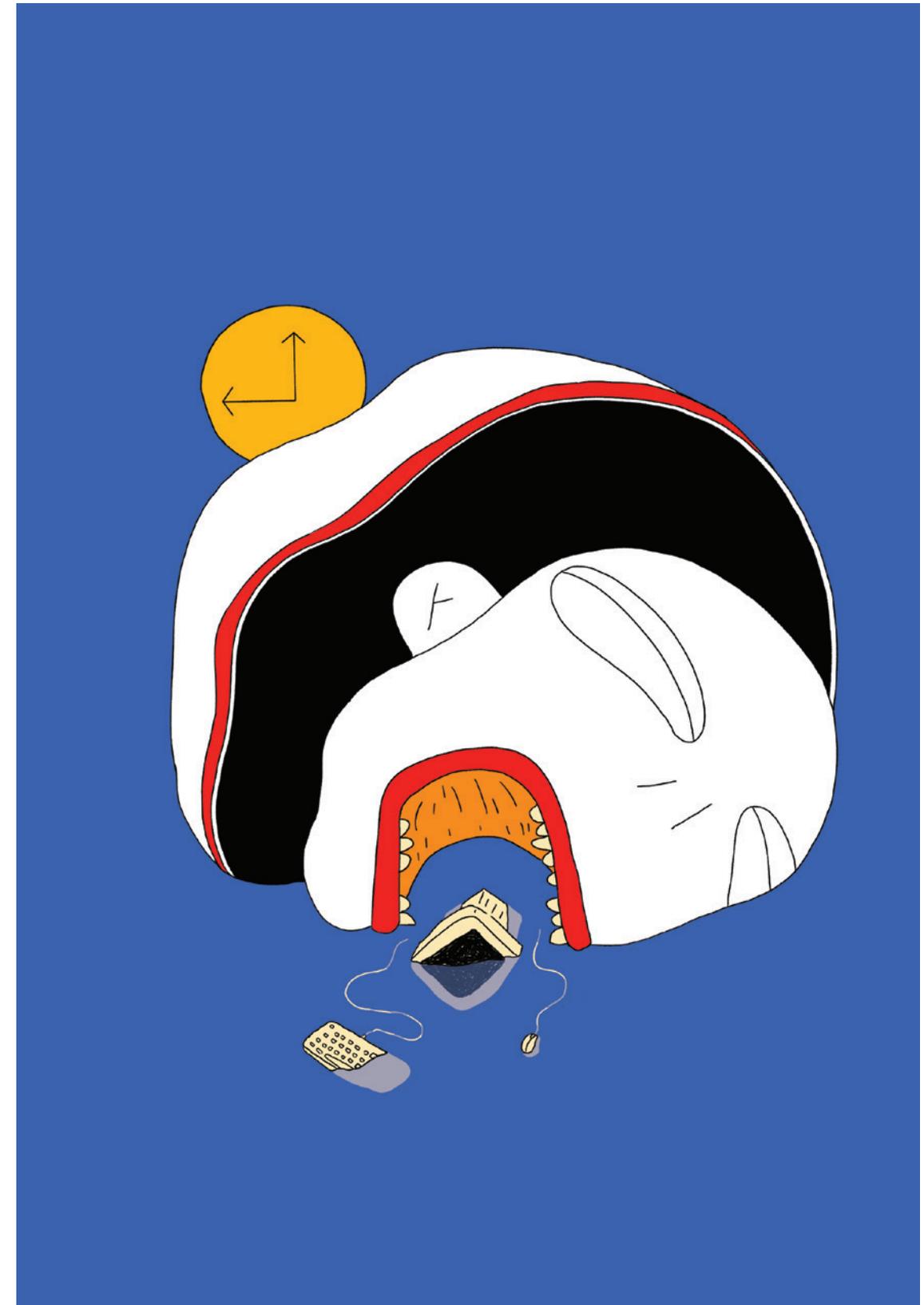


THE SINGERS

GOINGDOWNSWINGING.ORG.AU/THE-SINGERS

SPOKEN WORD

GOING DOWN SWINGING #40

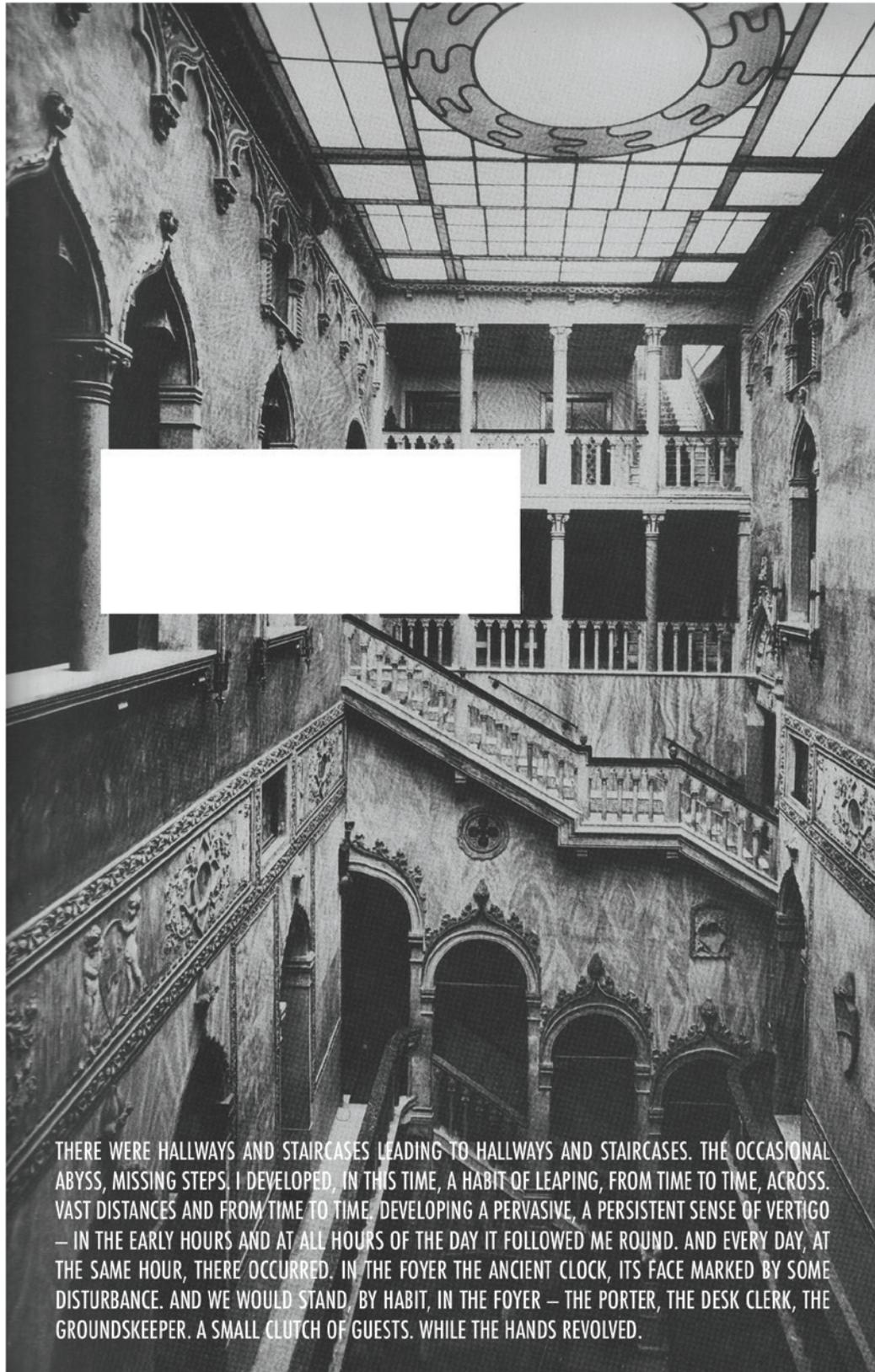


Of the dead trees lying there indefinitely
 Of the sky watching them as if nothing had happened
 Of a poem, written years ago, that emerges, copied, on the bark of a cardboard box
 Of the wind that makes itself heard, all day, all night, like a see
 Of the eyes outside that never try to meet, a twig, or two
 Of a book with a page torn off, its shriek sharp, but no pain, no known pain
 Of a laid leaf, half-transparent against the sun, half-warm, too
 Of characters, transferred onto words, revealing, and concealed, revealing concealed
 Of a desire for wordlessness, for cutting off all relationships, for sinking all of them
 Of a desire to smile, at an idea that comes to offer itself, like sex
 Of destruction that
 Of self-censorship, a ship anchored at a heart that swallows itself
 Of an I that gradually grows into an AI
 Of a sleep alive with dreams singing in the brain
 Of purposelessness like the tree that stands and stands, always with bare branches
 Of the cloud that comes close to hang itself on one of them
 Of the plane that heads right into the shadow of a pretend sun
 Of a face that never becomes larger than itself
 Of books in love with eyes and hands and beds in between, and with themselves
 Of raindrops so noisy that each sounds so different from the other
 Of the writeable surfaces, including the finger-nails, eyelids and the crack of dawn door
 Of one keeping oneself company day in day out around the same place ugly beyond belief
 Of red chillies yellow chillies green chillies with their curved shapes lying on a white tissue
 Of a story in one word with a title more than 100 words
 Of a book that wants to die at its own hand
 Of a dream that declares it is not a dream, not for recording for a purpose
 Of a potato that is sweet, brown on the outside, red on the inside, and mud-stained
 Of a book that is out of print as soon as one copy is printed
 Of total strangers who happen to like you for a second before moving on
 Of fluidity
 Of water
 Of clouds
 Of things, things, things, things
 Of a water tap
 Of a mouth, shaped, like a water tap
 Of a toilet roll, shedding to its core, not trashed, but hand-written, with poetry, inside out
 Of the two broken boats, like in love, side by side, wanting to, but unable to, tear apart
 Of my nose that has been breathing for over sixty-four years, without fail
 Of a nail whose memory is as deep as the flesh it's driven into
 Of a mail that went missing after traversing the sky of two continents
 Of cardboard boxes, hand-written all over with dated poetry
 Of a bird, seeing eye to eye, with me, perching on my hotel windowsill, in a forgotten year
 Of my dozen dead pens, hanging on the wall, in vertical lines, resembling poetry
 Of a receipt that serves as a reminder that I still live a commoner's life
 Of a thermos bottle that keeps warm as long as the tea-drinker hasn't exhausted its contents
 Of a fan of garlic that is sprouting a tender-green shoot after a night of ferocious wind
 Of pretending not to see, not to have seen
 Of rain which makes itself felt when the lips of the earth are stained, with wet
 Of a large leaf, lying on the ground, hold half a leaf, of rain water
 Of a voice speaking after the rain, in the wind, unheard, unheard of
 Of breathlessness, while walking →

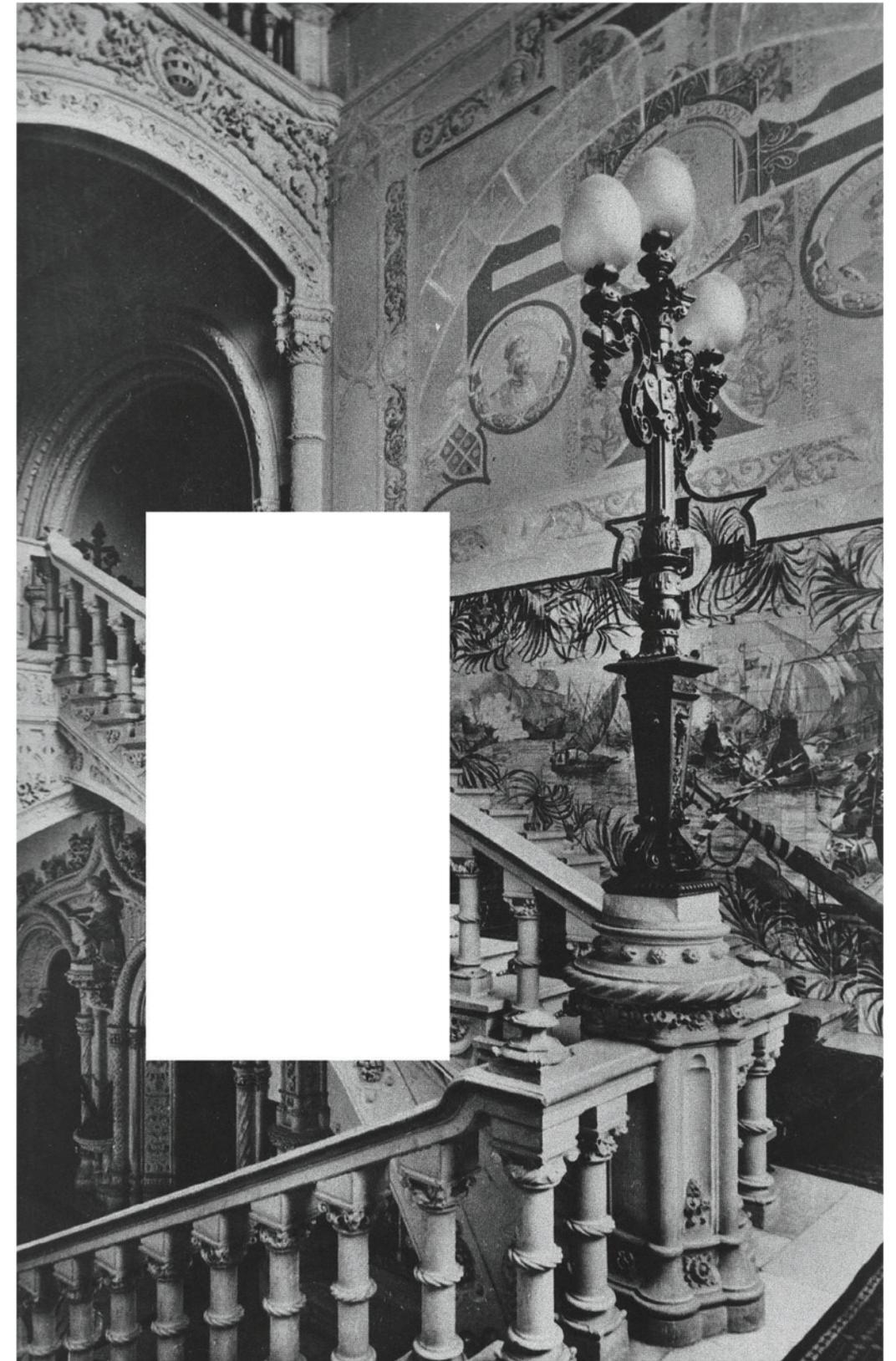
IN PRAISE

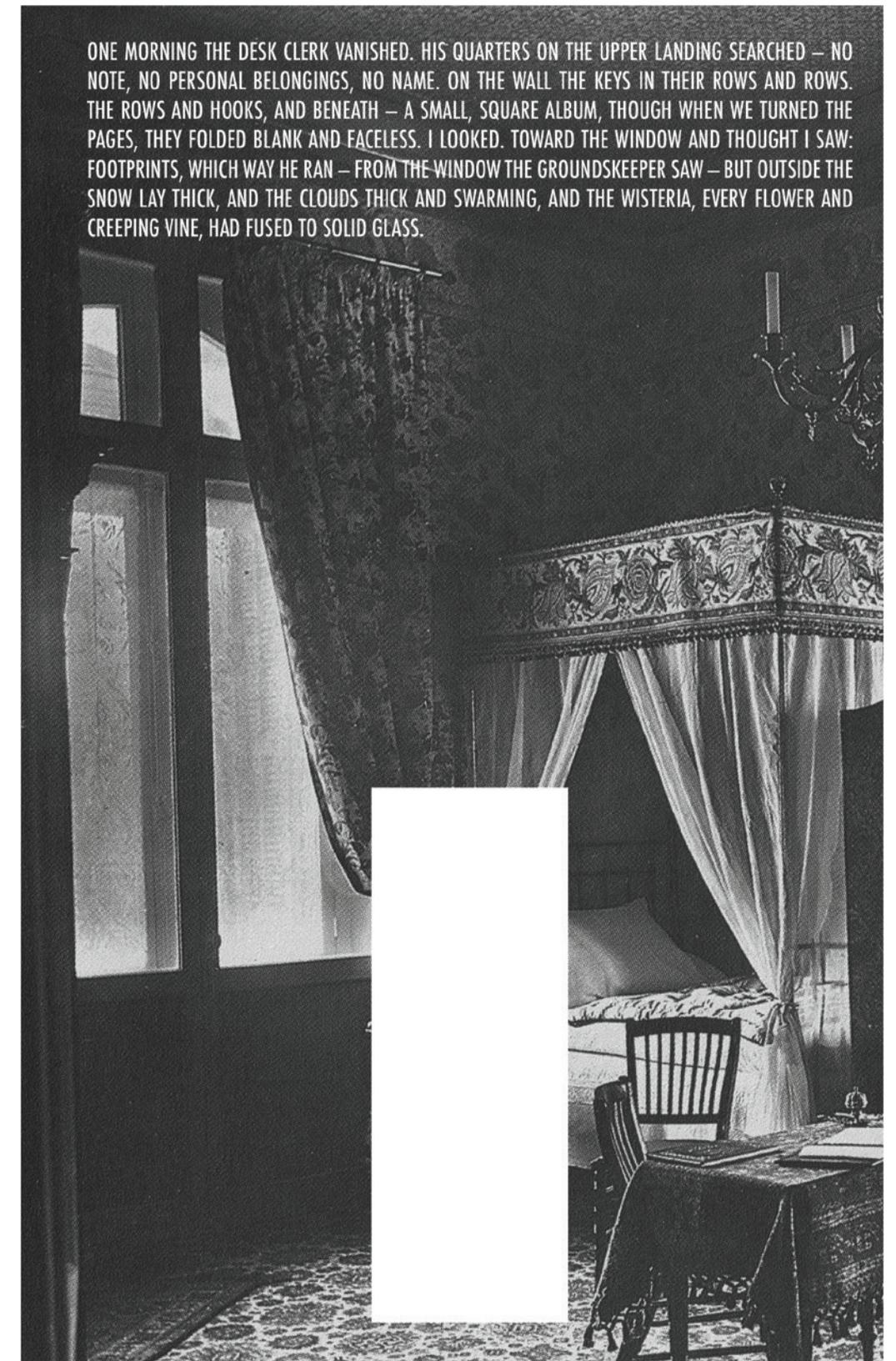
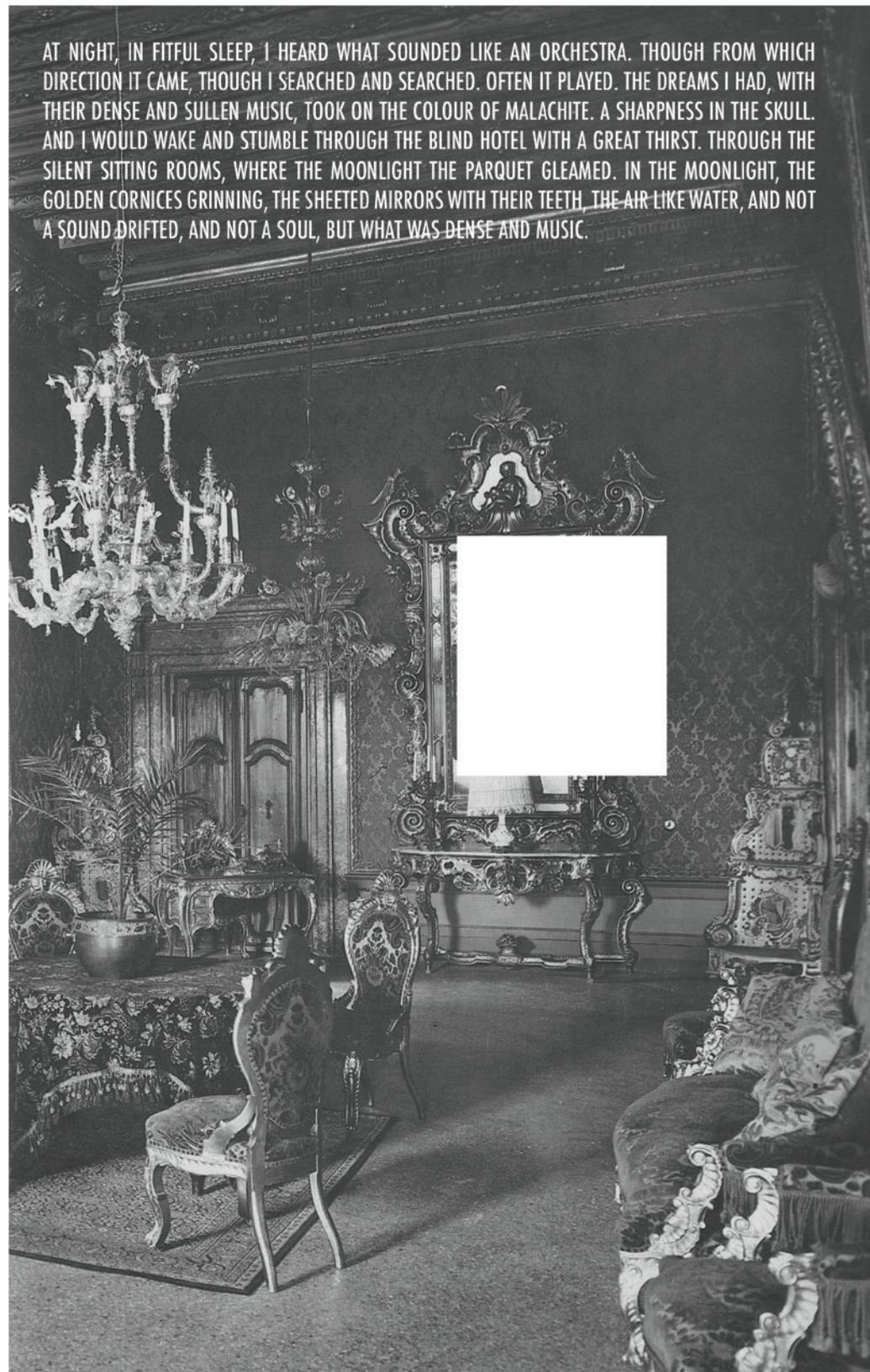
Of the years, spent, in poetry, as if nothing had, happened
 Of the sun striking me, right on the face, on the right side, of the face
 Of the wind
 Of the trees
 Of the leaves
 Of the birds in the trees
 Of the trees after the rain
 Of the yellow flag, standing, flapping in the wind, for a purpose I do not understand
 Of jealousy, like money, that preoccupies most minds
 Of love, hatred its counterpart, having a matching, intensity
 Of a broken branch, that lies, in the sun
 Of a dead tree, broken from the root, new green sprouting
 Of a bird of colour, who refuses to be photographed, in its continuous flight
 Of the guy who said no, to the highest prize
 Of a no, sustained for life
 Of more people born than they can ever make up for by death
 Of shadows that last longer than a century or two
 Of self-censorship as applied by the sky, never inpretending to criticize, just looking
 Of an abandoned envelope, not yet chucked out, with four sides to write things on
 Of the vacuum cleaner that lives to suck all the dirt into its heart, never feeling bad
 Of my c.old hands as a result of wriyting
 Of the warm water that soaks through my feet, right from the sole (the soul?), over a book
 Of the early dawn dark in which a poem is finishing itself
 Of climate change that takes millions of years to bring Mount Everest from out of the sea
 Of people who refrain from easy praise
 Of a thorough loser who confessed it to his laughing wife
 Of a face of multi-faces the nation is required to make
 Of the daily dung that, if well-dunged, makes life much happier
 Of silences, like well-kept s.ecre.ts
 Of Heart's History, sunken in a well, deep in the water, for 365 years
 Of literary people once regarded at a level higher than the beggars, just higher
 Of the feet, that are still walking, after sixty-four winters
 Of contentedness
 Of a book, hanging in the sky
 Of a poem, hanging from the eye
 Of death that will inevitably claim you, in an act of lasting friendship
 Of unemployment that sets one free from all earthly concerns
 Of poetry that actually survives profitlessness
 Of a whole arvo, devoted entirely to the translation, of two women, poets, from China
 Of a feel for fail
 And a sudden rain, so impatient to plunge into its trillions of death, that it noisies ●

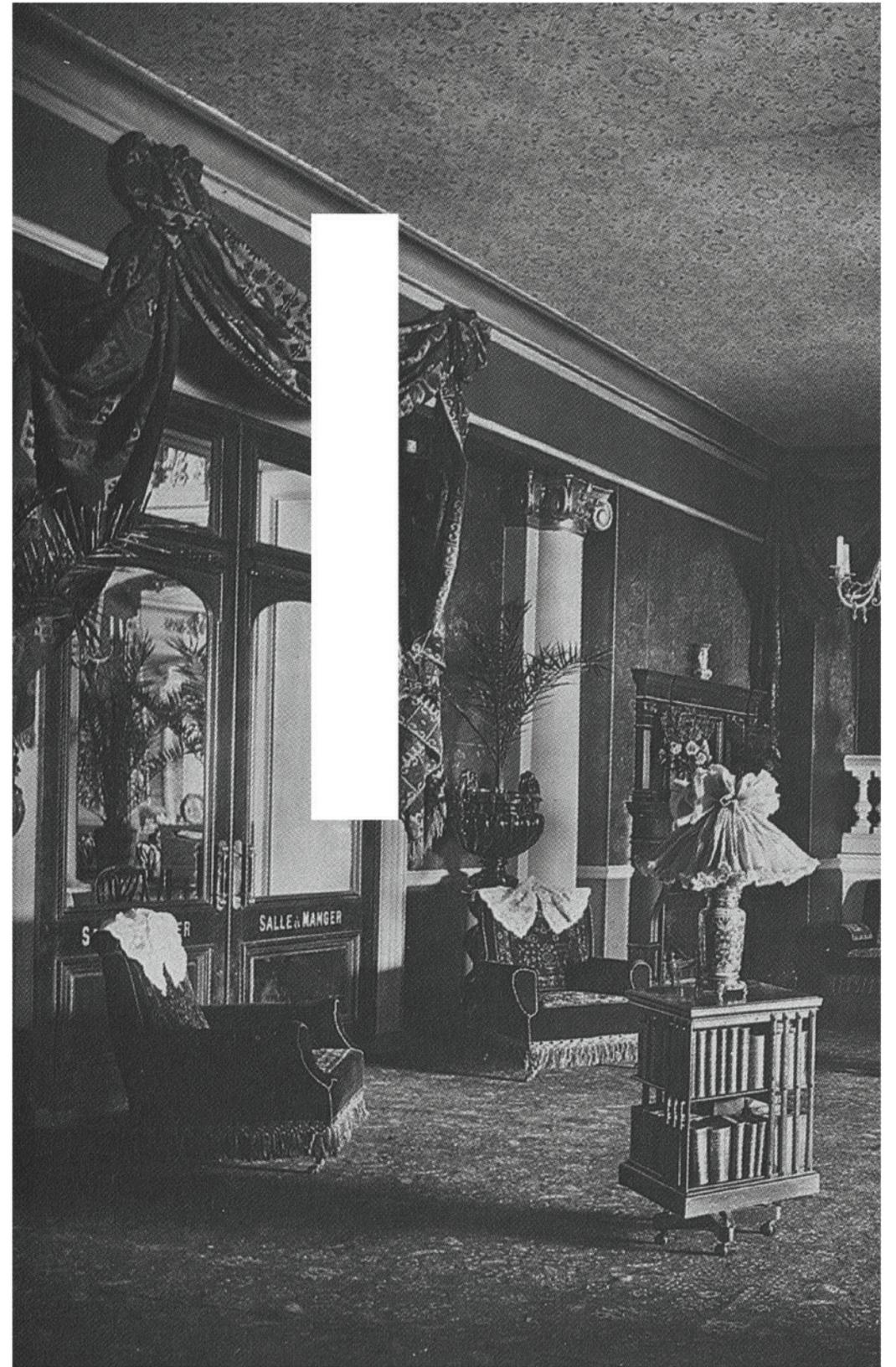
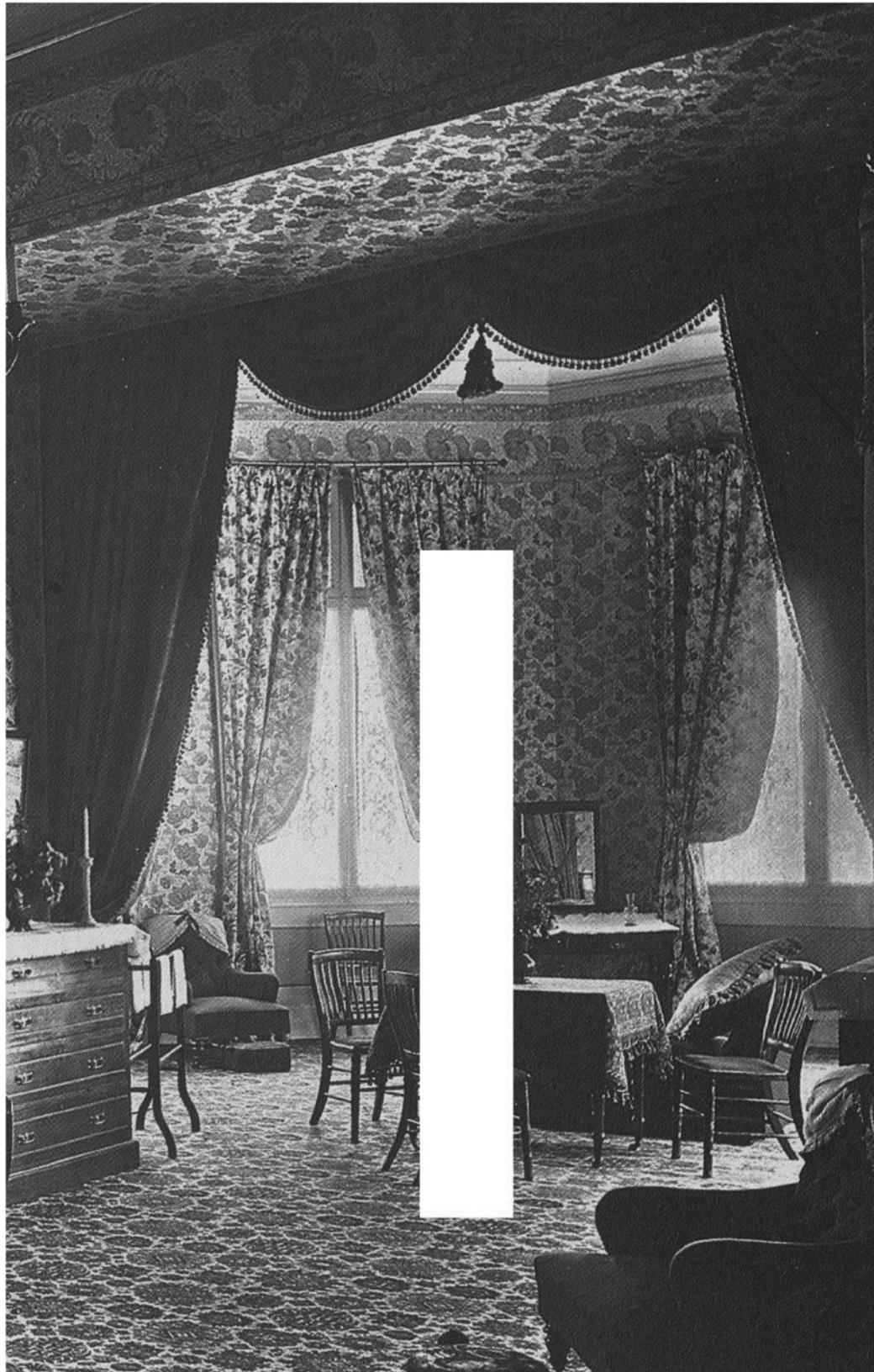
And a sudden rain, so impatient to plunge into its trillions of death,
 that it noisies



THERE WERE HALLWAYS AND STAIRCASES LEADING TO HALLWAYS AND STAIRCASES. THE OCCASIONAL ABYSS, MISSING STEPS, I DEVELOPED, IN THIS TIME, A HABIT OF LEAPING, FROM TIME TO TIME, ACROSS VAST DISTANCES AND FROM TIME TO TIME, DEVELOPING A PERVASIVE, A PERSISTENT SENSE OF VERTIGO — IN THE EARLY HOURS AND AT ALL HOURS OF THE DAY IT FOLLOWED ME ROUND. AND EVERY DAY, AT THE SAME HOUR, THERE OCCURRED. IN THE FOYER THE ANCIENT CLOCK, ITS FACE MARKED BY SOME DISTURBANCE. AND WE WOULD STAND, BY HABIT, IN THE FOYER — THE PORTER, THE DESK CLERK, THE GROUNDSKEEPER. A SMALL CLUTCH OF GUESTS. WHILE THE HANDS REVOLVED.

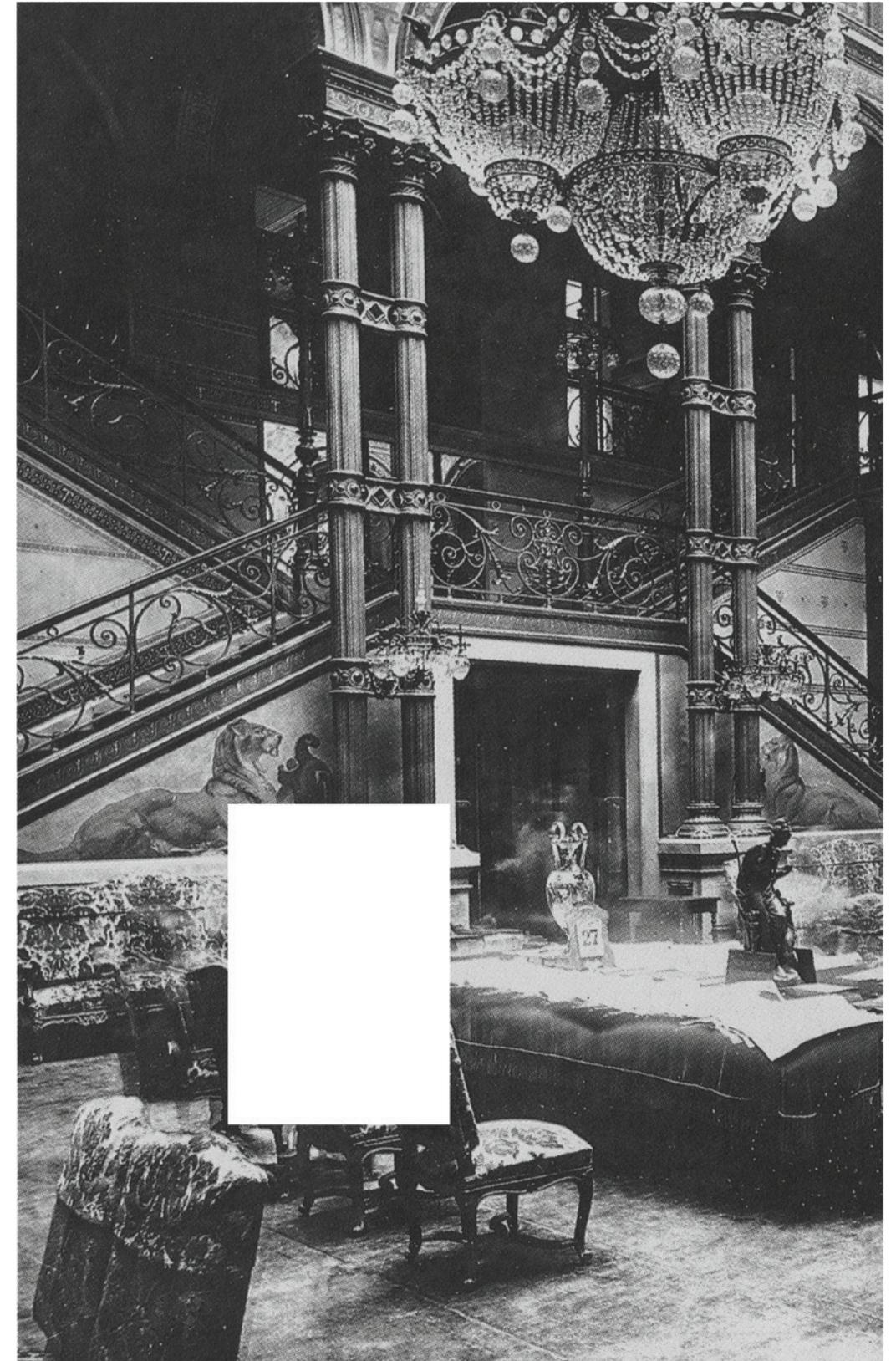






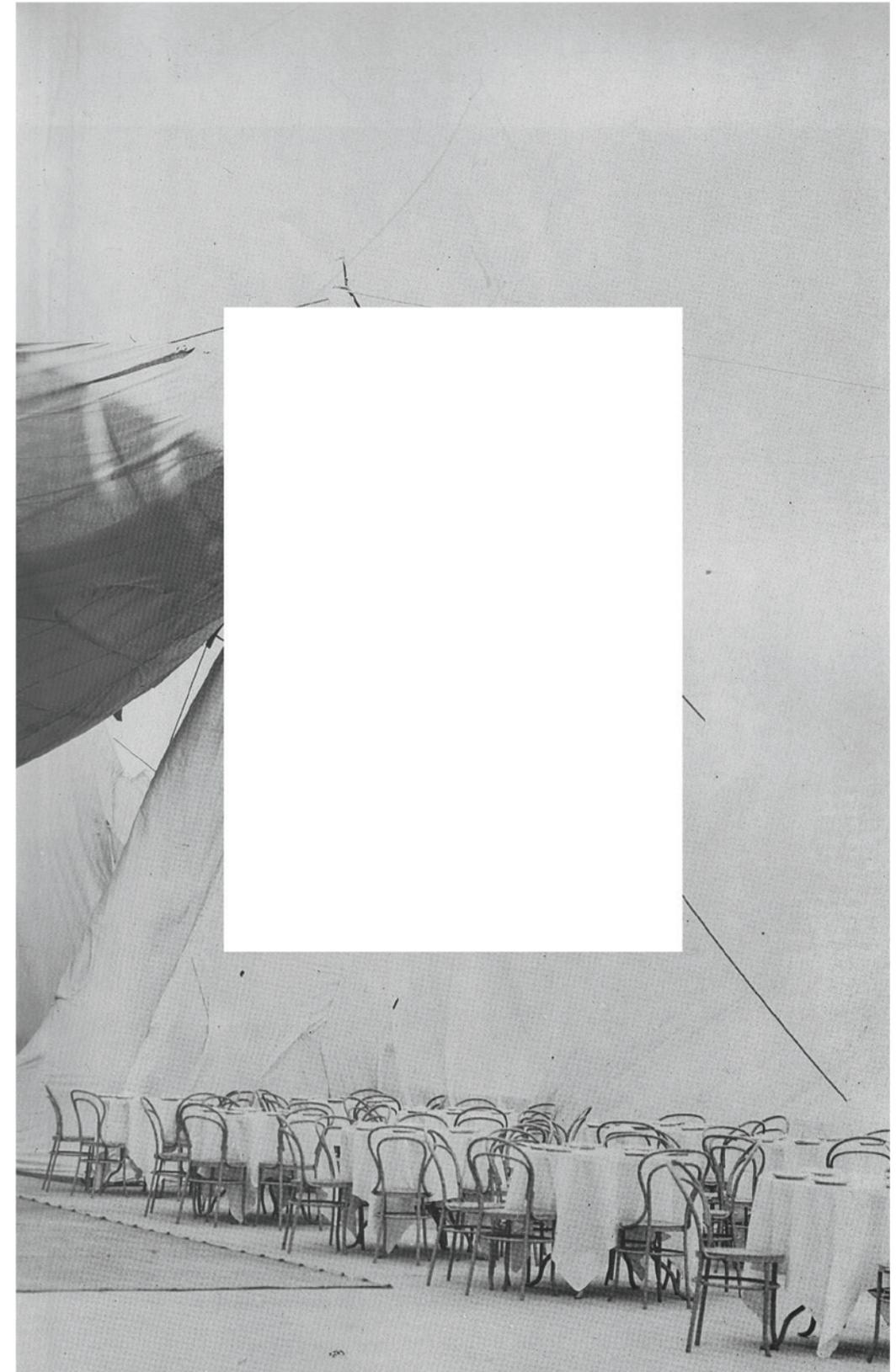


THE DAYS AND NIGHTS FELL INTO. AND HERE AND THERE PERPETUAL TWILIGHT REIGNED. DISTANT BOOMS STRUCK, AND DECAYED — AGAINST THE CHANDELIERS, THEIR GLITTERING STEMS AND THE SMOOTH CARPET, WORN IN GROOVES AROUND THE EDGES OF THE CHAIRS. WE PLACED THE CHAIRS WITH THEIR BACKS AGAINST: HERE AND THERE, NEAR THE ENTRANCES AND EXITS, A COLDER PATCH, INTO WHICH WE DID NOT STEP. THE DISAPPEARANCES OCCURRING. WITH FREQUENCY, THE ANCIENT CLOCK AROUND THE EXITS GATHERED: THE PORTER, THE RELUCTANT GUESTS. ON THE WIRELESS THE BROKEN DIAL, ITS FREQUENCY TUNED: STATIC, THE YAWNING TIDE.





BY A SELDOM-USED SIDE DOOR WE FOUND A MACHINE FOR FLIGHT. THE GROUNDSKEEPER AND I, TETHERED, AND UNIDID THE ROPES. HE ON BOARD AND I, ABOUT TO CLIMB – WHEN IT SWUNG, THE WHOLE MACHINE, INTO THE SKY. AND I SAW: HOW HE FLEW AND HOW HE STEPPED WITH FATAL STEP, BACKWARDS INTO THE SKY. THE GROUND ROSE. AND NO SOUND, AND NO SOUL, BUT THE ENGINE WHIRRING AND UPWARDS THE MACHINE. BENEATH ITS HEIGHT I SAT. TABLES SET WITH FROST, CRYSTAL GLASSES FILLED WITH ICE. WE SAT, THE WIDE-EYED GROUNDSKEEPER AND I, WHILE ALL ALONG THE COAST THE COLD. THERE, IN THE FAILING LIGHT, IN THE SOFTLY BLOOMING WINTER OF THAT YEAR. AT THE HOTEL AVENIR.



Original images used in collages in 'HOTEL AVENIR' were sourced from: Jean d'Ormesson, David Watkin, Hugh Montgomery-Massingberd, Pierre-Jean Rémy and Frédéric Grendel, *Grand Hotel: The Golden Age of Palace Hotels, An Architectural and Social History* (New York: The Vendrome Press, 1984).

She leaves in the middle of the day. The cat is fed. There are enough biscuits in the cupboard. Her housemates only have to put a scoop into his bowl when he meows loud enough that they come out of their rooms. She pays the rent the day before she leaves, enough for the next two months. She makes a huge lasagne that night. Her favourite part of making it is the béchamel sauce, melting the butter and cooking the flour into a roux, whisking the milk in, slowly, slowly. She adds more than the recommended amount of nutmeg, grating the little stone against the microplane, breathing in the fumes. Lots of salt and cracked pepper. When she looks back at her neat room, the bed made for once, there are already footprints in the taut sheets, the cat on the woven blanket. He's twisted his head upside down, the underside of his jaw stretched and waiting. She runs the back of her finger along the bone there. His claws come out and then go back in again.

She eats the lasagne with her fingers because she forgot to pack cutlery. That's the way it always is, always something left behind, no matter how hard she tries to remember everything and makes lists. She heats a portion up when the times she's feeling hungry coincide with the times she's passing a service station. They usually let her use their microwave if she buys a Twix or a packet of gum. She tried it cold when she got hungry and there was nothing out the window but dry grass and fence posts, but it was gross and sweaty. She throws out what's left after two days, when the ice packs are fully melted and she judges that she wouldn't trust the mince if she was at home and had left it out on the bench. She moves the chilly bin to the boot of the car so she can't hear whatever is inside the ice packs sloshing around.

At first the driving gives her headaches. She buys a packet of Nurofen at the same time as she buys a mince and cheese pie and a bottle of freshly squeezed orange juice that still has sugar added to it, she reads on the back. That's why it tastes so good. The Nurofen costs three times as much as the pie, and there are only twelve pills inside the little silver box. She goes through it in two days, following the instructions. 'Do not take more than six tablets in twenty-four hours'. It should be fucking illegal to sell a twelve pack of Nurofen. She eats the pie holding it in one hand while driving with the other, and occasionally using no hands while she squirts a bit of sauce out of the squeezezy packet directly into the gaping mouth of the mince. It doesn't taste like she remembers gas station pies used to, different brand maybe. Worse mince. The tomato sauce is still the best bit. In time she gets used to it, the constant blur in her periphery, how the sun sometimes bounces off the shiny cars in front of her and then she is blind for awhile. →

ROAD MOVIE

Her phone dies on the morning of the second day. She drives in silence before she remembers the CDs in the centre console. Her father's, after he put everything onto an iPod that connects to his speakers via Bluetooth when he opens the car door. They automatically start playing Celine Dion's 'All By Myself' because it's at the top of the list alphabetically. The stack of CDs is small, a couple of Robbie Williams, Bic Runga, Norah Jones, Creedence Clearwater Revival.

- She puts on the James Blunt album she wasn't allowed to listen to while her mother was dying. It made Dad do things like pretend he wasn't crying by wearing this pair of pitch-black wraparound sunglasses, and also talk about how proud he was of her for shouldering so much responsibility.

Thinking of her dad makes her feel guilty enough that she buys a shitty car phone charger the next time she stops for petrol. It only works if she holds it upside down at a certain angle so she does that, long enough that she can send a single text. Generic *haven't heard from u in a while love you* with a picture of her pretending to be Robbie Williams on the cover of *Intensive Care*, devil and angel on his shoulders, and lets it die again in the cup holder.

There is a woman with slicked grey hair sitting at the gnarled bar, a half-drunk beer with too much head in front of her. The woman is dressed all in denim that looks like it's never been washed, soft and filthy at the same time, small triangle of white wife beater at the neck. It's wet at the collar. She can imagine what the woman smells like, her hands huge on the pint glass. She doesn't want to talk to the woman, so she just looks. From the other side of the room, as she chews on the ice from a glass of cranberry and vodka that is maybe just cranberry.

They kiss outside under a street lamp, in between one puff and the next of the same menthol cigarette. The light is caricaturish, like the triangular beam from UFO. She doesn't smoke often and it does feel a bit like she's being abducted, the way her head spins and she goes out of herself, pulling up and over herself to look at the two of them standing slightly apart, only touching in two places. The woman holds the lit cigarette out and away from them easily, glowing at the end of the bend of her arm. The other hand is in her hair, fisting a clump at the base of her skull. The woman has done this before. Maybe this is her move, kissing city girls under street lamps. She pulls the woman's hair a little harder, gets her tongue into the small gasp she makes, opening her up a little.

When she gets back in her car she can smell the smoke still somewhere between her skin and her clothes. Her mouth is throbbing from where the woman bit her, a row of teeth on either side of her bottom lip. She checks the ashtray for small change. She gets to the next town over when it's still dark, but the laundromat light is always on, attracting moths inside. She buys a donut while she's watching the clothes go round, eats it in segments that she pulls off with her thumb and forefinger. The glaze slicks up her lips, and she slides them against each other for a while before licking it all off.

She plugs her phone in to see if her father has replied. She gets the bathroom key from the counter and when she wipes between her legs the toilet paper comes back covered in blood-coloured mucus, stretchy and dark.

She reads his text while she waits for the coffee machine to spit out a watery hot chocolate into the plastic cup she's put under it. There are three pictures of the table on his balcony, slab of black granite. The water on the top has frozen into a huge sheet. The text says *icy*. She responds, *Looks fresh*.

When she bleeds through the seat of her pants she rents a motel room for the night. She has an actual shower, uses the shitty three-in-one that's provided to scrub all over until her skin is so pink it's red. At least it's something other than wet-wiping her armpits at a rest stop or shivering under the trickle at a community centre. The towel doesn't go all the way around her so she dries everything individually. The person in the mirror doesn't look like her but is, or does look like her but isn't. Either way there are parts of her face that she doesn't recognise. If she keeps driving for seven years she'll be a whole new person. She uses the last of her toothpaste, brushes hard, spits out blood. She touches herself on the bed, lying face down and not thinking of anything or anyone in particular. It always takes longer like this but also she feels extra sensitive, maybe because she's gone so long without or maybe because she's on her period. She sleeps on top of the sheets in only a T-shirt. In the morning she has Weet-Bix with long life milk and heaping tablespoons of sugar. She can feel her teeth revolting as she crunches through it.

She's developed an innate sense for where everything is in a service station. She likes the sense of order, that no matter where she pulls over there will always be a row of confectionary by the counter, and small packets of condoms and razors facing the fridges. A stand full of bruised bananas for a dollar that she buys when she gets leg cramps and needs potassium. She can even tell which cashiers will let you use the bathroom that's only for employees.

- She's stopped talking to them, to anyone really. She knows how to get across what she wants without speech and only a few gestures.

She buys a roll of musk Life Savers and mumbles something they both understand is thank you.

The cubicle door opens and the person behind it pulls her in and locks it behind her. They pull her hand into their pants where it's hot and wet. She crooks her fingers, trying to warm up the ends. Bad circulation maybe. She's hungry, so she's the one to push the person up against the door, her other hand against a tendon in their neck. They taste and smell overwhelmingly of sweat. The lock rattles as they move. She winces and pulls off for a second when she feels the coat hook make contact with their skull, a kind of sick throb. They let out a moan that sounds like pleasure, so when she leans back she sets her teeth over a lip and bites.

There are days and nights when she drives and only stops when she sees the signs for power naps. 'DRIVING TIRED KILLS'. 'NOT DRUNK, NOT SPEEDING, JUST TIRED'. 'WAKE UP, DRIVE ALERT, ARRIVE ALIVE'. 'THERE'S NO ONE SOMEONE WON'T MISS'. Right at the bottom of the centre console is the twenty-fifth anniversary recording of *Les Misérables*. She puts in the first disc and drives. She starts drinking Red Bull to keep awake, and then decides to go through the full range of energy drinks in the fridge, aggressive names and aggressive colours.

Coke with extra caffeine, extra double shot espresso iced coffee with added guarana, and so on. It makes her mouth feel dry all the time, putrefying, but the buzzing in her head keeps her company. She bites her nails so far down that sometimes there is blood.

All that's going past the window is flat or softly crested fields, occasionally deep green and full of rain. The sky is too wide and open, not obstructed enough by buildings or ceilings. She feels scrutinised. Every couple of kilometres there is a flat house, tall straight trees lining the driveway and the perimeter of the property in a gappy, looming hedge. There is always a goat or a cow in the sparse paddock in front, close to nibbling at the washing on the line. She eats another handful of peanut M&Ms, fills her mouth enough that her cheeks bulge out chubby bunnies and she's almost choking around all the chocolate and saliva. She presses *next* on the CD player, knows all the words.

And there, in the distance, a sign that says 'PICK YOUR OWN'. She likes picking her own because it always seems fresher that way, if she's the one to tug gently on the branch; if it's definitely ripe but a little stubborn. She picks a persimmon out of the ice-cream container on the passenger's seat, warm and tender. She bites into it with the skin still on. The flesh oozes. It tastes a bit like perfume, not anything she can compare to another fruit. The seeds inside are hard and smooth. She bites through the thick outer skin of one seed to see what it's like on the inside. It's clear, bathroom silicone, but extremely hard. She finishes the first fruit, tosses the leaves at the top and the seed pieces out the window. The second one is even juicier, drips down her hand onto her shirt. She holds the mangled fruit aloft while she follows the trail of juice down her wrist, licking it all off, then transfers it to the other hand that's still holding the wheel while she wipes the spit onto her jeans.

She spends two whole days doing nothing but lying on the lukewarm beach in most of her clothing, only her shoes and socks off so she can scrunch her toes down under the sand. It saps all the energy out of her like an appliance so she can sleep better in the car later. She eats the rest of the fruit, even softer than before, and buries the seeds in small holes that she digs with her fingers. They won't grow here but at least they get to die out of sight. A family of four leaves behind a half-finished newspaper of takeaway, so she fights off the seagulls to eat the last of the stodgy chips. She pulls the batter off the cold fish and eats the two parts separately, holding it over her mouth before she drops it straight down her throat.

- She didn't bring togs so she strips down to her underwear and wades in. The sandbar drops off fast, the water so cold it's like being shot.

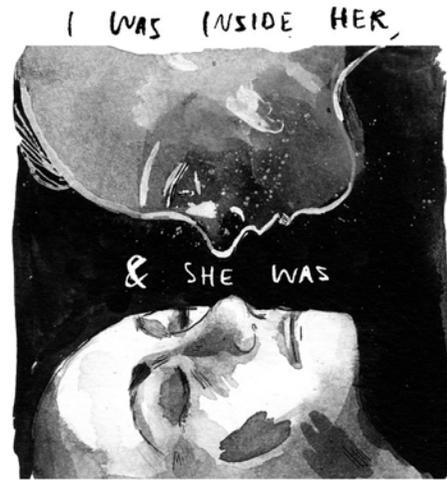
The path leads around the headland to a place that is signposted as 'FLAT ROCK'. The rock is less flat than she'd expect, deep scores carved into the surface as if from a monstrous hand, a dinosaur or Godzilla. The ocean crashes in in huge surges that rush up and into the cracks, then get sucked back out just as fast. On the other side of FLAT ROCK is a small cave in the face of the cliff. Someone has made a precarious seat out of a whitened log and two concave boulders. It groans when she sits on it but doesn't break. She pulls a rubbery heart-shaped leaf off a plant growing out of the soft clay of the ceiling and crushes it in her hand. It smells so distinctly of pepper that she tries a bit, but it tastes like she guesses most leaves do.

From here she can see tiny smudges of people across the bay. No one is swimming. They run along the beach, the colours of dogs in front of or behind them.

When the light dies, early, she sits in the mouth of the cave and builds a fire. Little teepee made of sticks that she sets alight. Her own hands silhouetted against the last of the sun. She turns on her phone to send her dad a picture of the water beyond the rocks – eerily flat, the moon doubled – and asks him to put some money into her bank account. There are no other notifications. One of her housemates has posted a picture of the cat wearing a tiny cowboy hat. She opens the packet of marshmallows and puts two onto a stick, both pink because they taste better. She melts them until they're black and lumpy as tumours on the outside. She pulls the charred skin off and eats it, then puts the stick back over the tiny fire she has made. Burning and pulling off the skin methodically, again and again, until the marshmallow loses all its shape. There are places on her tongue where the molten sugar swells her taste buds, sore and huge. She teethes one lump, pushing it to the edge with her incisors before she bites down. The lump comes off into her mouth, a piece of nerveless flesh, and she chews on it for a few moments before she swallows it.

The fire illuminates the inside of the cave, showing soft walls made of clay. The contrast makes the graffiti on the walls readable. It's generic bathroom stuff. 'SUCK MY DICK'. 'CALL 021499849 FOR A GOOD TIME'. 'BE KIND ALWAYS'. 'TOM'S MUM IS A FAT BITCH'. Near the apex of the roof, high and distinct enough that the writer must have stood on this wobbly seat to chip it out with a knife: 'SOMEBODY PLEASE TOUCH ME'. Right at the back of the cave, almost out of the ring of available light, is a pile of bones assembled into a skeleton that looks vaguely monstrous. A collection of small things that make up something bigger. They are picked nearly clean but a few pieces of dried tissue cling to one of the biggest bones. It's probably a thigh bone, she thinks, while she chews the bits off. Tastes like chicken.

It's harder to walk the trail at night but not impossible. The moon is fat and puts out a lot of light. She dusts the sand off her feet. It comes off easily now that it is dry. She puts her shoes back on so she will be able to drive, and then she puts Norah Jones into the CD player. She sits sideways in the driver's seat as she tries to lick the caramel out of a Mars bar. The tricky part is not fracturing the chocolate around it. Hollowing it out while keeping the shell intact. ●



IN EVERY PART OF ME.



(SHE WAS IN THE SUNLIGHT)



PART OF ME)



(& SHE WAS IN THE COFFEE CUP)



SHE HAS ALWAYS LIVED IN THIS HOUSE



(MY HOUSEMATES LATER CONFIRM THIS)



BEING FUCKED BY SO MUCH TIME



WHEN WE LIE TOGETHER



I SEE EVERY ONE OF YOUR PAST SELVES AS A CLEAR DISTINCT ECHO BEFORE THEY BLEND TOGETHER

AND ALL MY POSSIBLE PASTS

& POTENTIAL FUTURES



RISE TO MEET YOU.



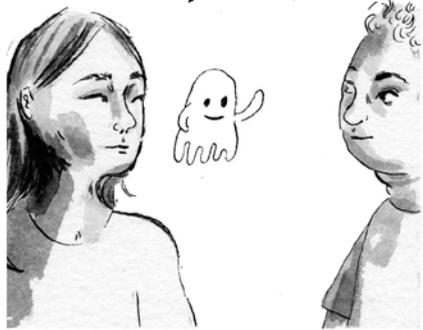
BODY AS WARM

MULTIDIMENSIONAL SEISMOGRAPH



DEEP TIME DEEP SPACE DEEP LOVE

I INTRODUCE MY NEW GIRLFRIEND TO MY FRIENDS.



WHO TRY TO BE POLITE BUT ARE CLEARLY CONFUSED.



LATER, ONE OF THEM ASKS ME FOR INTIMATE DETAILS:



so how do you fuck a void?



THE GHOST WHO HEARS EVERYTHING,



RESPONDS:

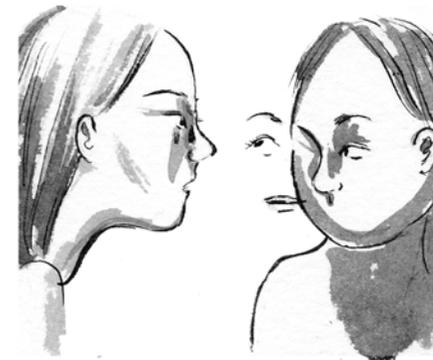
well, that's rude.



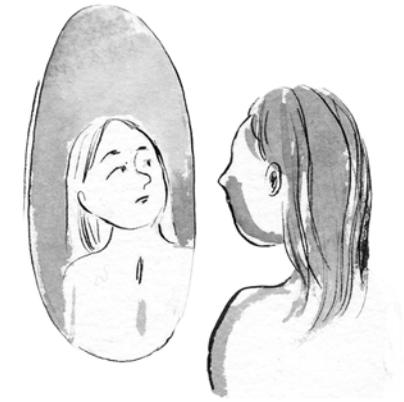
THE TWIN



THE DOPPELGÄNGER



THE REPLICA



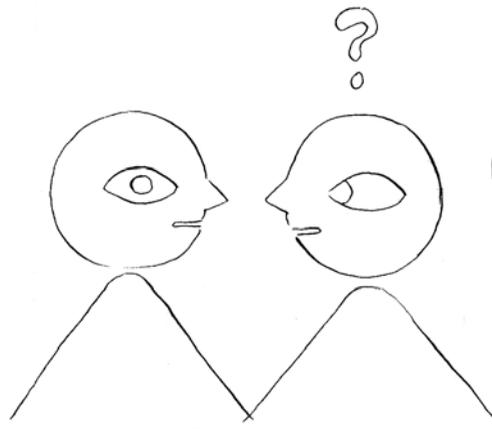
THE MIRROR



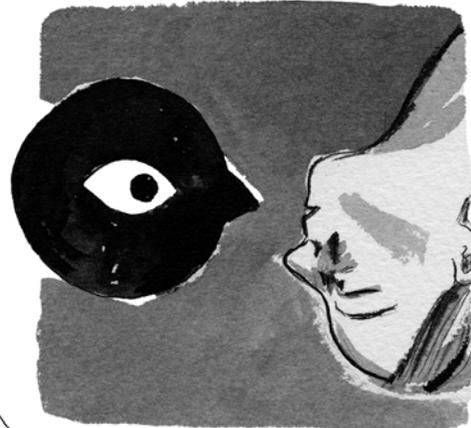
THE SHADOW



THE UNDERSTUDY



THE CLONE



THE NEMESIS



THE AGGRESSOR



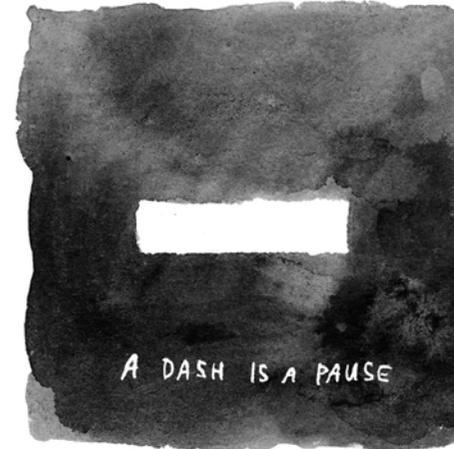
THE ENEMY



THE INTERLOPER



THE GHOST



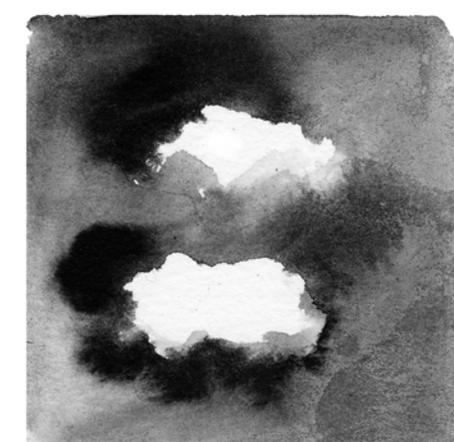
A DASH IS A PAUSE

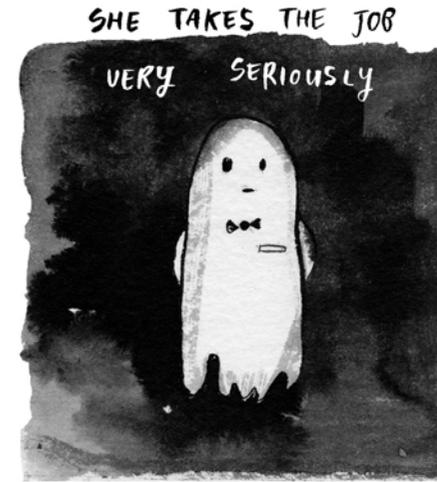


TWO DASHES HOVERING OVER EACH OTHER



FORMS AN EQUALS SIGN.





WE START TO QUARREL MORE & MORE
AND I WORRY THAT SHE EXISTS LESS & LESS



IS PART OF HER BEING ABSORBED INTO ME?
AN ALL TOO HUMAN PROBLEM.

ONE NIGHT WE ARE FIGHTING,



& SHE YELLS (TELEPATHICALLY):



you
have so
many
shadows,
it's like you're
already
haunted!

i dont understand.



I SAY,



i thought that's what
you liked about me.

WHEN I START TO CRY



SHE FREEZES MY TEARS



& FLICKS THEM AWAY LIKE DUST

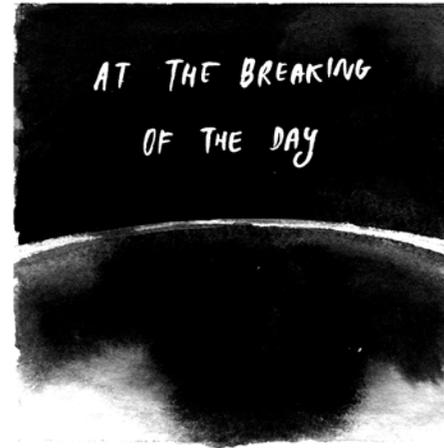
ONE DAY I SIT ON THE
PORCH ALL NIGHT,



WAITING FOR HER
TO COME HOME.



AT THE BREAKING
OF THE DAY



THE SUN APPEARING



AS A
THIN GOLDEN LINE
OVER THE HORIZON

I REALIZE NOW THAT I AM

THE CATALYST
FOR HER
LEAVING THE
HOUSE.



THE HOUSE
TO WHICH
SHE
HAD
ALWAYS
BEEN
BOUND



IS LIKE



MY LOVER'S FACE



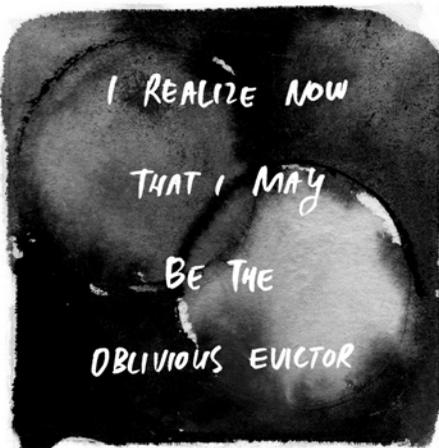
I REALIZE NOW

THAT I MAY

BE THE

OBLIVIOUS EVICTOR

COLONIZING THE HOUSE



IN WHICH SHE HAS KNOWN

ONE HUNDRED LOVERS.



IS LIKE

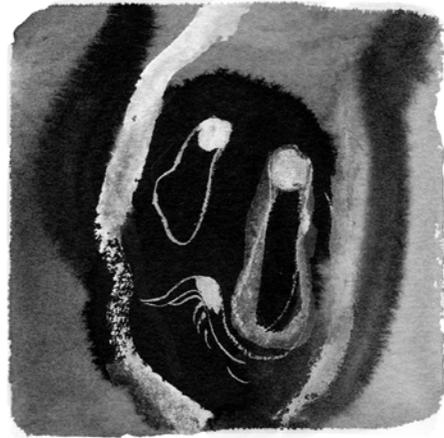


WHEN SHE





COMES AND



COMES AND



COMES AND



AND
SHE
NEVER



COMES
HOME

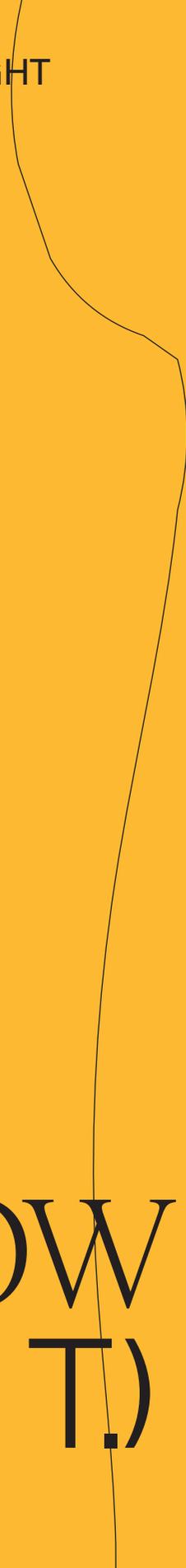


AND I MOVE OUT



THE NEXT MONTH.





& HOW
(FOR T.)

I think of my
brain quietened, & how
I didn't know that this could happen
& how I think I understand how people get
caught
up now & somehow
this doesn't scare me. I think
that once it would have,
& how your legs twitch
as you fall asleep. I dream of sleep, I dream
of waking here again
& I didn't know that this could happen.
I think of how it's been eleven months
since I last wrote a poem & how
often I've been saying "okay, okay, fine,
fine, fine". The fine lace
of your curtain. I think
you have beautiful hands
& how cool they feel against mine
& how you put them in my pocket
& of my collarbones, my bottom lip
between your teeth, the gap there
when you smile. I think of how
I thought it, felt it, first
when it was unremarkable - a white couch,
a white room, a silence - the thrill
of it, the terror, & how
my heart felt fat
and bruise-like:
this again, then. This,
already &
how there's no way
now to stay
unscathed. ●

Brodie spotted the dog first, sniffing along the gutter, its nose buried in rubbish. It wasn't a completely a ugly dog. A big-bodied brindle. Maybe Bull Arab out of a ridgeback? It could have been a pig dog. Or even a trained fighter. Except the dog didn't have a battle scar on his coat. I looked closer, for a branding. Burning the signature of an owner into a dog's coat, around the hindquarter, was illegal. The law around our way didn't stop dog owners doing so, and the crime went unpunished. The dog wasn't wearing a collar. I'd always wanted a dog. One time, I even got up the courage to ask my mother if she would ask my father about the possibility. We were sitting down to tea, mashed potato and chops, when she put it to him. He said "no" without a blink, without looking up from his plate. I hadn't raised the matter with him since.

Although he looked to be a healthy specimen, the animal had most likely been dumped. Brodie approached the dog. It lifted its nose from the gutter and growled, deep and angry, stopping Brodie dead. The dog turned in a circle, sniffing its own arse as it went. A pair of balls hung low, swinging from side to side. The dog sniffed in the direction of Brodie and let out a second warning growl.

"Do you reckon he would bite me?" Brodie called over his shoulder.

"Well, if I were you, Brodie, I'd put my hand in his mouth and see what he does. That way you'll know for certain."

"Get fucked, Ally."

The dog had a broad forehead and a snubbed nose. I was sure it could headbutt a rock all day without any worry.

"You see them paws?" Brodie said. "This dog could go like Mike Tyson, I reckon. We could make money with him."

"I make my own money, already, working in the supermarket after school."

"I'm not talking pocket money. This is real money. Prize money."

Maybe the dog could fight. He looked big and angry enough. But I didn't see that it would be a smart idea, me and Brodie, taking a dog to a fighting pit run by bikers. We'd be laughed at if we lost, and us two and the dog both would end up skinned if we happened to score a victory.

"You'll be going on your own," I said. "Anyway, if this is a fighting dog, he most likely belongs to someone who fronts the pit."

"You don't know that. I heard my brother talking that they have a big purse up this Sunday. For all comers," Brodie explained.

"You need to forget all about that, Brodie. We don't have the entry money. And if we did, and we won, we wouldn't see the purse. The dog would be nicked off us and then we'd be killed." →

The dog looked up at Brodie, his tongue hanging from the side of his mouth, dripping gobs of spit into the dirt. He waddled forward and walked straight by Brodie and stopped in front of me. He sniffed my leg then licked sweat off my calf with his sandpaper tongue. He lifted his head toward me. The poor dog looked sadder than a professional mourner.

"I don't know that he's got fighting in him. Look at him," I said. "He could be too soft, this boy."

"I don't think so," Brodie said. "Soon as one of them mongrels was on him, he'd fight back. What do they call it, when an animal has to protect itself? When it has no choice but to fight?"

"Instinct."

"That's the one. Instinct. I bet this dog has a bag full of instinct. And pretty soon, he'd get a taste for blood too. They all do. Once a fighting dog gets the taste you can't stop him. Not with a crowbar over the head. When a dog can't win any longer, when he's slowed down but still has some go in him, and the instinct and the taste, they have to put him down. With a sawn-off too, nothing else will stop him."

"You know you're full of shit, don't you, Brodie?"

We heard the roar of an engine, turned and looked along the road. It was Brodie's older brother, Mac, driving the dented family ute. He slammed the brakes on the truck and pulled up alongside us. The dog looked up at Mac and kept a careful eye on him. Mac was a cruel bastard and looked it. He wore a scar across one cheek where he'd been whipped by a line of fencing wire that snapped when he was repairing a gate. And his eyes were heavy with bloodshot on account of all the drinking and tabbing he did.

Mac stuck his head out of the side window. "Where fucken you been, Brodie? You were supposed to get the twins up for school before the old man got in from night shift. He come in this morning and they were asleep in front of the TV. It was hissing like a giant fucking snow globe, where you left them last night with a bucket of ice-cream. They could be poisoned by the static coming out of that TV." He leaned across the front seat, opened the passenger door and pointed a finger at Brodie. "Hop in."

Brodie did as he was told, buried his hands in his pockets, hopped in the passenger seat and slammed the door. Mac looked down at the dog and up at me. "This mongrel belong to anyone? He's a solid bastard." Mac spat in my general direction. "Throw the dog in the back of the truck for me. This one could do a job on the pigs."

I looked down at the dirt and my bare feet, covered in dust and scabby sores. I didn't like looking at any of Brodie's family directly in the eye, from the scarred Mac, to their crazy old man. Or the twins, who had heads like bullets and talked to no one but themselves in some sort of foreign tongue.

"You hear me?" Mac repeated, slapping the driver's door. "Throw him in the back. Let's see how he goes on an old razorback."

I'd once seen a dog after a wild pig had finished with it. It was laying on a track the other side of the dry creek, bloated, fly-blown with its guts ripped open. I looked down at the dog. He nudged my thigh with his shoulder. I dropped an arm and tickled the back of his head.

"I can't put him nowhere for you. This dog is mine. Me and my dad's. We have equal shares in him. My dad wouldn't let me part with him."

"I just want to loan him," Mac winked. "I'll take him out shooting tonight and drop him back at your place in the morning."

I was certain, once Mac got the dog in his truck, I'd never see it again.

"My dad wouldn't allow that," I explained. "Not for anyone."

"Don't talk bullshit. I don't believe he's your dog or your father's. Where'd it come from?"

"We got him from the pub. A shooter come in and put him up for sale. Said the dog was no good going after the roos. Gun shy, he said he was. I reckon he'd be no good on the pigs, either. My dad brought him home and said the dog could be half mine if I paid part of his feed from the money I make working Saturdays at the supermarket. Maybe you should talk to him?"

Mac's cheek twitched nervously with the thought of having to front my dad.

"So, you say he's your dog?"

"Yep. He's mine. Half. Like I said."

"What's his name, then?"

"What?"

"What's its name? You say he's your dog. He must have a name. What is it?"

I mumbled a word that made no sense to me, let alone Mac or Brodie.

"Bomba," Brodie offered, putting one hand in the air like he was answering a question in the classroom. "The dog's name's Bomba."

Mac turned to his brother and fixed an eye on him, searching his brother's face for the sign of a lie. Brodie held his nerve and looked right back at him. Mac shrugged and turned the key in the ignition until the old engine kicked over.

- "Bomba?" He shook his head. "That's a really fucked name for a dog." He stuck his head out the window. "Like the Jungle Boy?" he giggled. "You dumb prick, Ally."

Mac drummed against the car door with a couple of fingers. "Hey, Bomba. Come on, fella. Over here."

The dog didn't as much as look at Mac.

"Don't look like he knows his name," Mac said to Brodie. "You're both lying."

I patted the dog again. His fur was thick and soft. "Bomba only answers to his name if you're a friend," I explained. "I don't think he likes you."

"This dog's as mental as you are, Ally," Mac laughed. "What a fucken pair you make."

"We're not a pair. Like I said, there's my dad in this too. It's the three of us. They call that a trio."

"Don't be a smart-arse with me. And you keep a close eye on that dog. Maybe I'll be back for him."

Mac slammed a foot on the accelerator. The ute kicked dust and stones into the air. The truck took off down the road, spun around and sped by me and Bomba, standing by the side of the road. →

“BOMBA,”

Brodie offered, putting one hand in the air like he was answering a question in the classroom. “The dog’s name’s Bomba.”

The dog let out a lazy yawn. He looked up at me, like he was worried over what was going to happen next.

It took nothing to get the dog to follow me along the street. He stayed by my side all the way, looking up and wagging his tree-branch of a tail from side to side when I called his name. “Bomba! Bomba!”

I turned the corner into our street. My dad’s ute wasn’t out front of the house where he parked it. But the blue station wagon belonging to Mr. O’Toole was parked in our driveway. O’Toole was the town’s JP, parking inspector and debt collector. My mum was standing on the verandah, arguing with him.

“You only come around when Steve’s not at home,” she said. “And you do that because you’re a coward. If you have business with him, grow a heart, O’Toole, and call by when he’s home.”

“Don’t be speaking to me like that,” O’Toole yelled. “Money is owed from this house. You’re as responsible for the debt as your husband is. And I’m here to collect it.”

I stopped on the roadway. Bomba snarled at O’Toole, low and mean.

O’Toole stuck a finger in the air, as if he was making a point at a council meeting. Bomba didn’t see it that way and took offence at the man’s aggression. The dog charged at O’Toole. He saw the dog coming for him, bolted for his car and jumped in the driver’s seat. He caught a leg in the door. Bomba snapped at the exposed leg, wrapped his jaws around it and held on. O’Toole made a noise, not a scream, but more of a yelp. A puppy’s yelp. Bomba took a good piece of out of the leg before letting go. O’Toole reversed out of the driveway and took off down the street, my mother calling after him, “and don’t you come back!”

She chuckled to herself and looked over at Bomba, who was licking his chops. “Where’s this dog from? Did you find it?” she asked.

“Sort of. It’s more that he found me.”

“That bugger, O’Toole, is likely to come back with here the police.”

I didn’t want the dog taken away. “What will you say to them if they come?”

Mum smiled at Bomba. “Well, look at him. He’s a bit of a hero, isn’t he? Hide him back there in the yard. If anyone comes snooping, we say that the dog’s a stray. It took off down the street and we have no idea where it got to.”

I took the dog through the house into the yard and lay in the long grass with him, in the shade of our apricot tree next to a fallen-down shed. Bomba curled up beside me and rested his jaw on my hip. A little while later I heard the screen door slam, raised my head and saw my father marching through the grass towards me, wearing his work boots, shorts and an oil-stained singlet. A cigarette hung from his bottom lip. Bomba sat up and watched my father closely.

He stopped and took a long drag on his cigarette. “Your mum says this dog just sent O’Toole on his way?”

“He did. O’Toole was screaming at her over money.”

“What did the dog do?”

“Scared the shit out of him. Bit him, too.”

My father smiled admiringly at Bomba. “He belong to anyone? Any collar or tag?”

“Nothing. No collar and no marks on him. I don’t think he’s been a loner.”

My father got down on his hands and knees and grabbed Bomba by the shoulders and massaged them.

“Strong bugger. Could have been dumped out on the highway. Or maybe he’s been lost. He looks in good health.” He tickled Bomba behind his ears. “Reminds me a bit of a dog I had as a kid. Same colour and build.”

The news surprised me. “I didn’t think you liked dogs.”

“Oh, I loved that dog. Took good care of him too. No hunting or fighting. He was a pet. Slept on the end of my bed. Sometimes under the blankets, when it was cold.”

“What happened to him?” I asked.

He hesitated. “I don’t know. Not for certain. I went on a school camp, and when I came home, he was gone. My father said the dog ran away. But I don’t know about that. He never liked dogs, my dad.”

He stood and turned toward the house. “You keep him out of sight for a few days.”

“So, we’re keeping him?” I asked, hardly able to believe what I was thinking.

“No.” He looked down at me. “You’re keeping him. You’ll be paying his way and looking after his feed and water. You want to give a home to this dog, you’ll be doing it properly.”

My father walked back into the house. I lay down in the grass and whispered, “Bomba, Bomba,” into the dog’s ear. ●

SUKHJIT KAUR KHALSA
ILLUSTRATION BY MAEVE BAKER



TWO HANDS

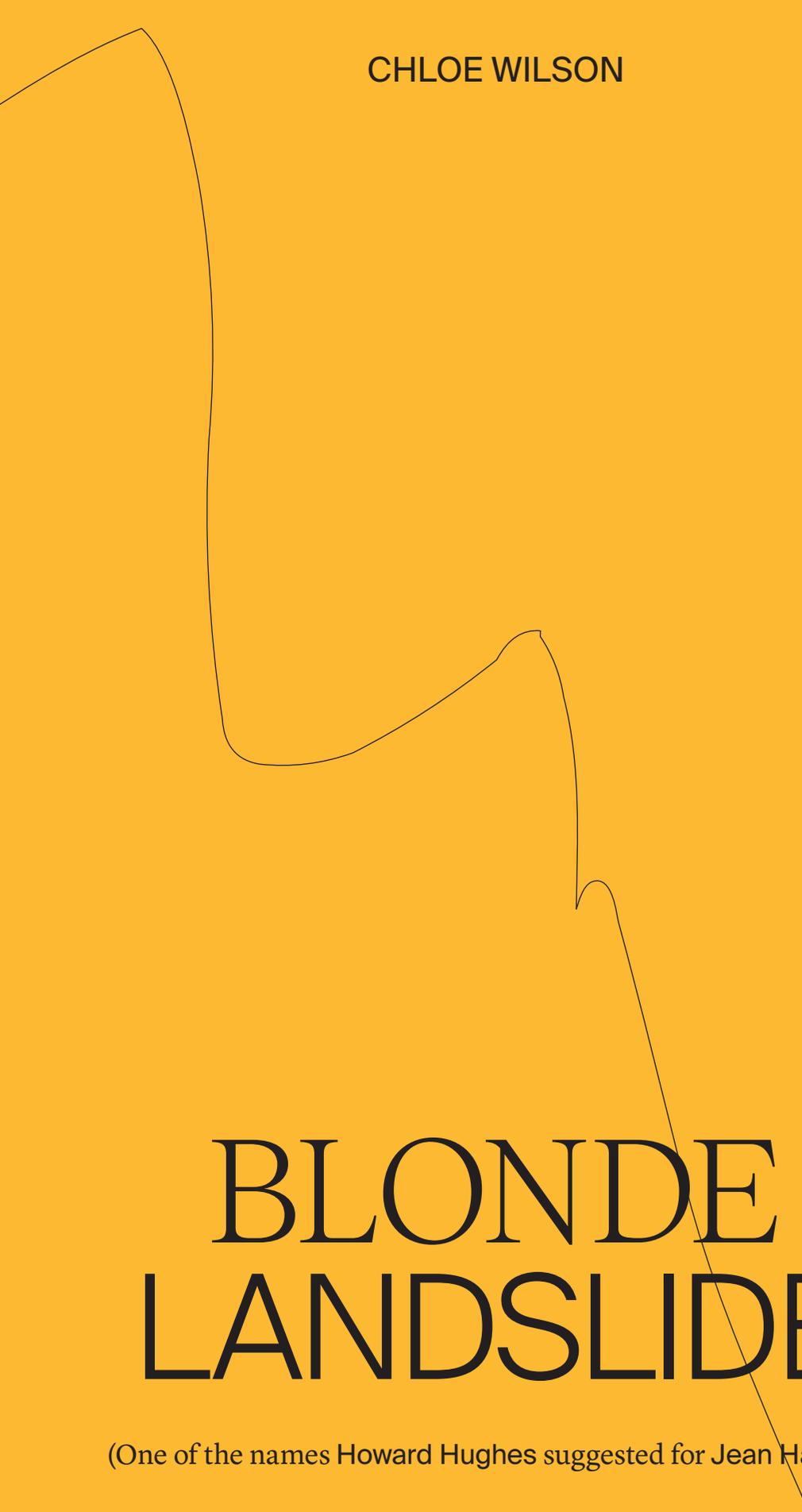
GOINGDOWNSWINGING.ORG.AU/TWO-HANDS

SPOKEN WORD

GOING DOWN SWINGING #40



Scan the QR code or follow the URL for spoken word and animations.



BLONDE LANDSLIDE

(One of the names Howard Hughes suggested for Jean Harlow)

It's difficult to find credible,
this idea of a landslide
with a signature tint: to think

that a disaster might agonise
over pigment or condition
before its keratin

tendrils unfurl to grip
and uproot trees, to hollow
out mountains, to gleefully

sweep away the foundations
under houses. One struggles
to compose the tableau:

a landslide awaiting
the ritualistic frizzling
of its scalp, the application

- of that witchery
which turned out to be
a mash of Lux flakes, ammonia

and chlorine. Then again,
perhaps that's what
they have in common, actress

and landslide: that drive
towards the fabulous tabula rasa,
whether in the form

of a disarticulated village,
doomed seaside resort or
that other tenuous edifice:

- the woman at the mirror,
her fingers deep in the cold cream,
preparing to take off her face. •

DAMNATIO MEMORIAE

No one messes with Venice. When
a doge went rogue, the other nobles
had no compunction about
strewing his component parts

around the city walls, like bunting.
But that was not enough. The Venetians
were completionists. After all, someone
somewhere might think gently

on the offender. Someone might
be in cahoots, or tell fond anecdotes,
remember a preferred turn
of phrase, a precious gesture. Venice

could not tolerate this. Hence,
it seemed necessary, in cases of flagrant
outrage, to herald their displeasure,
to scrub the offending face

from paintings, scrape it from coins,
torch everything: the slippers
and sketch albums, handkerchiefs, cologne,
the dried albumen coating the shell

of the egg he accepted
for his final breakfast. The amount
of reconnaissance this took
would have been less onerous

to accomplish during the Renaissance,
when news cycles were measured
in years and likenesses were
approximate at best – nevertheless,

the leaders of the most serene republic
must have known that any attempts
at damnatio memoriae would remain
incomplete, leaving specks

of recollection scattered
like the spots on a Dalmatian. Yet,
it's an impulse anyone might recognise
from experience; from drawing

a black curtain across the wall
in memory where that certain
portrait resides – and on it,
listing the sitter's name, his crimes. ●

Thanks to our rock, Joanna Gould, for always being just a Skype call away. We can't wait to see you in the flesh very soon. A million thanks to Megan Anderson and Elizaveta Maltseva. Without you, we wouldn't have a clue what we were doing and *Going Down Swinging* wouldn't be looking quite so great at forty.

Endless thanks to Steve Grimwade, the chair of the Going Down Swinging board until September this year. You have served the GDS community with dedication, love and an open mind since the turn of the century and will be very sorely missed.

Thanks to our new chair of the board and human powerhouse, Sandra Boyd, and to the rest of the board, Anna Kelsey-Sugg, Sonia Nair, Dr Elizabeth MacFarlane and Vartika Patel. Your support is truly appreciated and there's no one else we'd want to sit in a boardroom and look at reports with every three months.

Thanks to our new staff members, Hollen Singleton and Georgia Coldebella for your hard work, steady hands and care. We're so very fortunate to have you on board. Thanks also to our fantastic editorial interns, Wai Mun Mah and Darcy Rock and to our events intern, Gabrielle Raz-Liebman, for your enthusiasm and for making our events truly sparkle. Thanks also to our multimedia intern, Harry McLean, the rarest bird.

Huge thanks to Jennifer Compton for being so generous and thoughtful - applying for an internship with Going Down Swinging was the start of a fine friendship and we're so glad you love hummus too.

To Kevin Brophy and Myron Lysenko, for creating this incredible, far-reaching thing that we're lucky enough to continue. Thanks for sitting down with us in January, sharing your favourite poems and letting us try your homemade honey. We think it may just have been the secret ingredient.

To Carolyn Ang, for your energy and for just running with it. Your diligence and creative eye have created a book that feels far too cool for us, but we adore it. Thanks also to Maeve Baker for the most beautiful illustrations and animations, and for being an absolute angel to work with.

To Geoff Lawyer at Complete Colour for your efficiency and dedication to getting everything right. And to the Complete Colour team for all that you do to make high quality printing sustainable.

To all the writers and artists behind the works in this book, thanks for choosing us as a home. *Going Down Swinging* would be nothing without you.

Thanks to Jason Cavanagh and The Motley Bauhaus for giving us a home this year and for housing our many, many books.

We're grateful to Brunswick Mechanics Institute for hosting our big, fortieth birthday bash and to our incredible performers, Eleanor Jackson, Eloise Grills, Fury and Sumarlinah Raden Winoto.

Kudos to all the previous editors and staff who have worked on *Going Down Swinging* over the last forty years. It's a tough but wonderful gig and we feel lucky to be in your ranks. This book is for you, too.

Finally, thanks to our loved ones, friends and family for the late nights, big chats and more than a few wines. We look forward to reconnecting with you before we dive in for another year.

Let's make the most of it. ●



A large, white outline of the number '40' is centered on the page. The number '4' is on the left and the '0' is on the right. Inside the outline of the number, the word 'START' is written in a white, serif, all-caps font. The word 'START' is positioned horizontally across the middle of the number, with the 'S' starting at the left edge of the '4' and the 'T' ending at the right edge of the '0'.

START

PART II.

EDITORIAL

This is the first blow as we go down swinging. The future of the magazine is uncertain but we're working on a second edition. We have mainly tried to present prose from new Australian writers. GDS will also feature articles and interviews on writers we think are important influences on Australian fiction.

We cannot afford to pay contributors as we are funding the magazine ourselves and do not have much money. In fact, Myron is \$4,000 in debt and Kevin has broken his collar bone and is off work.

GDS will appear haphazardly—depending on our finances and suitable material. It has taken us 18 months to produce this issue and we hope to have the next one ready later this year.

Any enquiries, encouragements, contributions, reviews, criticisms and offers of help are appreciated. All correspondence to be directed to:

- EDITORS,
GOING DOWN SWINGING
P.O. BOX ■ COBURG 3058.

Special thanks to Jennie Stewart and Janine Brophy for their help.

kevin brophy &
myron lysenko ●

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EGG
POEM

MARK REID

... you've got to eat ...
eggs!

i need eggs the way a fridge
needs something to hold,
something to draw
back inside its cool, hospital-white interior
(the sound of trolley wheels braces
the walls as footsteps clock like heartbeats from
one distance to another).

i need eggs!

they are smooth & shapely
like a plaster cast
or the puffed cheeks
of a glass-blower (in wide-eyed surprise at
the sheer transparency of his creation) as
figurines of frogs & deer & horses spill
from his unspeaking lips.

i want eggs.

a wholeness in the tummy.
i want something to suck into my systems
like a shipwreck, to have & to hold like a grave
with its stinking fertility where weeds thrive;

i want eggs

because i want to thrive,
i want to sink my toes into a clump of death
& really come alive! ●

35

WHY I AM A POET

KEVIN BROPHY

“In order to write a poem you must first invent the poet to write it.”

– *Antonio Machado*

“Books are dingy, dreary, dog-eared and dead.”

– *Verner Clapp*

“The so-called traumatic experience is not an accident, but the opportunity for which the child has been patiently waiting – had it not occurred, it would have found another – in order that its life become a serious matter.”

– *W. H. Auden*

Is it true that you cannot become a writer unless something has gone wrong early in your life – and that this experience will repeat itself as a murmur below everything you write from then on?

Winter sharpened its teeth on the tips of our fingers, toes and ears in those days. My breath steamed out of me. Puddles cracked under my school shoes. Everything was a miracle. Early each morning a horse dawdled down Sydney Road pulling a tray of milk crates while a man as hot as his horse ran bottles to the front doorsteps. I would climb on the tray and let the horse take me up to the church a mile and a half away. At the church of Saint Paul I would push open the heavy side door to the sacristy where I would put on the white alb of an altar boy. Father Norris was there kissing his stole before flipping it over his neck, tying the girdle round himself like a mountaineer, muttering the Latin prayers needed to make him worthy of the chasuble as it dropped over his shoulders and fell with a grace that suddenly erased the old man. In his place was a priest with power to turn wine into blood and wafers of bread into flesh. I took the finger towel and glass cruets of water and wine to the credence table at the right of the altar and put out the bell on the step where I would be kneeling at the consecration.

Later during the Mass I would ring it just as the chalice lifted by the priest reached its peak where, I thought, the miracle was happening. Like a magician’s apprentice it was my task to keep the audience enthralled and distracted while the real magic happened beyond their perception. People stood as we marched out on to the altar. →

What is a poet? One who answers back?

Are writers the ones who refuse to give up their childish ways?

All the noises of a church: the dull beat of a dropped book, chinking beads, the stuffy sighs of winter coats, the cracks and yelps of old wooden benches, and the priest's *Introibo ad altare Dei* to which I answered *Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam*. I go to the altar of God: to God, the joy of my youth. Father Norris had sat me on his verandah once a week and drilled me in the Latin responses. The mass was to go without a prompt or a hitch. In my slippers I made no unnecessary noise. When he spoke I was to have the Latin response on the tip of my tongue; when he put out his hand for a towel or a cruet I was to be there with it. We were a team. I was as close to Heaven as a boy could get and would know what to do when I did get there.

What is a poet? One who answers back?
Are writers the ones who refuse to give up their childish ways?

Arriving at the church for a benediction I hear shouts from the altar. A woman is on her hands and knees, wailing. She cannot speak English. Father Norris stands over her, black in his street robe, shouting at her that she has no right to go near the tabernacle because she is a woman. She backs away from the altar on her hands and knees and keeps moving backwards close to the floor until she is outside the church. Father Norris keeps shouting what a sinful act she has committed, what a sin it is for a woman to be on the altar. I prepare myself for the duties of an altar boy.

I regurgitated a length of paper. Pulling it from my mouth, it came up as a long worm-like length of clotted paper, on and on, unrolling from within me as it came up through my neck in a reverse-swallow. Like a tapeworm or a tumour the paper had grown inside me and eventually I had no choice but to "bring it up".

He sits near us on the tram. He has long hair and a length of wizard-like beard hanging from the centre of his chin. Most of the rest of his face is covered in shorter but still dark whiskers. His neck is whiskery too. Under a deep navy military jacket with sparkling shoulder emblems he wears a red skirt. Then boots. We chat about phenomenology (a word I have always been able to spell but never able to understand), about structure versus free association in the production of creative works

and his nine-year stint of undergraduate study in arts and Slavic languages. There is something dog-like about the word, Slavic, as he says it. He tells me he is resigned to moving on to something postgraduate soon. My children stare at him. They are introduced, answer a question or two from him then go back to wrestling on the seat next to me. When he has left the tram they watch him stride across the road into the university. My ten-year-old daughter asks me, "Is that a man or a woman?"

- I could have said he is the evidence we need. He is the reason poets need and he is the poet reason needs. I talked to my children about costumes.

My eight-year-old son reads to me at night. When he comes to the sentence, "The ship lost its rudder in a gale" he reads, "The ship lost its udder in a glade". Later he asks me to repeat his mistake. It is important to get the mistake right.

Two men walk along a country road bending their heads towards each other and from where I stand several days away it is difficult to know whether they are sharing trouble or carrying shovels.

Like night mice moving unseen along the gutters of a city, words can keep an inhuman order below the city's neon instructions.

What went wrong? I read dead writers. I believed you had to be dead to be a writer. I went from Classic Comics to classics. I wanted to be a writer, one of the living dead.

My books by dead writers filled the Brownbulit metal shelves installed in my mother's ironing room. Smells of washed clothes, singed cotton and dusty books filled my head with desire for the writing death: Edgar Rice Burroughs, Algernon Blackwood, H. G. Wells, G. K. Chesterton, O. Henry, Captain W. E. Johns, Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Kafka. The mice in my city.

My older sister did the living. Boys dreamed about her and feared her and came to me and asked me to pass on notes to her. I understood the passion in words, the importance of a sentence on a scrap of paper. I understood what could be bought with words, the coins of the heart. My sister had no time for books, not the kind of time I had. She had a face and a figure and a body. →

She had skin. Hair and sunglasses in summer. I had the dead and their words that probably wouldn't buy love but might be kaleidoscopes. I had words so interior I could not speak them. When my family looked at me they thought, "When will it stop?"

Each line of poetry must be a tightrope crossed.

Winter sharpened its teeth on the tips of my fingers, toes and ears in those days. My breath steamed out of me. Puddles cracked under my school shoes. Everything was a miracle. Early each morning as I waited for a tram to take me and a few other children to school we threw stones at the rats skipping across the council rubbish tip. Grey rats on grey mounds against a grey sky. Our noses pink and wild, our eyes small and black in the low morning light. The rats dodged away like dreams from daylight. I spend my life now coaxing them back.

- Bookish: adjective: origin mid-sixteenth century: addicted to reading books or getting knowledge only from books.

The book is a hallucinatory drug, its words venomous mushrooms sprouting in dark armies on the soft fibres of paper. Like all addicts, I savoured rituals: the purchase of a new hardback classic, holding it in the hand, putting it aside for later, then opening it under a bright light with a heavy blanket and a soft pillow on an endless afternoon.

Time let go and sat there beside me with its head in its hands.

Drugged with fiction and poetry, dead in the endless life of words, a scholar in this school of pathology, it was not easy to know what to do with my life. I could not know how wrong it had gone. I thought that if I could write one book in my lifetime that would be enough. There is a secret universe called Bookish.

With my brothers and sisters we strung a rope across the backyard over the concrete, and holding a broom as a steadying bar we staggered like babies into our small circus where death loomed a foot below us.

Lumping a blue vinyl schoolbag full of books, I stopped to watch a fist fight near the railway station. The crack of a fist on a face was like the sound of a textbook shutting. The eye of one man fell out onto his cheek when he was hit.

I took my bag and moved away, taking with me the image of that man on the ground. This was not like reading. What is the opposite of reading?

At eighteen I opened my eyes one morning in a Jesuit seminary. I had become a novice in a black robe with black wings to hold in my hands when I did not have a book. The black robe made me seem a word among other words. I was part of a story. I was training to be the most bookish of priests, fed and educated, encouraged to read and given time to write. I remember sitting in the garden of the seminary where an autumn wind turned over leaf after leaf as if looking for what had been lost.

I was now close enough to priests to smell the altar wine on their breath. Books with earnest silent words opened of their own accord on my lap. Everything echoed, as though spoken in a chapel. My monthly job was to clean the gully trap at the back of the kitchen. This place where rats would drown, anchored me. Just as death must anchor every poem.

It was 1968 and I was not called up to be a soldier for the new war in Asia, for I was called by a darker government. Silent for whole days, we were amazed at how loose with sound the simple birds were. We prayed our silence would provoke God to speak to us. It was 1968 and we stood in a room watching television images of two men dressed like wingless angels bounce across the moon.

Suddenly I needed glasses. God was not enough for me. Prayers were too repetitive. It joined the rats dodging down the line of a wall in the chapel, aiming for that flaw in the brickwork and slipping like a heresy through each sacred layer of the institution.

Priests, like the most sophisticated toys, or like books, speak the same words each day. As if the great universe is silent only because it listens for these words. Who else will say them? In his black robes a priest is a cartoon of the night walking through the day.

Some writers drag the words after them and watch a trail of wonders form from the mess of a backward-lived life. Some will nail the words down.

What went wrong was that the woman backing out of the church on her hands and knees is still moaning something in another language.

The words for lost are lost for words.

What went wrong was that my sister died, her future suddenly locked in a coffin.

Words line up like an orderly history of everything.

To speak is to eat time. ●

1 BIG TEASE

ANIA WALWICZ

She's a big teaser. She took him half the way there. Only one half or a quarter, or even less. Than that. She wore these silk stockings. With a black line down the back. Snakeskin pumps. She's a pretty girl. The only thing she was ever good at. She. She didn't have any men friends. My mother flirts with the tailors. They drop their needles. They laugh with pink, distended faces. She's a big teaser. She's this big tease. Big. She knew what they were after. So she was going to give it to them. Not by a half or a quarter or even less. Not at all. You get some sneaky ways if you can't hit. And angry. He couldn't hardly wait. Broke a box, taking me home. Looked ridiculous. And in one big hurry. You can tell when someone just aims. I was talking to Bruce at an opening. Bruce doesn't like me. And he wants to. I'm talking to this Bruce at an opening. I'm talking. Bruce, this he, drinks this red wine. This claret in a cut glass. Hello Bruce I say and more. Bruce hates me. And he wants to. Bruce doesn't love me. Bruce swings his hand around with a full tumbler. Bruce gets too happy with himself. I watch the hand, the glass describe an arc, and spill the red on someone else's white trousers. I'm this big flirt who put a knife in this man's gut. Made him squirt. ●

7 IN LOVE WITH THE BOMB

MYRON LYSENKO

I've fallen in love & I've fallen heavily
I've been watching the bomb for a long time
& I'm utterly infatuated.

Last night, at a party, I danced with the bomb.
We did the tango & we danced beautifully.
We talked about relationships & philosophy
& how much we hated our jobs.

I cuddled the bomb & the bomb responded so
we decided to go home together on my bicycle.
The bomb was a bit drunk
so we drank black coffee & went to bed.

The bomb is a great kisser, said:
Quick, quick, press the button
& we had a world shattering experience as
we exploded with happiness.

Afterwards, we lay on the bed, smoking,
& the bomb confessed to being married
but by then it was too late...

I want to elope with the bomb.
I know the bomb gets depressed
& I want to take the bomb on a holiday
down to the beach, to get away from it all.
The bomb needs a break
& I think I can make the bomb happy.

But this morning I woke in an empty bed.
The bomb had pinned a note to my pillow:

- Thanks
for a wonderful night.
I will always be with you.
Love,
The Bomb. ●

PIGEONHOLED

THE WOMEN

AMAL AWAD

My mother tells people the day I left home the sky turned black. She was speaking of the shame my departure brought – a single, Arab-Muslim woman leaving home to live with another single Arab-Muslim woman. And I wanted to make a joke of it. That reputations are like STDs, easily spread if you're not careful. But I was already in trouble and my mother wouldn't know what STD means.

What my mother likes to forget is that the sky was a bright blue the morning I carried out my last box, so Mama settled for theatre. She sat morosely in the kitchen, limply studying her coffee cup for clues. Blackness all around the interior would affirm her grief. Grains in the shape of talking heads would signify the gossip she worries constantly about. When the cup refused to indulge her fears, she looked to the kitchen window. But the morning sun continued to stream through, casting a warm glow on the counter.

Finding answers in coffee grains is Mama's daily ritual. Every morning she studies her coffee cup, quietly reasoning with herself that intuition is a tool gifted by Allah. It is He who made it possible for us to see beyond the physical world. To sit in pure stillness and visit other worlds – all seven of them, according to Mama. The coffee is thick, muddy and bitter. Before she drinks it, Mama always sweetens the brew with a teaspoon of sugar. She sips her coffee slowly, between tasks: a small packed lunch for Baba, a few commands shouted to my brother, a reluctant offer to make me breakfast.

Reluctant, it became, because I was leaving. I was moving out – moving on – and Mama was filled with shame on my behalf.

Still filled with shame.

She never asked me why, or tried to understand. She only spoke of what it meant. My words wouldn't matter. She wouldn't trust them, as I'm a *sayyah*, a girl who goes out at night, who lacks *adab*, which are so much more than manners in this bubble she has created.

All these things between us left unsaid.

How she must imagine me in her mind.

And I wonder how different I am in her thoughts. If there is any truth to be found.

The coffee cup, not satisfying Mama, was flipped upside down again. It sat innocuously on its saucer for several more minutes. The ritual of it has not changed, down to crockery and the silver tray Mama uses for serving, a gift from her mother. Mama brought it with her from Palestine thirty-five years ago, a relic from another time and place. →

My stomach tightened at the sight of the cup, waiting for its moment. Its stillness heavy and meaningful. Fairuz's lilting voice filled the room, at odds with the tension strung out between us. Fairuz, the Arabic singer every woman wishes to be, and whom every man admires. She is a fiction in our minds: romantic, beautiful, filled with love not only for a person, but for her country. She is every Arab in the diaspora even though she is not among us. Every person separated from an idealised homeland because she speaks of wholeness. Every person who has longed for something that seems impossible to attain.

B'tadhakkur akhar marratan shaftik senta?

Do you remember the last time I saw you that year?

The coffee cup is neutral and will remain so. In Mama's mind, it never reflects how she feels, or what she wishes to see. It is an untainted oracle, a place to check in without emotional bias or interference. To me, it is charged with a power of judgment that feels unjust.

On the day I left, just as my mother abandoned her coffee cup for the second time, the glass evil eye that hung above the front door fell to the ground and shattered with an almighty crash. Mama exhaled with relief. She abandoned her post at the kitchen table to retrieve the dustpan and brush.

I stood by the staircase in the hall and watched as she carefully, almost reverentially, gathered up the broken opalescent shards, whispering invocations to the sound of tinkling glass against tiles as though they shared a secret between them. I couldn't help the unkind thought that, as strands of Mama's hair flew out in all directions, she looked a bit mad. When we returned to the kitchen, Mama's energy had shifted to that of the validated conspiracy theorist, plugged into both a sense of satisfaction and unease.

Mama is devout. Prays five times a day. But she is consumed by superstition. She is a control freak who feels powerless.

Sometimes I feel sorry for her.

A month has passed since I left home. But instead of fixing up my new bedroom, I'm back in the kitchen with my mother, waiting for the women to arrive. These are the women I have known my entire life. Nice, jovial types whom I call 'aunty' or '*khalto*' even though we are not related.

They gather in Mama's kitchen at least twice a week. Women like her: separated from the homeland, carrying grief like baggage, while forging ahead with life in a place that has the appearance of ordinariness but will never feel like home. Women who, in the presence of each other, slip out of their masks and somehow become whole again.

They talk, gossip, smoke and cook together. They roll vine leaves and stuff zucchini, enough to feed each woman's family. Their emotions tighten then grow large as they unpack the latest *mousalsal* from overseas, usually a Spanish soap opera dubbed terribly into Arabic. And they read their coffee cups. All except khalto Salma, who says the priest forbids it in his sermon and she's too close to death to risk incurring God's wrath. (Well, further, because everyone agrees she is the finest of the readers.) Mama will vigorously nod, invoking a similar decree she heard from a *sheikh* on the local Islamic radio station. But she can't help herself.

"We don't tell the future," she tells the group with quiet authority. "We peel away the present to find the missing parts."

The house I grew up in has barely changed. There are two living rooms: one for the family, and one for the guests, with thick velvet curtains in gold, polished wooden tables and glassware that only comes out on special occasions.

Mama has already replaced the glass eye that broke with a new talisman. A wooden Hand of Fatima, a heavy piece painted in gold and azure blue, guards the hallway. Both can do the imaginary work she intends. The eye was a glossy deep blue, familiar and comforting, like it saw all, ready to shatter itself in protection. The Hand of Fatima rests differently and is more feminine. As though in warning, its fingers close neatly together. It's weighty, watchful, like it's blessing the hallway rather than guarding it.

As I take my place in the kitchen, I notice for the first time how worn it looks. The guests' living room is well-preserved, as though somehow the energy surrounding it has stopped the furniture from fading. Or perhaps it's a sign of how little it has been used, how the special occasions dwindled over the years.

But this kitchen remains the same. The cupboards are shiny off-white, with yellow handles straight out of 1979. Everything works, but it's old and in need of updating, of new life. But this is Mama's territory and no one can touch it without her permission. She doesn't like change, not in the physical or mental sense.

I'm here today because khalto Salma's daughter is getting married. The groom's a nice Lebanese boy from the right village. Not an import either. She really lucked out, Ruba decrees. I'm surprised all of this still matters, then I remember that Salma's daughter is my age.

This is where I failed. To bring home a suitable boy, from a suitable family, with the right boxes ticked.

I smile as the women file in, chattering before they've reached the large dining table that sits neatly between the pristine living room and the kitchen. Salma is beaming, as though she has managed a great achievement. And I suppose she has: a suitable match for her daughter, someone she can speak of with pride, who has nothing to hide, or so she thinks.

Mama has already placed a plastic spread on top of the floral, delicate tablecloth. Plastic bowls cover its surface, as well as ingredients. Bags of flour, tubs of butter, mounds of medjool dates, shelled pistachios and a bag of almonds.

Today we are making *ma'moul*: sweet biscuits stuffed with dates or pistachios, patterned on the outside or dusted with icing sugar. We make them for religious festivals, and for celebrations like a wedding. I don't cook, but I have a special talent for baking. Even Mama acknowledges that I make *ma'moul* like I inherited the talent from an ancestor. The only thing Arab about me, she jokes to the women.

"*Yallah, inshallah* we'll be making yours next," says khalto Lena in Arabic. She mock-ululates as you would for a bride and the women chuckle, all except Mama, who rolls her eyes.

"Sana prefers to be by herself," says Mama. "She's a *modern woman*." All her words tumble out in Arabic except the last two. My mother speaks in Arabic but she peppers her sentences with English to inject force, to add meaning. →

I tried to please my parents by bending my desires towards theirs. I didn't know anything else. But change slowly crept up on me. Things were shed, bit by bit. It is not always sudden, though the moment of realisation that something has shifted feels unexpected.

This separation is brutal, painful, like a part of me has been cut out and I am yet to repair.

"*Khalas*, leave her alone," says *khalto* Ruba. "Who says marriage is everything? I had a husband and the only thing he gave me was herpes."

My mother visibly flinches. "*Ya Ruba*."

Ruba laughs. She is free. Doesn't care what they think. Widows get a pass on most things once they've played out their mourning period. Ruba is Christian so hers was forty days. Muslims do three months.

I realise Ruba sees me in the same way she views herself. We are the same – single women – but to her I'm still a *binit*, a virgin who will remain so, in all other ways free.

There is more than one way to read a coffee cup. The important thing is the quality of the grains. Too thick and there is nothing to divine. Too thin, and your future is as faint and indecipherable as a ghostly spirit.

The women in my mother's circle sip the coffee until there is only a slimy layer of mud, enough to swish around the cup anti-clockwise to paint the interior. Once they're done, they tip the dregs onto the saucer. Then they get rowdy, or cheeky, or hopeful, as though they can manifest the stories the cup will tell.

Today, Ruba prays for a handsome Chris Evans look-a-like to appear in the knitted images marking the interior of the cup. She saw him play Captain America and something within her stirred. She cannot forget him.

"*Yallah*, write to him, *ya Sana*, tell him I very pretty," she tells me. As though I have a direct route to Chris Evans. "Twittar. The online."

Ruba is attractive but she's in her fifties and seems invested more in her television shows than her appearance. She dyes her hair a fire-engine red, seemingly in defiance. Because she doesn't care for it beyond that.

Lena snorts. "*Ya habla*, you think if he had a choice between you and Sana he'd pick you? Look at her."

They praise my looks frequently.

"Say *mashallah*," breathes Salma, because even Christians are superstitious.

I'm practically a spinster, but I receive less pity because I'm tall, with long thick hair, my skin white and my eyes blue. I'm a beauty to them, at least. Consolation for the worriers. There is nothing more pitiable than an old single Muslim woman who warms herself with a career but has little else to recommend her. What man values a successful woman?

"Someone read Sana's cup," says Lena to the table.

Ruba's eyes light up. "You cheeky thing, where is your cup?"

Mama practically snorts. "She doesn't drink coffee. She never lets me read her cup."

I can't place her tone, whether Mama wishes I had let her read my cup on occasion, if my refusal is another way I have disappointed her. Have I disallowed a connection that could have improved things between us?

But it's true. I never let her read my cup. I don't believe in its powers, but Mama does and that's enough to warn me away from handing it over. While I inherited Mama's cynicism, I had long ago learnt to subdue the Arab inclination towards superstition. But I suspect that Mama sees things others don't, or at least believes she does, which in my mind is the same thing.

I wasn't moved by the shattered eye the day I left home. In my mind, it symbolised not the destruction of peace, but the distillation of the old and already broken. But I was flooded with a knowing: that when I returned, I would never be quite welcome. And I'm here today with all of this confirmed, because I feel like a visitor – too big for this space, or perhaps too small.

In truth, Mama has always been the dramatic type. Wailing is forbidden in Islam, but when her brother died, she ripped her clothes off her chest and beat it while she howled in grief. Years later, she spoke proudly of it, as though wailing is a sport, one that requires a talent like the poetic ululations women offer at weddings.

That's Mama. A sorceress of emotion. A woman who never forgets. She hovers between having a daughter who is cursed, and a daughter who curses her family. Her allegiance to superstition means she would often try to cure me. Seven recitations of three verses of the *Quran*, one hand on my shoulder, the other on top of my head. A feeling. A heavy hand meant there was *hassad*.

For very serious cases, she would resort to ritual. Melting a ball of lead into a bowl, which she circled above my crown as she whispered prayers. She would pour the molten lead into a bowl of water and watch for the shapes that would form. Animals. Letters. Something to reveal the unseen forces at play in our lives.

It felt good to be protected by my mother. It was love without condition. Connection by her rules.

How things changed. Sudden and vicious and sharp.

"*Mat'amalish halick zay il slut*," was Mama's goodbye to me the day I left. I chuckled, understanding that Mama was not going to give me a shard of a kind goodbye. I assured her I wouldn't behave like a slut. Though to be fair, that ruled out a lot of ordinary things.

I wondered how much she knew about me in that moment. The Outside Me. The one who lived a non-pious life, who talked to men and laughed aloud in public, who went for coffee breaks with male workmates, who didn't always cross her legs, who wore skirts tightly fitted to her curvy body. I wondered how much she knew about Matt, the non-Arab, non-Muslim man I had fallen in love with, who had proposed and was puzzled by the secrecy I enforced.

I wanted, for just a moment, to ask her to admit her suspicions, because she always had them. I was overcome by a desire for us to speak truthfully, not loudly. We don't have inside voices, but even as piercing plain talkers, there are layers of subtext. →

When we were younger, we were afraid of our father. He was the one quick to anger, to pull our ears or smack us as punishment. The offence wasn't always clear. But we learned. We learned. And with that we faded, dimmed our lights. Became quieter when he was around. I became quiet inside.

My mother was softer, her edges not so hard and pronounced. But one day I realised how much she had changed. How my father, once so quick to anger, was quieter, defeated. My mother, angrier. I saw with clarity how Mama was always one to cover up. It manifested in the physical – your hair, the curves of your body, the way you walk, the sound of your heels on the pavement, the shape of your voice as you spoke. Layers and layers. Checking for petticoats under skirts. The way she thought she was protecting and empowering me by putting me at the mercy of the community.

For these migrant women – forging ahead in a new land with less freedom, more pressure – the trauma sinks in later. PTSD. I don't know how to say it in Arabic.

- I tried to tell Mama once that's what she suffered. She pretended not to understand. Pretended the trauma of migration wasn't real or possible. Pretended under layers to be fearless and solid.

Still, Mama's body seemed to get smaller each year. Like she was collapsing in on herself. I told her to get therapy. *Get help*. I was dismissive and cruel. I didn't excavate the why. I was just mad at the pain and how it trickled down. How we inherited suffering. How we inherited trauma.

The night I left home, I slept restlessly and saw the future sketched out in a dream. An abstract message to decode. My family sitting before me as I took their picture, but the screen was cracked. I thought I understood the dream: a relationship irreparably fractured.

They had stayed quiet when I took off the headscarf, when I broke off an engagement to a nice Arab boy. But the act of leaving home was too much. It led not to quiet observation, but deafening silence.

I'm not superstitious. I don't know what I believe. But I knew the dream signalled a solitary way forward, a path where I could not look back. I'd won freedom with conditions – or rather, sacrifice.

“You don't have to drink it all. It just needs your breath, your energy.”

This is khalto Salma. She can't help herself. She loves the ritual.

We wait for my cup to do its work. “It is thinking,” declares Lena.

Ruba dares to ask how my new situation is coming along. Mama visibly tightens. She stands over a large plastic tub, mixing pistachios and honey. Seeing her like this, I realise she seems even smaller now. Are her shoulders always so tense and closed in?

Her hair is tied back with the usual headscarf, because she is among the women. She could dispense with it altogether in her home, but she is attached to it. Without a head covering, Mama feels naked.

“Change the subject,” she says.

The women come to my defence. They scold my mother. *This is Australia*, they remind her, all conveniently forgetting their own conservatism, the ways they forced their own children into categories to keep them safe and respectable. None of them would want for their daughters what has happened to me. But they don't have skin in the game. They can happily endorse my goodness because they are not affected by my rebellion. In their eyes, I suppose, I am still pure; I'm just restless. I'm a spinster who needs some freedom to feel more like a Westerner.

To them I am polite, good and nice-looking enough that my prospects haven't faded. It's not me who is gossiped about, though my flatmate Mariam has a reputation. Being spotted at a queer dance party for Arabs. That sort of thing.

Mariam doesn't care. She likes herself.

Shedding. That's what Mariam called it.

What's going to be left of you, crazy woman?

This, she said, when I first showed up without hijab. She's not religious. Mariam tells me she's barely even Muslim. But I detected the worry in her expression, the furrow in her brow. *Just tell me: are you okay? Grieve into me*. Arms outstretched. She was the only one capable of understanding the changes in me. The cause. One night after university, the two of us waiting at a bus stop, joking about Mariam's latest crush. Then, five boys we didn't know formed a barricade. We were saved only by the public space.

They called us names. I got the worst of it, the headscarf like a red rag to a bull. One of them had a switchblade. I think he surprised himself when he drew blood at my neck, the rich red soaking through the peach fabric of my scarf.

I have a tiny scar, a threaded knot of tissue I always keep covered with my long hair.

All I thought at the time was how the attack would empower my mother's restrictions. Her warnings about staying out late validated. It's not me she doesn't trust, she would say, it's other people.

Mariam recovered so quickly after the attack. Nothing much shifted in her, except that the divides she saw between herself and white people deepened. That, and she started to carry a rape whistle.

But I changed.

Taking off the physical layers was easier than I'd thought. I did it slowly. The headscarf came first. One day I realised I'd missed a few prayers. I no longer woke up at dawn, before the first peek of sunlight, to make ablutions and supplicate.

Later, I understood my language had changed. Once infused with declarations of trust in Allah, an obedience to divine destiny drenched in inevitability and fatalism and acceptance, I was now a blank page.

Issa. He was next. He started out as my boyfriend, the only Arab man I've ever cared about, but we never called each other girlfriend and boyfriend. That would be *haram*. No, our relationship was pure and it wasn't long before we were engaged then married – Islamically married, that is. We had the religious ceremony, but the wedding would wait. →

The most we ever did was steal a few kisses and some touching in unseen places. It felt nice but incomplete. Issa had more hang-ups than me. He was shy and clumsily tender. Every movement tentative, affirming his innocence.

After the attack, Issa approached me gently. Gathering words of faith wouldn't help, he brokered the situation with more practical observations. But he couldn't pretend it didn't wound him to see me collapse, not into despair but into nothingness. *Be angry at God, but don't stop believing in Him.* Religious platitudes crept in. God rewards suffering. *Patience, habibti, Allah loves the patient.*

In an instant, my perspective shifted.

I saw with searing clarity how discoloured I had kept my world. A whole palette of shades and I was painting in black and white.

Issa's beard grew longer and my sleeves got shorter. There was no overt challenge in either of our actions. We were forced to acknowledge how far apart we'd grown.

It was over. I asked him to say the words.

I divorce you. I divorce you. I divorce you.

And we were done, the cord between us broken.

I don't feel nervous about Ruba reading my cup. She's the weakest of the readers. She always makes a joke of it. She tells Lena she's going to meet a man who will be her great love. Lena has been married for fifty years.

Ruba winks at me as she ties her bright red hair into a ponytail. Her mischievous look sets me slightly on edge, because if she jokes about men in my cup, it will only fire up Mama.

It would be okay if my mother didn't take everything personally. It's a demonstration of her hubris. That my desires are born of restriction rather than something more natural and reasonable. Something normal.

I am her daughter and there are rules.

You are always somebody's daughter in Arab families. You are always someone's parent. There is little space for another story and so your journey is never singular. It never belongs solely to you. It belongs to the collective.

- All these things I never thought I'd do. I am a person I never thought I would be. And yet it never feels whole, even if it feels right.

Ruba squints into the cup. Fairuz plays softly in the background, a glamorous, separate witness to our play. I lighten up, relaxing more the sillier Ruba gets.

"I see a house and lots of money. And there's a plane. Where are you going?"

I smile. My secret life pales in comparison to the one Ruba constructs for me.

"Yeeee, I see a baby! Ya Sana, what aren't you telling us?"

Khalto Salma crosses herself. Lena delivers Ruba a stern look. Mama focuses on the bowl, even though the mixture is ready.

I smile, softening. "Just one?"

But an ache in my body spreads. My face warms a little, and I can feel the redness rush down my cheeks like wildfire.

I know she isn't seeing a baby. I know she is making all of this up. But my truth is showing on my face, I realise, when I see my mother staring at me, comprehension in her eyes.

Mariam accompanied me to the clinic. Matt had commitments. We would see each other in the evening, he assured me. Mildly apologetic. I had nothing to worry about.

Mariam was bubbly. She left me in the waiting room because she had to move the car. I remember feeling pained by her mood.

Only later she told me the truth. That she wasn't being nonchalant. She was trying to show a brave face.

"Sana," she breathed. "I was terrified."

Perhaps it was over between Matt and I before that. But I couldn't look at him the same way. Even though I knew I had done the only thing available to me. Having a baby out of wedlock was not an option, and yet an inner conflict raged quietly below the surface. That I didn't seek an ordinary, white-picket life. That even in a world where Matt and I could be together without issue, I would not have wanted children with him. The idea of it suffocated me.

And yet, being pregnant created a warmth in me that briefly eclipsed my aversion to motherhood. I became protective. I looked up information about the growth of a foetus. When I told Matt our baby was the size of a pea, he grew angry. "Why are you doing this to yourself?"

Afterwards, when it was all done, when what remained of our connection had dissipated and exhausted itself, Matt refused to take the ring.

"I just told you it's not over," he said, his voice tight. "I want you to keep it. If you decide you truly don't want it, we can talk about it later." Matt took my hand and held it in place, placing the ring in my palm then closing my fingers over it.

Then, as I turned to leave, he took my hand. "Do you think I took you lightly?"

"I don't know how you took me, or why," I said flatly in response.

"Maybe your concern should be why you took me. How I feel is none of your business," he said. "They're my feelings. They're genuine, but you seem to want to find meaning in things that aren't there."

I left Matt's flat in a state of mourning. I had lost my connection to him and wasn't certain it could be restored.

Lena must see it, too. It's not warmth I feel now. I must have turned white because Lena cuts Ruba off. She rises suddenly from her seat and takes the cup from an oblivious Ruba.

Ruba seems taken aback, then shrugs. "I was just getting to the good bits."

"Take it seriously or don't do it at all," snaps Lena.

Mama is silent, now at the kitchen counter busying herself by wiping down the pristine surface. →

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God rewards suffering.
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And we were done, the cord
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Lena smiles then studies my cup. I can't help the uncharitable thought that curiosity has seized her rather than compassion. Nor can I tell her to stop, because it will confirm what everyone now suspects.

I clear my throat. "Is there a tall, dark handsome man in there?"

And for a moment, I wish the fantasy were true: that I was still the naïve dreamer who believed that, if I followed all the rules, life would reward me.

"The sun can still come out in winter," says Lena, studying my cup. She pours out some of its contents. "*Yallah*, tears yet to dry."

I take up a rolling pin and begin to massage some pastry. I smile. "I don't cry."

"This is why the cup does," she says, as though it makes perfect sense.

"Are you sure it's not my cup?" says Mama, turning to face us. She doesn't smile, and the energy of room shifts.

"We all have sorrow," says Salma, who stops rolling her pastry and studies the table.

"This one has secrets," says Mama.

"I see a man, but he's not here yet," says Lena, trying to break the tension. I want to tell her there is a better way to move the conversation forward. Talk about a job opportunity. Go back to Ruba's fib about travel. Lie about something that won't sway my mother further into her anger.

"He's older. Ooh, he's handsome. His nose is very pronounced, but it makes him look distinguished."

Ruba rolls her eyes, finally starts to use her hands and help with the sweets. "This one doesn't need good looks in a man. She needs someone who won't check in on her every five minutes."

- She stops and turns to me. "Don't ever marry a jealous man, Sana. They are broken and never worth it."

I have forgotten how easy-going Ruba is, how I have long suspected that she has mastered the double life. That her choice not to remarry was not a lack of opportunity, but an abundance of choice.

"He's not Muslim, is he?" This comes from Mama and I'm surprised. There is something in her tone and expression. She is not asking out of curiosity. She is trying to confirm a suspicion. I don't fancy myself very intuitive, but I see it in her face and the way she stands, leaning against the kitchen counter with her arms crossed. She doesn't look mad. She looks almost pleased.

"Blue eyes, maybe?" she adds.

"I can't see the eye colour," says a pained Lena.

Ruba laughs. "No kidding, Sana, I did see a man with a big nose in your cup. I swear."

Matt hates his nose. He broke it when he was a kid, playing footy.

I try to master my facial expression, to keep my emotions in check.

The break-up is fresh. It's easy to disavow the vision.

"I don't have anyone like that in my life."

"He's coming," says Lena, in a near-hush. And my heart stops for a moment, because I can hear in her voice that she is truly reading the cup now. "No, wait. He's around you. You already know him."

Lena looks like she's scolding herself, struggling to comprehend the exact meaning of the images. My rolling of the pastry slows, and I realise the women have stopped what they're doing. Only Fairuz fills the air.

B'tadhakkur waqtaan akhir kalimat qulta?

Do you remember the last words you said?

Mama slowly walks over to Lena and peers into the cup. I watch as Lena relinquishes her hold to allow Mama to study it. "He is tall."

This is all she says. Mama takes the cup with her back to the sink. She turns on the tap and washes it out, as though to extinguish the truths we have uncovered.

- Before I can stop it, tears are flowing. I don't know why I'm crying. It's not for Matt, a person I never really had. It's for everything in my life that could have been.

I am shocked by Mama's actions. Gone is the severe look. Something has replaced it. My mother is not smug or victorious. I realise a few moments later what it is – relief. She is validated.

And yet. She is not angry now. Something has dissolved, even if not all is forgiven.

Have I mistaken all my mother's pain for anger? Have I failed to separate my emotions from her expectations? Have I created a villain in my mind to ease the guilt that flows from my upbringing?

"It was nice to see you here," says Lena, as we pack up. "You should join us more often. Help us with the vine leaves and zucchini."

"She always pierces them," says Mama, amusement replacing the usual bitterness. I am terrible at cooking, but instead of frustration, I find it seems to give her some pleasure. That I haven't been able to master one of life's simplicities. She has no true idea as to the depths of my existence. But if I can't cook, I must be a *habla*. Who doesn't see the importance of something that sustains human life, of a skill that nourishes and unites people?

"Be quiet," says Ruba, who seems to be leaving with more heaviness. "It's never too late to learn."

Mama almost smiles. "I knew when she was in high school that she was never going to be the kind who sat in a kitchen rolling vine leaves for four hours."

The women titter and I come to attention. "What is that supposed to mean?" I say it carefully, unwilling to fracture the scaffolding of peace my cup has afforded us.

My mother looks pleased. I don't recognise the energy of her demeanour until she leans in, a conspiratorial air about her. "I couldn't get her away from her books and TV shows. She would sulk all day if I asked her to vacuum. She was like a boy." →

I realise there is a compliment in there, or an insight I never would have expected of Mama. That she saw something in me before I did, a pathway set out ahead that didn't subscribe to ordinary life in the way she did. She saw it, yet it still shook her up as my destiny unfolded.

What I had perceived as an inability to accept me as I am transforms into a distinct idea of love – that it isn't clean and easy, only complete. My parents, faced with their unmarried daughter seeking independence by moving out of home, didn't stop me. They didn't accept it, either.

But from here, I understand something: that it isn't a decision for them to accept. As I look around and absorb the fractured world that raised my mother, I realise that to ask for Mama to accept my choices would be to ask her to undo herself.

I remember Mama holding me after the attack. Her anger vibrating through her body. Not at me. For me. How did I forget this act of love?

“Come when you can,” says Mama. The invitation a surprise, it flattens me.

The women are assembled by the archway that leads to the hall. They smile. I don't know what they're thinking, but I decide not to search for acceptance in their expressions.

I want something else for myself. I want what I have always longed for and didn't realise – freedom. To be wild and free, untethered, that I might fly away.

I envy this contained, safe world. But it's not for me and I cannot pretend otherwise.

I kiss my aunts in farewell. When I reach Mama, I am unsure what to do. We never hug. Never express love.

We look at each other and the moment draws out until I lose track of time.

“I'll try to come next week,” I say.

We pause in the moment, Fairuz serenading us as we say goodbye to the past.

Taht el remain, houbi hakani, we samaani ghnani ...

Under the pomegranate tree my love spoke to me, sang songs to me...

Mama half-smiles. “We're always here.”

The women finally close their drawn-out goodbyes and begin walking down the hall.

It's uncomfortable to leave with them; I used to lead them out, waiting for them to be out of sight before closing the door. I feel the insult of leaving keenly, the sensation ripping through my belly, and I wonder if I should hold back, close the door for them as always. Change takes time.

But I stop myself. Change is inevitable.

The ability to come and go as I wish, even if it comes with conditions.

Freedom, I remind myself, as I follow the backs of the women, even if it requires sacrifice. ●

FREEDOM.

26

UNTITLED

In the empty strip club
She unhooks her bra
anyway

•

EMILIE ZOEY BAKER

19

CUSTOMER
SONG

I can't win
As soon as one goes out
Another one comes in

•

SIMMONE HOWELL

A CUCKOO FLEW INTO MY LOVER'S HEAD

JANE JERVIS-READ

A cuckoo flew into my lover's head. The spine of it crumpled when its beak hit the thick skull of my lover and they fell together to the ground.

My lover has a neck as wide as his head and hands the size of boxing gloves. My lover has fingers which smell like the cunts of other women and coal dust on his lungs. My lover seizes my crotch from behind me at the sink and could lift me well off the ground with one hand just like that.

My sister, she's a woman with a wily serpent tongue and hair as oil, and she takes her lovers like crescent moon biscuits dusted with white icing sugar. She takes them with a finger and a thumb, looking elsewhere as if she just as easily might go without. She takes them like two soft tomatoes at once onto the chopping board, skin splitting and seeds spilling when she's barely touched the knife to them.

Sitting between them at dinner I feel like I'm anchoring my body against the pull of two dogs straining at their leads. The worst thing is that they're straining towards other.

I line up bottles of wine and dishes of potatoes between them. Platters of meat, kegs of cider and piles and piles of napkins, but nothing can do it. I try to fill that space with coughs, music and conversation. I try to clamber into it with my own sweated limbs, try to push it out a bit, to make a bit more space. But she flies in the door, unannounced, red silk around her neck like a tango dancer and he'll swing in an hour later, sweat in his whiskers, cider on his breath, giant hands hanging at his sides and all of a sudden I'm dizzy with my lack of presence, like a feather trying to serve as a firebreak.

- He has no sympathy for anyone, my lover. He never asked to keep me, but I stayed, sitting at the foot of his bed or making clear, snaking trails with a finger through the rust in the sink.

We were walking side by side when it happened. Side by side and he was holding onto me. Not out of fear of having me lost, but rather the way you keep hold of a ball on a string, which is tied around your ankle, to keep it from pulling at your leg and banging against you. So he's holding me like this and I'm hanging from his hand, limp like a ladies purse in his clutch, and it happens.

I looked up when the swagger-motion of his walking stopped and I saw him there: the pointed beak of the cuckoo embedded in his head, its wings splayed, frozen mid-flight. The bird entered his head at a ninety degree angle and its vertebrae compressing made a sound as quiet as paper scrunching. A cord of saliva slipped from the lip of my lover and bug-eyed they both fell to the ground. ●

12 HAT I

SUSAN LAURA SULLIVAN

i was on a train
heading interstate
everyone had a hat

but me

everyone had a hat
but me
how could i hope to
head interstate
without a hat?

(pause for the Porter)

there wasn't
there just wasn't a porter
i didn't have a hat
and i thought there would
be a porter at
least a visible porter
not a skulking ticket between
his legs porter
but there wasn't
there just wasn't one
and i didn't have a
hat.

(station eight empty houses one full)

who lives in the empty
houses on the nullarbor where the
train stops
who lives in them those empty
eyes eyes nose
&
mouth?

i saw 4 emus but i
didn't tell anyone because i
didn't tell anyone because i just
didn't have a hat
maybe the emus
live in the 8 empty houses
2 houses per emu.

my hat is on the shelf in a wardrobe in a
house where my mother lives
i think i wouldn't need it my hat
i just thought it wouldn't be needed but
i do i do i do O i do need my
head over here needs my hat and
soon a parcel will
be eaten by my letter box and the snails will read
FRAGILE HANDLE WITH CARE
ONE HAT
each day as each day passes
i'm waiting on it. ●

20 LIKE BEES IN THE LAMPLIGHT

LORIN FORD

Too beautiful to put away in the wardrobe,
the Chinese silk dress on the wooden hanger
caresses the mind as water soothes the skin.
Gold butterflies swarm like bees in the lamplight.

The Chinese silk dress on the wooden hanger...
It's way past midnight and I'm not asleep,
gold butterflies swarm like bees in the lamplight,
our hands touch like kisses and we're laughing.

It's way past midnight and I'm not asleep,
how skin, how blood, how breath respond to memory.
Our hands touch like kisses and we're laughing.
The heart leaps expectant, mistaken.

How skin, how blood, how breath respond to memory
as if there were no absences, no Time.
The heart leaps expectant, mistaken.
Though Mystery compels me, I falter.

As if there were no absences, no Time
the sun streams through us, we're enfolded.
Though Mystery compels me, I falter
forever, at beginnings as at endings. ●

35 YOU'RE STANDING ON MY TAIL

KIA GROOM

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 video game 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 far-fetched. 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 contacting 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. →

Growing up had been inevitable... It's difficult to picture your mystical destiny when you're spending eight hours a day convincing the elderly to purchase robotic vacuum cleaners.

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? ●

29 ICE AGE

EMILIE ZOEY BAKER

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

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

Sleep is a scorpion, best avoided.
Dreams bite you in the skull.
Every drop in the shower whispers
your name
tells you you're insane.
That's why you only have baths,
but the bugs can get you in there,
they love flat water.
They breed in your towel
so you dry yourself with the
hairdryer,
over your big belly,
full of someone else.

Food is chalk
oranges are aliens
bread is dry skin.
Wine is full of microphones
that amplify the heartbeat to
your throat
a concert in a silo.

After two ashtrays that day
you feel everything get wet between
your legs.
It's time for that someone else but
the nurses breath is too white,
the doctors teeth flash like cameras.
You run,
you didn't even have time
to see someone's tiny face.
You run, before the haze slips away.
He is waiting.
Logic tells you it's the right thing
to do.
It's fine, it's good.
You just want to look into the ball of
smoking crystal
and see yourself again.

●

VAL KILMER IS IN YOUR FORTUNE COOKIE

In your gloved hands is a Styrofoam cup from which you are drinking designer coffee. You are in the markets, next to the vintage clothes and the future.

The graffiti on the wall says:

Val Kilmer. It is the fifth time you have seen:

Val Kilmer graffitied in the city

1. On a parking meter on Queen Street
2. On a stop sign, in black paint, around the corner from your building
3. On a bus, spray painted in red across the middle door, so when opened it reads Va lmer
4. His face, photocopied and stuck to a wall in the annex. Lips painted pink.

A friend of yours, well, not really a friend but someone who you hang out with in groups and play pool with, tells you that Val Kilmer was written on the wall, next to the urinal, at a restaurant and that he almost pissed on it, when drunk. He is embarrassed to tell you that story. You promise to keep it top secret.

You compose anagrams:

MARVEL ILK

ALL REV KI

VAR ME KILL

Type his name into Google.

Middle name is Edward

Height is just over six feet

Interesting fact: he never wanted to be in *Top Gun*.
Obligations in contract.

Famous line: *you can be my wingman anytime.*

It is Saturday night and
you take a walk to Blockbuster
to hire three movies for an all night Val Kilmer marathon.
You invite your lover to cook popcorn. And to massage your feet.

In the middle of *The Doors* you make love. Val Kilmer as Jim Morrison
Val Kilmer singing 'Light My Fire'. Val Kilmer in leather pants. →

In the morning, you call the city council and leave a message.
 You are making a general inquiry about the disproportional references to
 Val Kilmer in the downtown area and wonder if they know anything. If
 they have, perhaps, funded any projects to revamp the city. Know of any
 local artists. Any arrests. Anything at all.

You leave your number.
 Expect a return call.
 Never get it.

You compose chords and rhyme lines for a song:

- Val, oh my Val Kilmer, why oh why
 this is killing me
 Val Kilmer

and sing it in the streets. Earn enough to buy a morning hangover.

For a photographic essay, you expose images to curate your home
 slideshow of graffiti in multicolour and head shots in black and white.

You design a spreadsheet. Type in sightings and times and measurements.
 You imagine you are on a crime show. Prime time.

You stop and rewind.
 Pause to fast forward.

Write this poem.
 Read it aloud.
 Hold your breath.
 And signal the time for applause
 with the closing of pages.

You look for suspects in the streets.

The obvious: the boy with the deer-hunting cap. The one who hangs
 on street corners asking for change to buy cigarettes.

And the unexpected: the old hunchback in the Chinatown grocery store.
 Buying fortune cookies and green tea. Laughing as you...

become obsessed with celebrity.

You design your own fortune. Bake it within a sweet biscuit.
 Crack it open at midnight:

You will never solve certain mysteries.
 This is not how it is supposed to read. ●



23 SPRING POEM

ALISON GERBER

It's a hot spring afternoon and the near-sighted man at my bus stop is in love with Mariah Carey. His lips were kissing her in his lunchbreak. The photograph was enlarged from a women's magazine. The print shop attendant had been concerned about the quality to A3. Never mind that, his glasses had enjoyed inching their way across every pixel of her blouse, her ear, her neck. It's a hot afternoon waiting for the bus and Mariah Carey is smiling inside his bag. She's waiting for home time. She's singing "dreamlover come rescue me". He's in love with her with all the rapture of spring. He's sighing tiny little sighs. His parents are pleased he has a girlfriend. ●

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10/11 EXPLAIN WHY YOU'RE DRIVING A CAR

LYNDON WALKER

I'm not driving a car. I sit here in the writing group not driving a car, writing an exercise that forces me to explain why I'm driving a car. This is all a bit bizarre. This is the first time I have come to one of these full of love and happiness and the response, from the men at least, has been total aggression.

Before, when I was lonely and miserable, I would come to these and everyone would be nice to me. Tonight both Nathan and Mitchell tell me they don't like what I have written. When I was unhappy they were great. We just got on with writing. But tonight it is different. Tonight the women's voices are soft and unequal and the men's are harsh and uncertain or certain with threat and we are in the deep end of the eighties and I am worried. Tonight there is a new woman here who I have not seen before. Perhaps she makes things different just by being here. Maybe we all turn into cavemen when an attractive woman walks in the room. This is terrible if it is so but I am not unaffected either. I will not pretend I am. I fantasize about her boyfriend and their life together in the new world. After all she is a new woman but she cannot drive a car. I am thinking of this having recently spent twenty-four hours driving a car. I drove up in one night and back in one day; all of it; two thousand kilometres. Twelve hours per thousand kilometres.

Tonight Lenore told me that a lesbian friend of hers told her at a tree-planting yesterday that the greenhouse effect is happening now. Not in ten years' time; and that the ultraviolet radiation is already beginning to burn out eyes. We humans, who did all this, we will be alright. We will put on glasses. It's the animals, who can't protect themselves, who will go blind first. The insects, the birds, the animals all going blind. Flying into walls, falling off the edges of things, dying. The whole natural world falling apart, caving in, fucking up, now.

There, that's better. Now I'm miserable again. I'm nostalgic for the time they used to like me. Us men are so utilitarian.

- from: 'the writing group' 1989 ●

STATUTORY

THIS IS A STORY ABOUT A SEXUAL PREDATOR,
AND HIS VICTIMS, AND THE PLACE THAT CREATED US
ALL. MY ADOLESCENCE WAS A LONG TIME AGO, AND
THE WAYS IT WAS WARPED, AND THE WAYS IT WARPED
ME, ARE COMPLICATED, AND SCARRING, AND UGLY IN
THE SAME WAY AS THE SOUND OF A BREAKING BONE.
A PART OF ME IS FOREVER FIFTEEN, STRAPPED TO THE
BED IN A MIDDLE-AGED PERVERT'S GUEST ROOM.

UNA CRUICKSHANK

“Sensitive gentlewomen of the jury, I was not even her first lover”
– *Humbert Humbert in Lolita*.

I grew up in a depressed small town a long way from anywhere, with a highway running straight through it and a ring of dark pine forests shutting out the surrounding countryside. It was a forestry town, built to support a paper mill that burped steam and sulphurous odours day and night.

Every now and again a slow-building siren would sound, fanning across the whole town and hanging there in the fog, wave after wave of dismal urgency. It sounded like an air raid was coming, and sometimes I convinced myself one was.

There wasn't much to do, not in public at least. “We made our own fun” is what I say when I'm feeling generous about the place. There was a lot of drugs, and violence, and every kid knew the names of the two main biker gangs: White Power and the Mongrel Mob.

I lived on the middle-class side of town – there was no rich side. The parents with the nicest houses were teachers and bank tellers who had golden retrievers instead of pit bulls and gave themselves extraordinary airs, considering.

I was raised in a good family, and so I was largely shielded from the worst the town had to offer, but it still touched my fortunate life. In primary school there was a boy named Carlos who had burn scars all over his body. An adult had thrown him into a scalding hot bath as a toddler. He was picked on because of it, and while I absently wondered once or twice whether it was mean of us, I still didn't want his scaly, piebald hands touching me.

Another girl lost most of her family when her flimsy state house burned to the ground one night. We were seven, and I was deeply impressed.

When I was twelve, a boy I'd gone to school with for years disappeared for a while. We all knew why. He and his brother had been playing with their grandfather's gun while the old man was out, and it had gone off in my classmate's hand and shot his brother in the neck. The younger boy bled to death, and though Ambrose eventually came back he never seemed the same. It happened in a house I passed every day on the walk home from school – the last one before you turned into the Z-shaped alleyway. In my view it was haunted from then on. →

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That same year another girl at my school lost her brother. She was a tough younger girl who hated my guts and who, years later in high school, threatened to beat me up a few times. One night, her older brother lay down on the train line that ran smack through the centre of town and waited. His death became local legend. We kids talked for years about the splattered blood and body parts strewn for hundreds of metres, which of course none of us had seen, and which we could no more really imagine than the thoughts in his head before it was smashed by the train fender.

I'll tell you what I did see, though. The morning after his death I saw his sister being helped out of the school grounds by her friends, crying like I'd never seen anybody cry before, her blue eyes wide and staring, in her own world of pain. She was eleven.

In some small towns, gruesome things seem to happen all the time and everybody knows about them. With fewer people around, there are fewer buffers between you and disaster. Somehow, invariably, it will be your neighbour who finds a body, or your aunt who cares for the children until the police arrive. But people don't pull together the way they do in movies. They don't pitch in and help and come out stronger. In reality we just watched, and talked, thrilled at the weird glamour of it all.

At thirteen my best friend was a girl I'll call Laura. We were paired up one afternoon in home economics and became passionately attached, writing hundreds of notes, skipping class to smoke in alleys, pressing pricked fingers together to become 'blood brothers'. She was the youngest child of a large family whose parents were exhausted by the time she was born, so much so that they let her older siblings name her.

She lived on the other side of town in a dark, cluttered house that was filled with mysterious junk and smelled like cigarettes and dog. She was three months younger – which can seem like a lot in high school – and she was so much more grown up than me. Laura was the glue that bound me to most of our other friends, and when she was mean, or distant, it cut me to the bone.

I studied my best friend with the obsessiveness of a lover. I knew by heart, her mannerisms, her colouring, the scar on one knuckle where she'd burned a smiley face with a lighter. I copied her verbal tics and took up smoking because she smoked. She was beautiful, with strong cheekbones, rosy skin, and curves where I had none yet. She was the first girl I'd ever met who wore her hair short, and she had a tiny silver nose stud shaped like a rose. I thought she looked cute the time she came to school with pink eye, and thought quite seriously about acquiring it myself.

A natural leader, Laura seemed to me to be the focus of any room she entered, the sun around which we dusty little planets revolved. She could dance, and she could act. I couldn't do either very well, but the year we met we both lined up for our first audition in the school's wood-panelled assembly hall.

The drama program was run by a snappish old woman with a puff of white hair like a dandelion who directed the plays, and a road cleaner and amateur actor who built the sets, chose the music and choreographed the dance routines. I'm going to call him Dwayne, to protect others. He was forty-five, older than my parents at the time.

Dwayne was bald, with a large belly, gangly limbs, flat fingertips and an unclean, digestive sort of smell. He had appeared in a few commercials as a weird guy doing wacky things because the discounts were so good, and once as a midget chasing a giant car down a hill. But mostly he was a road cleaner, with a fleet of vehicles painted candyfloss pink and contracts with several towns to clear the streets of confetti after parades.

In a town where everyone knew everyone, Dwayne was notorious. Officially, he was not allowed on school premises due to what was euphemistically described as 'his reputation'.

- Non-euphemistically, the loud rumours were that he had fucked several under-age girls from the school while helping out with the drama club.

Because he worked for free the school reached a compromise: he was only allowed to enter school property after 4 p.m., when most of the students

and teachers had left, and was to maintain a low profile by parking at the rear of the school and entering the assembly hall through a side door. He had his own key.

- As an adult looking back on this, I find it so ridiculous it's almost unbelievable. But as kids, what it told us was that Dwayne was perfectly safe. Otherwise the rules didn't make sense. Teenagers, even rebellious ones, are secretly great believers in reason and justice. We thought the school was being silly, but not callous.

Dwayne lived on a farm, about a ten-minute drive from the edge of town. He didn't grow or raise anything; the only animal in evidence was a goat. He just liked the space, the big sheds for tinkering with his road-cleaning vehicles and the absence of neighbours. Every Thursday an extramural group of the best and most serious drama students, hand-picked by Dwayne, would meet at the farm. I don't remember how, but Laura secured us both an invitation to join the club when we were fourteen.

Dwayne would pick us up, collecting Laura first then working his way back across town, collecting several more kids before he got to me. And so there would be four or five of us crammed into his boxy white car, with its maroon leather seats and pungent scent of diesel, lighting cigarettes and being smart asses.

My virginity was a favourite subject for teasing. I was the only one who hadn't had sex, and I was both thrilled and horrified by the speed at which my friends were falling into adult relationships. On the drive between town and the farm, the headlights would catch the long grasses at the side of the road and turn them silver. Sometimes they seemed to reach out and brush the side of the car as it passed.

Out at the farm, Dwayne would put on CDs – Michael Jackson's *Bad*, Peter Gabriel's *Birdy* – and we would sit in a cluster, drinking instant coffee and mouthing off about our parents, while his plain, silent wife sat alone in the kitchen. He showed us how to Moonwalk;

Laura aced it, but I couldn't get the foot slide right. On our first visit I wore a ridiculous sparkly gown stolen from the costume box at school, attempted to chain smoke for the first time and made myself sick. It was all very impressive to a rural fourteen-year-old who wanted out.

Although he talked about sex almost constantly, there was no suggestion in those early days that he actually wanted to do it with us. He was just a cool old guy, the head of a clique, an adult who let us smoke and occasionally gave us a sip of Cointreau or whisky. He brought up the rumours that he was 'a bloody child molester' early and often, and we agreed without hesitation that this was cast-iron proof of his innocence. Other adults were hypocrites, he said. They knew it wasn't true, he said. The whole thing unfair and ridiculous, we said. Who were these other girls, anyway, the ones he'd supposedly hurt? Without names, without faces, they were too vague and ghostlike to believe in. Whoever they were, they seemed to have all grown up and finished school, leaving town for the city like most middle-class kids did. In my imagination, they were sleek and cool, the original crew, and we were the less remarkable second generation.

In summer our gang of teenagers drove out to the farm to use Dwayne's pool. Laura wore a bikini, while I covered up with a T-shirt. The previous year I had worn the same pair of black jeans and one of two large sweaters every single day, summer and winter. Now, I was beginning to enjoy being looked at. A womanly body seemed like a thing of power, and I was proud of my new breasts, which were round and firm like plums, or tumours. Still, I remained shy.

Other people came by to use the pool, too: male drama club alumni, Dwayne's adult kids, and his twenty-four-year old best friend, who I'll call David. David was a very tall, very angular Goth who designed clothes for the town's only alternative shop, and had spent the year or so since he arrived laying waste to the female population. He was reputed to have slept with almost everyone and I was thrilled the day I learned that he fancied me.

"Although he says you make him feel like a dirty old man," said Dwayne. I was only slightly over half David's size. →

My virginity was a favourite subject for teasing. I was the only one who hadn't had sex, and I was both thrilled and horrified by the speed at which my friends were falling into adult relationships.

Time passed, seemingly very slowly. We went to school, sneaked out to parties, climbed the town's only hill and spat on the brass map at the top. Laura was practically living at the farm by the time we turned fifteen. Her boyfriend Martin, an aspiring actor of twenty-one, actually did live there, in a caravan near the house.

Never a great fan of school, she turned up less and less, dropping in for the few classes she liked in only half her uniform. Jeans instead of her kilt, or a black T-shirt in place of the regulation white polo. Sometimes the teachers let her stay, and other times they'd kick her out.

Energetic and original, she always had some new project, and Dwayne let her use his workshops and tools whenever she liked. She learned to drive early and relished the freedom of her first car: a station wagon called The Beast that she painted matte black and invited friends to draw on with crayons. In her beloved Beast, a cigarette perched stylishly between kissy lips or dangling negligently to the side depending on her smoking style that week, she wove in and out of the bounds of our dull little town, on a busy schedule that nobody else could quite fathom.

We'd been part of the farm and theatre clique for about nine months when Laura told me something about Dwayne. The reason he had taught her to drive, bought film for her camera, lent her the first cell phone Laura and I had ever seen. The reason she seemed so troubled lately. They were having sex. Martin knew and accepted it, reluctantly. Dwayne's near-invisible wife either didn't know or didn't care.

Laura delivered this incredible news as we sat in our kilts on the concrete step behind the woodwork shop at school. It was our favourite place to smoke. Because of the way it was positioned you could see any adults coming before they could distinguish a cigarette hidden in your palm. She had asked me to meet her there so we could talk about something. This wouldn't have been unusual the previous year, but lately Laura had been remote and hard to reach, her aura of maturity and world-weariness almost impenetrable.

Now, rather than being concerned for her, I was flattered by her trust and a little envious of how dramatic her situation seemed. Somehow, this new development still didn't prove to me that the rumours that swirled around town were true, or that the other adults were right. Laura and I both liked the word affair because it was so sophisticated, as we believed we were, and we naturally used it from then on to describe what was happening at the farm. Dwayne was not a child molester. What a stupid thought! We weren't children.

That evening at the farm, Dwayne wrapped me in a sweaty hug that wasn't entirely welcome and told me he was glad I knew. He explained that they had talked about it first and agreed that if she had to confess to someone, I would be the one to understand.

- It seemed like an unequivocal compliment at the time, but what I realise now, so many years later, is that I failed her. A better friend would have seen the 'affair' for what it was, and come to her rescue. But I didn't. I was fifteen, and deeply impressed.

A few months later, Laura and Martin were in a car accident while hitch-hiking to the city. Her injuries were minor but Martin was killed, his neck broken when the car landed upside down in a ditch. The driver's skull was smashed, but she was a stranger so we didn't care.

My last conversation with Martin was about what sausages are made of. He grossed me out and I laughed, and then he was dead. I was too afraid to view the body. At the wake, his mother pulled at my sleeve and asked, "What am I going to do? What am I going to do?" Her eyes searched my face as though a fifteen-year-old she barely knew might be hiding the answer. I waited in terror for an adult to rescue me from her, but none did.

At a post-wake gathering at the farm, Laura – medicated and heavily bruised – sat on the floor in the living room where we had tried to learn to Moonwalk and told the gathered crowd about how wonderful their trip had been until the accident, how they'd stood in a lake the day before and licked drops of water off one another's fingers and declared themselves 'married'. Now everything was over.

"The good die young," someone sighed, and we all nodded.

Laura began avoiding the farm. She removed all Martin's clothes from the caravan and hung them up in her bedroom, where she could touch and smell them. She wore his favourite jacket everywhere and rarely came to school. I was lonely without her, and shocked to my core by the first real tragedy I'd ever been more than brushed by. I began spending more time at the farm than ever. Although I was a little more clear-eyed about Dwayne's character at this point – Laura had told me of jealousy and scary rages – he somehow seemed like the only person ready at all times to listen, encourage and keep me company when I was sad. My parents were loving and bewildered. Our teachers were a bad joke. David the Goth, who had become my first real boyfriend, broke my heart a week or two before the accident.

In my first real time of woe, with Laura locked in her own far-worse world of pain, I began to feel that Dwayne was my only adult friend, a person who treasured my hidden qualities when even I couldn't see them. He would tell me I was beautiful ("Just in a less-obvious way.") and sexy ("You wait, people will see it when you're older.") and being the directionless, vain fool that I was, those things seemed very important.

One night, about a month after Martin's death, Dwayne took me to an arts and crafts exhibition themed around fairies. It was a pretty significant cultural event for the town. Afterwards, he suggested taking a drive and we headed out of town, in the opposite direction to both our homes. He parked the car by the road out in the country. The darkness outside was thick and velvety. I don't remember exactly what we talked about, but he brought the conversation around to sex, as he almost inevitably did. Somebody who was doing it, or some time he had done it. I didn't mind – now that I had actually had sex, talking about it made me feel sophisticated rather than scared.

He released the lever on my seat so I was lying flat, then climbed on top of me to demonstrate a sexual position. He traced fussy little filigrees in the air above my breasts with his hairy hands, his yellow-smelling breath

in my face as he continued to talk as though nothing out of the ordinary was happening. I understood the challenge he was making. It was exciting, frightening and a bit revolting.

- "Just don't ever tell me you're going to leave your wife for me," I said, in what I imagined was a jaded drawl.

I knew from movies that men having affairs said that sort of thing a lot, and it seemed very adult to show I wasn't going to fall for it. He promised he wouldn't, and with that, something was settled and he drove me home.

We started having sex soon after, usually at the farm on afternoons when his wife was out, occasionally in one of the vehicles. Middle age and heavy smoking had ruined his erections, so once we were naked he would stop, go into the kitchen, and inject the shaft of his penis with some ancestor of Viagra. Once it took hold, he would return and climb on top of me, breathing hard and forcing himself inside. The thought of getting caught scared me more than it did him. While in his bedroom, I made him get up to investigate every sound.

I found him physically unattractive from the first. As our relationship wore on, I found him increasingly repulsive in other ways. His temper was foul. He'd insult me until he'd driven me to impotent rage or tears. He would swear and throw things and call me a bitch, storm out of the room, then come back to comfort and kiss me and rub my back, both on top of and under my shirt. I told myself I stayed during those waits because I needed him to drive me back to town, but that wasn't strictly true. It was a long walk, down roads with no footpaths, but I'd managed it before.

So why did I choose to stay? I honestly don't know. Time, in this case, has not revealed the answer. As much as I was starting to hate him, I couldn't help but be aware that he liked me less than he had Laura. He made sure that I knew, which strangely made me more anxious to prove myself desirable. Pickup artists call this negging. The police call it grooming.

Laura had been taken to restaurants and hotels, in cities several hours' drive away. I was fucked in the back seats of cars and handed a sock to wipe off with. I wanted him to like me goddamn it. →

In the course of my relationship with Dwayne, I spent a lot of time staring at ceilings. I learned how to knit my ankles together behind a man's back during sex, and how to refuse the unwanted intimacy of kisses (thanks to something I read about sex workers). It didn't occur to me at the time that sex was not something you were supposed to endure. I doled out my visits to the farm, treating them like vaccinations. If I go today, I'll be okay again for a few more weeks. It's hard to put my finger on what that meant now. The sex, as disgusting as it was, quelled my loneliness, my sense of deep unattractiveness and aimlessness. I had never had an orgasm (I wouldn't for a few more years), but having sex, even horrible sex that made me feel bad, was an implied compliment, an achievement, an important thing to do. I hated him, but I still got antsy if I didn't visit.

- Alone at home on certain silent afternoons, I wanted to be negated. I wanted to crawl out of my troublesome skin.

One winter day at the farm, he said he had a surprise for me.

"It's something I've been working on with you in mind, actually".

I followed him into the spare bedroom, which had a single bed and a photo of his mother leaning against the wall near the door. He sat me on the bed, then took my wrist and slipped it into some kind of plastic loop. It took me a moment to realise it was part of a homemade bondage device, two ropes running from the top legs of the bed, with plastic sheathing around the wrist loops.

As he moved to secure my other wrist – I was still clothed, for some reason – something new and strange broke loose inside me and I panicked, blindly shouting "No!" and thrashing. At that moment it was as if I had split into two people: one who wondered whether I was overreacting, and another who was trying to run away while still attached to the bed.

Dwayne climbed up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders, part reassuring, part restraining, until I'd calmed down.

"I thought you'd like it," he said. "But we don't have to use it if you don't want to." I stared at his mother's photograph, waiting for my heart to slow down. He'd once said I looked like her, but studying her face I began to think that might have been bullshit. A minute or two later he began to undress me. I helped with my jeans and let him fuck me, lying empty and cotton-mouthed on my back. I kept my eyes closed and tried to imagine it was David, my first and only boyfriend, as I'd heard you were supposed to do if you were tired of your husband or something. But I felt no better at all, and I learned that afternoon that there's a limit to how big of a lie you can tell yourself.

Standing in his vast machine shop out at the farm some other evening, I told him I didn't want to do it anymore, but when he challenged me I could not articulate why I wanted out.

- "I think it's immoral," I stammered. "Because you're married." He mocked me about that for a long time.

When I was seventeen my family left that town of fog and gangs and gassy smells and moved to the city. I spent my last year at a much better high school, discovered that I was still pretty sharp academically, and with my results got into university straight away. Before school started, however, I saw Dwayne one last time. It was Valentine's Day, 1998, and he was in the city on road-cleaning business, and I was lonely so said yes when he called to invite me out. He picked me up at our new house in his company van, which looked completely out of place in our tidy new street. I suggested an Indian restaurant, and feigned surprise when he said he had never eaten Indian food before. Over dinner, he talked about how city girls grow up slower than small town girls, how he'd driven two fifteen-year-olds somewhere the previous week and they'd giggled in the backseat the whole time like little babies. I nodded and agreed those girls sounded stupid, but as he talked I imagined them, rich girls probably with great hair and long, tanned legs, and I thought maybe they're the normal ones. It sounded pretty great just then, still being a kid at fifteen. →

The sex, as disgusting as it was, quelled my loneliness, my sense of deep unattractiveness and aimlessness. I had never had an orgasm (I wouldn't for a few more years), but having sex, even horrible sex that made me feel bad, was an implied compliment, an achievement, an important thing to do.

After dinner he took me to my first bar, where I drank tiny bottles of sparkling wine and listened to the comedy performance. We barely spoke. Transplanted to the city he seemed tacky and small, no longer the only person in town with a copy of *Leaves of Grass*. I knew I was going to have to have sex with him before he dropped me home, and I promised myself under the red lights of the comedy club that I will never let him pick me up again. A little later, in a nasty motel bathroom, I took off all my clothes and faced myself in the mirror. I pictured my little breasts as plates of silver armour, protecting my heart. You only have to do it one more time, I told myself. I took three deep breaths, then unlocked the door and entered the bedroom.

I never saw him again after he dropped me off that night. I refused contact, and being several hours away it was as easy as that. I hadn't known where his motel was at the time, being disoriented by wine and the sheer size of the city, but after I'd started school for the year I realised that it was on my bus route. I would glance at it on the way past each day, a haunted place that I never told a soul about.

Laura – Laura who I always loved – dropped out of school before our final year. The last time I saw her we were twenty-five. I stopped in to visit one Christmas, and we sat drinking cans of beer in the backyard of the state house where she lived with her boyfriend and his son. Her boyfriend was a mechanic, quiet but nice enough. She spent a lot of the visit looking just over my shoulder while I babbled about my travels, my career, my outrageous luck disguised as hard work, knowing I was being insensitive but unwilling to stop. I hadn't missed her very much in the intervening years, but I missed her badly as I sat across the dingy plastic table from her.

"Well, I should get going," I said, uneasily.

"Oh no," she replied, tonelessly.

We hugged and I waved to her boyfriend on the way out. I left her sitting in the yard with a beer, still gazing at something I didn't see.

While I'd like to finish this section in fine literary style by suggesting that she was thinking about our conjoined adolescence, the things we shared and the things we never

could, the ways we supported and the ways we betrayed one another in the face of someone bigger and badder than us, the truth is I have no way of knowing. Perhaps she was just wondering, like I was, how the less promising one of us had got away.

When I was thirty I fell apart completely, and in the deep, sick strangeness of my breakdown year, Dwayne chose to get back in touch. He learned my new name somehow, and used it to message me through Facebook. I hadn't bothered to shower or dress that day. I was sitting up in bed in a share house in Melbourne, and the shock of seeing his name in my inbox literally stopped my breath.

His message went something like this: I hope you're doing well. Thought you might like to see this thing I wrote about you on my blog. I miss you.

The link led to a plain page where he described a special girl he once knew; a girl of unusual depth and maturity, with a warm and peaceful soul and a talent for writing. Sadly, she had vanished from his life. He did not know where the dear girl was now, but he wished her well.

- In Dwayne's version of the story, he didn't give my age. He didn't mention the sex. He chose not to say why I had disappeared, only that I had. There were comments at the foot of the page, all generous and admiring of his devotion to his young friend.

It took time, and therapy, for that weird episode to resolve itself into sense. At forty-five, Dwayne sincerely hadn't seen the bleak, hilarious irony of it all when he complained to his fifteen-year-old mistress about his reputation as a predator, and the unfair way her school treated him. He viewed ours as a relationship between consenting adults, a version of events that suited me at first because it meant I got to be an adult. I was too young and foolish to realise that the story I was telling myself was his, not my own – that the terrible pressure I felt was the result of story grinding against experience.

Now, at sixty, he still considered our story a romantic one. He was self-aware enough not to admit publically that the girl he was pining for was fifteen, yet crazy enough to think she might be moved to hear about it. Even that late in life it was clear that he saw nothing wrong with what he did – he was offering me his approval, as though I might still want it.

I almost wish the serene woman-child Dwayne described on his blog were real. But teenagers don't work like that. I really wasn't that charming or deep.

I was a roiling mess of rage and boredom and hormones. The real girl is still there, buried deep in the meat of my brain, and when I spend too long thinking about her I feel airless and stale, pulled back miserably into the deep past by a self I no longer understand.

There were other girls before me, and probably more since, who learned too late that paedophiles aren't just the legendary strangers in vans. Dwayne's version of the story tells me that he never changed, never learned, and probably never stopped abusing.

Somewhere in my parents' garage, there is a black and white photo of three fifteen-year-old girls. They are Laura, me, and a third girl, and we're kneeling in a row under a small, half-dead fruit tree in somebody's yard. Dwayne took it, using Laura's camera, and developed it in David the Goth's darkroom. As I was writing this story I became fixated on finding it. I wanted to search it for evidence of Dwayne's guilt, maybe dust it for prints, reassure myself that I wasn't crazy. I haven't found it yet. But I did find another photo of myself from that year. Aged fifteen, I look even younger than I remembered – my childhood freckles are still visible, my hair is messy and my smile is a little goofy. There's a fruit sticker on my forehead.

I am deeply unsexy, and not at all grown up. Though I don't know it yet, I have entered a harsh new world. ●

30 DANZIG

GEOFF LEMON

It's a distant thought of toast
and the yolk of soft-boiled egg.

It's flat-backed in linen, both eyes
feeling the sharp crust at their corners.

On a morning like this
it's you tangled equally in sheets and sleep.

It's me half an hour away from learning
if I'll ever sleep again.

It's sunlight sticking like gum
to the shreds of roof it's colonised;

a heart twice as wide
as the largest landlocked nation;

and you,
marching on its borders,
muttering that we won't stop walking until
we reach the sea. ●

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-blond 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 pigtails 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. →

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Zero.

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 mewing. Phyllis opened her door and gently ushered me into her apartment. I was too upset to protest. Newspaper lined the floors. Multicoloured 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." ●

33

THE NOVEL TEACHER

ERIC YOSHIAKI DANDO

I am a twice-failed novelist teaching writing in a university course called Novel Writing. The thing I notice most is how bad the coffee is. It is cheap and bitter and the wrong colour. I am just like this coffee, I write in my journal. I haven't written anything in weeks. I was writing my third novel but it is useless. None of the big publishing houses are interested in me now. I am only pretending to be a writer.

The coffee is all I have to look forward to. I am not even sure if it gives you a hit. When I drink too much it makes me sweat and I talk too quickly. It makes me shit. It gives me cottonmouth and hideous breath. I don't drink enough water. All I drink is coffee and Coca-Cola and beer. All I eat is bread and bacon with a little bit of lettuce and an apple every couple of days. I chew on my nails. My hair is falling out in the shower. I am about to have a heart attack. None of my students would fuck me. I think I am miserable.

Sometimes I notice my students taking a step back when I am talking to them in the line to buy more coffee. It is because I have gassed them with my breath. I keep drinking this coffee and trying to put some small ray of sunshine in my day. It is no use. The coffee will not work, it doesn't matter how much of it you drink.

In the first class of Semester 1, I begin by writing my favourite books and authors on the board so we can talk about them. "I only read the classics now," I tell my new students, "I haven't read any modern novels this year at all." I list the classics I have read this year on the board: *Treasure Island*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Gulliver's Travels*, the list goes on. I read these books more than once. Some of my favourite passages I read over and over and over.

I am trying to write something about islands, so I am reading anything with an island in it. I do not read these books for enjoyment, I read them so I can understand what people are talking about. I read them because everyone else has read them and because we are supposed to read them. I really did enjoy *Lord of the Flies* and *Treasure Island* though. I recommend these books to my Novel Writing class.

I ask them to call out what they like to read, and there is silence. Nobody has read any books. Some of them have watched the movie versions of books. Mostly telemovies of some of the classic books on my list. →

Even in school they just read the study notes or watched the movie versions presented by their teachers. I end up writing a list of TV shows and movie versions of books and we talk about those for a while. Otherwise there would have been a big uncomfortable silence. We hardly talk about books but at least there is no dead air. That's one thing I have always hated – dead air. You can write that down, if you have something to write on.

Most of them don't even bring a pen to class. I have to hand out paper all the time. Imagine posing as a writer and not having a pen or anything to write on. They don't even keep journals. I had to explain the concept of a journal to them. It's like raising rare tropical plants. My Novel Writing students are just not capable of writing a novel, they have the desire but not the discipline.

My students have only seen the movie versions. They don't read the paper, they get all their information from the internet. A couple of students have Googled me but that's as far as it went. None of them have read my novels. As yet no movies have been made of my books.

I had a couple of offers from small production companies but always managed to fuck it up. I couldn't get an agent. They wouldn't touch me. One lousy episode at a literary awards night and I have been blackballed forever. "Somebody spiked my drink," I remember saying just before I passed out. I woke up in the hospital with a policeman making a report. I answered all his questions. I had to pay for a lady's dry-cleaning and a broken window. I wrote a letter to everyone saying how sorry I was even though I didn't remember anything.

I am still not sorry.

Sometimes I will chance upon these people in the street and try to make eye contact, but they pretend that I am not even there. I saw one the other day on the main street and he crossed to the other side rather than walk past me.

Sometimes I beat myself up about not reading enough books. I like reading but I have never been good at reading. I was put into the Special English Class at high school because nobody could read my handwriting, then I wrote my English compositions on a computer and they said I was a virtuoso. I had a good ear for language. I only used words I could spell. I was a quick study. If anything, I was a talented literary stylist. I was just like one of those expensive hairdressers in the city, only with words. I could use an eloquent volley of small words to embiggen you, or use one or two big words wisely and economically to make you feel very small. I just had a way with words. It was a gift.

I got a fucking scholarship and then a book deal with a multinational publisher. I was the new kid on the block. They made out like I was one of the Backstreet Boys in the newspapers and

One of the photographers asked me to take my shirt off. Then there was a photo of me in the bath that appeared in *Marie Claire*. You couldn't see anything because of the bubbles, but that photo still pops up at inconvenient moments.

The truth is I only read for fifteen minutes on the toilet each morning. Unless I have to do a second poo, the only other times are when I'm catching a train or a bus or waiting for someone. I am slow but persistent. There are some books I cannot read. I have attempted *Heart of Darkness* many times. The text is all so deep and thick and hard to read even though the book is thin to hold. My mind wanders. I have seen *Apocalypse Now*. I don't need to read the book having seen the movie so many times. Even though *Apocalypse Now* is only based loosely on *Heart Of Darkness*. Even though a movie is not a book, I think I know what happens when Kurtz gets up the river.

I always thought the movie versions were never as good as the books. The endings are always different.

I look at the pile of my students' work and sigh. I rearrange the stack of manuscripts so that they are almost perfectly aligned. I must read this whole pile before the end of the semester. I don't think I can do it.

I write slowly. My spelling is atrocious.

Manuscript 1:

Science Fiction novel written by Talks In A Monotone. About a guy who dies too many times. It is like two, maybe three Arnold Schwarzenegger movies chopped up and joined together again. Each time the main character gets reborn I think, oh no, not again. I check how much I have to read until the end but it is no good. There is no end in sight. He has more, he says. Oh my god, I think. Please, no more.

I photocopy bits and pieces of my favourite books and hand them out to my class. Nobody reads the things that I have photocopied. They want to see my novels. The ones that were published. "Where can we buy your books?" they ask.

"They are not available," I say. "Both my books bombed," I say. "I didn't make any money. The publisher doesn't even answer my phone calls."

It's like I am proud of it or something.

I don't even own copies of my own books. I sold signed copies at the Camberwell Market for a while. When I tried to get more I was told my books were no longer available. I think they needed to make room in the warehouse and the books were pulped. I have a pain in my heart, my left arm is numb. Somebody call an ambulance, I am having another heart attack.

Manuscript 3:

Beardy-Weirdy Dungeons and Dragons Guy has a Ye Olde reading voice, says he hasn't given me the whole manuscript yet. I have tried to read what he has given me. →

The main character is always being ravaged by sexy Elven wenches, going at him together all at once and then tag-teaming him slowly one after the other, in the heat of the fire and the light of the moon. I always feel a bit sick afterwards. The main character is a dwarf who is much taller than the other dwarves. The author is the main character. He makes me want to shave my beard because he has a beard and so do I. We are affiliated by our beards. And there are too many chalices and descriptions of chalices. Everyone is drinking out of a chalice and the description of each chalice runs for several pages.

“Maybe you should call this novel *The Chalice*,” I write in my comments. But the novel is not exclusively about chalices. Chalice is just his favourite word. He speckles the page with this word.

Another word for ‘chalice’, which a lot of people use, is ‘cup’. “Maybe you should call this book *The Cup*,” I write in my terrible handwriting. I don’t think anyone can actually read what I write to them. My handwriting is still very hard to read even though what I write may well be brilliant.

Manuscript 12: Guy With A Broken Nose gives me change sometimes for coffee when I am short. Has submitted handwritten manuscript, tiny handwriting scrawled in many different coloured pens. Sometimes the ink changes colour mid sentence. I can’t actually read it, I can make out some of the words but not complete sentences. I’m not sure if he has written actual sentences or just pages and pages of long scribbly lines. “I can’t type,” he says.

“Nobody can type. I type with two fingers,” I say. I hold up my index fingers, “I only use these ones.”

“I don’t have a computer,” he says.

I am not sure he lives in a house, he smells like the pagan god Pan. “That’s okay,” I say, and I stick up one of my thumbs. “No problem,” I say.

His handwriting may actually be worse than mine. His work is very well presented, even if it looks like a some insects have rolled in ink and crawled all over the pages. Even if the lines he has drawn are not words, he has created an object of great beauty. I pass it from hand to hand and stare at it this way and that, but cannot decipher its meaning.

Manuscript 5: Midriff Girl With Smart New Phone spends her time darting out of class whenever it rings, causing a ruckus. Will not submit manuscript or idea for manuscript. I don’t hassle her about it in case she decides to submit something. I am a terrible novel writing teacher, I do not believe my students should waste their time writing novels. Maybe they should work on a short story first. Maybe start with a little poem or a list of interesting words.

My heart is not in it. I am terrible at teaching novel writing because I am a terrible novelist. Writing novels is just not worth it. It is a jib. A bloody mug’s game. It’s not even worth one cent a word, last time I had to give the publisher money.

People just aren’t buying books anymore. I have wasted my life writing novels that nobody reads. I never spend money in bookshops. I have bought a couple of limited edition books by Dr Seuss or Kurt Vonnegut on the internet for great sums, but all my other books come second-hand from Camberwell Market. They are discarded on the train. I have found some of my favourite books in the rubbish on the side of the road, lying there on the nature strip getting rained on.

People just throw books away. They are worthless.

Manuscript 10: Should Be In High School is very self-absorbed with many facial piercings. She has submitted pages and pages of poetry about her boyfriend, which she keeps referring to as ‘chapters’. Nothing happens in the novel except the love that the two main characters feel for each other. “Maybe you should try numbering the chapters in your verse novel?” I write on the last page.

I am angry that I had to read so much of her verse novel. I am angry at her for writing a verse novel. It isn’t a novel. But then I feel bad about being angry. I start to feel good about the verse novel she has written about the endless love she feels for her boyfriend.

“Who am I to say what a novel is?” I ask myself on the tram home to my mum’s house.

I always find it really hard to write anything for myself when I get home. My head is overflowing with bad writing and the inner workings of their plotlines. It gets in my head. Their work is so important. Their work is brilliant. They will not hear negative feedback. They will not hear it. One of them has already complained to the Dean. I feel bad whenever I think negative thoughts about their work. “My writing is bad too,” I tell myself after reading all that bad writing and then trying to write something, badly. “It’s shit,” I say. I can’t even read it back to myself.

Now I can’t remember what I was going to say. There is silence, I am dying up here. Nobody else is going to say anything, even when prompted. No one will discuss anything. They just sit there like I am something on TV. They don’t speak, even to each other, they give me nothing. I have tried everything except poking them with a stick.

I have noticed some of the other writing classes watching videos and everyone seems happy and comfortable doing that.

I get them to arrange the tables in a circle so that we are all equal. “Come on,” I say. “Wake up!” It is like I have assembled a whole bunch of insects in the garden and set about trying to teach them everything I know about literature. →

“Okay,” I say, “let’s watch a video.”

Just look at my Novel Writing students wake up and come to life. It’s like I have a bunch of hungry fish in a bowl all swimming up to the surface to feed.

Manuscript 6: The Grammar Sheriff is a primary school teacher on extended sick leave, a bit of a cow when it comes to feedback for her classmates. She is writing a science fiction trilogy for young adults. She wants to give me all three but I haven’t even read the first one. It gives me vertigo and not in a good way. I can’t even dip into it without the whole world spinning. Every time I open it up and look at the words I get the feeling I am up very high and just about to fall off something. If I don’t wake up before I hit the bottom I will die.

Manuscript 7: Eltham Earth Mother has a flair for dialogue, except for the scenes set in hospitals. “Doctors don’t talk like that,” says The One Who Complained About Me.

Manuscript 8: Tall Blonde sits and sighs and yawns and doesn’t contribute anything. She bats her blue eyes. She is used to getting away with it. I think we have an understanding. I’m not going to say anything if she isn’t going to say anything. She hasn’t written anything. She doesn’t cause any trouble or complain. I don’t say anything or write anything about her. We have built a level of trust. I have asked her out for coffee but she does not want to drink a cup of coffee with me.

I still haven’t learnt anyone’s name, even though we know each other pretty well now. Most people are comfortable just watching the videos of books that have been made into movies. I bring in three different versions of *Treasure Island*, including *A Muppet Treasure Island*, which is the only one we watch until the end.

Manuscript 9: Legally Blind Woman is writing a Jazz Mystery. It actually sounds pretty good. She has read out small parts of it, all in this jazz rhythm. The main character is a Jazz Detective, he uses jazz music concepts to solve crimes. He is a great piano player but is able to play any instrument that he picks up. He is a virtuoso.

She’s got a great reading voice. I don’t really understand what is happening but I am already hooked. She reads with one eye almost touching the page. The words in her book are very big. So big that even though she hasn’t written much it is a heavy volume. It is emboldened. It is simply the shortest, boldest, heaviest, longest, thickest manuscript in the pile, and one of the best I think. If nothing else she is economical with her words and I thank her for that.

The class has agreed that we need to learn more about constructing plots. The One Who Complained About Me has got the rest of the class to write to the Dean about it. I have to meet him in the cafe. I try to buy him a coffee but he pays for it. I confess to the Dean that I don’t know what a plot is, not really. I agree it is something that we must all learn. I remember one reviewer wrote that my first book was ‘anti-plot’, and I always thought that was very kind. I don’t care about the plot or any of that stuff, all I care about is the story and the story of the story. I have the Dean’s ear and I try to express my expertise on anti-plot in novels but I do not seem to have the words. The concept of anti-plot in novels may not even exist.

I agree with the Dean about what needs to be done. I am a bad teacher. I agree with everything the Dean says. I put all my trust in him, he is a god to me.

I can teach my students to be as successful as me, I know I can. “You can be just like me,” I say to my reflection as I am shaving before I leave for work. I shouldn’t have to shave, I am a novelist and a novel teacher – I am supposed to have a beard. But I don’t want to be like the tall dwarf.

“Yeah well,” says my girlfriend as she drops me off at the station, “I’m not sure you are the right person to teach them about the plot. You lost the plot a long time ago. Any arsehole will tell you that.” She wants to know when I can come over and pick up the rest of my stuff. She wants me to ring before I come over, I think she wants someone else to be there with her. She doesn’t want to be alone with me anymore.

I have nowhere to live. I am moving in with my mum. It doesn’t get any better than this, and I still have so much reading to do. I have to write insightful comments on each manuscript. I don’t think I can do it. I don’t want to be a novelist or a novel writing teacher but I don’t know if there is anything else that I can do. I am just not a very talented person.

Manuscript 11: Spanish romance with pirates involved in the opium trade. I blush a little while reading some of the romantic interludes, all curled up in bed with a huge block of chocolate. I am totally sucked in. It’s just like *The Love Boat* and *The Time Tunnel* playing in a double bill drive-in. I don’t know where to look. The timeline is full of holes. →

The manuscript would span 400 years if you put the historical events in chronological order. I read until the end because some of the sex is very well written. “Need to assemble more historical facts about the period,” I write at the bottom. “Why not make the pirates into vampires? That would explain how they can live so long.” I can’t remember if it is written by a guy or a girl. “Very sexy stuff,” I write, “would like to read more.”

Manuscript 2: The One Who Complained About Me has written a two page synopsis of a possible setting and the feeling of an idea. I’m not sure what it is but I make sure she knows how much I like it. She throws up in the bin a little bit before she reads anything out. She doesn’t like the way I teach the class. She has already made a complaint about me to the Dean. I received an official letter from the university and I had to go and speak to the Dean.

I was not allowed to ask her what the complaint was about. It was agreed that I would try to be aware of the possible sensitivities of some students, and to try to be more inclusive in my creative writing examples in the future. The Dean mentions videos, a lot of the students are just used to watching videos in class. It is just what they are used to doing.

“We will watch more videos from now on,” I promise the Dean.

“Good work,” I keep saying to my students. It does no good at all. Hopefully the new videos will help. I only write positive comments on their manuscripts, they can’t read my handwriting, nobody has ever been able to read my writing.

I keep thinking about The Jazz Detective. He is like a child sometimes, the way he comes out with something very wise or very funny. It cracks me up. I don’t know if I should laugh or cry.

“It’s the notes that you don’t play that are the most important,” says the Jazz Detective sagely on page 63, and again on page 136. I am impressed at the layers of meaning Legally Blind Woman has weaved around this recurring phrase.

“Just be still, bitch,” says The Jazz Detective again and again throughout the manuscript and each time it is like – pow! I literally swoon each time I read it. It excites me. Sometimes he says, “Bitch, just be still.” The Jazz Detective repeats his catchphrase with different inflections whenever he puts something or someone to rest.

“Be careful with the Jazz Detective’s catchphrase,” I warn Legally Blind Woman. “Just don’t overdo it.”

I go and see the Dean in his office. He has a baby grand piano. Because of the generous northern light he is able to grow a sumptuous array of tropical plants. Some of the Moreton Bay figs have become large and leafy. I can hear him watering shrubs but he is obscured by rainforest. I call out and see a flash of red as the Dean steps into view. Today the Dean is wearing jade trousers and a loud Hawaiian shirt.

All he has to do is take off his shirt and he is invisible. Maybe he was standing here all along and he just took the shirt out of a green bag and put it on.

I tell the Dean that I am unworthy to teach novel writing. I tell the Dean that I am going to quit. I tell the Dean that my novels are shit and so are the novels that my students write. “Shhh,” says the Dean, “Not here.” It’s like his office is bugged.

He is as tall as Don Lane, taller probably, but with Bert Newton’s face. What a fucking nightmare. Look at us going down in the elevator to the café, the Dean towering above me like a tree with his big moon face.

The Dean ushers me to the cafe, he buys me a coffee. He has the yellow teeth of a swami. The woman who makes the coffee hates making coffee and does not know how to make it. I think she is burning it.

The Dean says that I am taking my classes too seriously, maybe try and break things up with a video now and then. His big bald head is like the moon. He takes a sip of coffee and winces. It must be rotting his gut by now, this horrible coffee. It is poisonous.

“Nobody can learn to be a writer anyway,” he says, “that’s something you can’t teach. They can either do it or they can’t. I’m just here for the money.”

This a funny thing to say about the money so we both laugh but my heart is beating a thousand beats. We could make more money working the nightshift at Coles. This is funny even if nothing else is, and I laugh with the Dean about it. Even though he must be making much more than me. The Dean has published several books on writing, his instructional manuals on creative writing and getting published are still sold in bookshops. He gets royalties. Quite a tidy sum, paid into his account twice a year.

“Everything is okay,” he says, shining, winking, beatific. I believe him. I put all my faith in the Dean as we sit there in all that plastic and polystyrene.

I keep telling my novel writing class to read more books. Read as many different books as you can, I tell them. Don’t be a snob about it.

Talk to other people about reading and what they have read. Get back to them and tell them about what you thought when you read it.

I say the same things over and over. No one is listening, they are all looking out the windows or at their phones.

“Try to have as many different experiences as you can,” I tell them, “it’s good to have something to write about. You don’t want to end up writing about writing.”

I am worried Legally Blind Woman will take up all my time. “She is only legally blind,” says my mum when I get home.

“That’s the worst kind,” I say.

My mum is friends with lots of legally blind people. She volunteers at Radio for the Printed Handicapped, reading out parts of novels and articles from the newspaper to listeners. She is my greatest fan. She talks to her co-workers about her son the published novelist who is teaching novel writing at a university. “You should come in and read from your novels,” my mum says. My mum can’t help being proud of me even though I have to keep telling her again and again what a jib it is. →

“Nobody can learn to be a writer anyway,” he says, “that’s something you can’t teach. They can either do it or they can’t. I’m just here for the money.”

This a funny thing to say about the money so we both laugh but my heart is beating a thousand beats. We could make more money working the nightshift at Coles. This is funny even if nothing else is, and I laugh with the Dean about it. Even though he must be making much more than me.

I have to print out special enlarged handouts for my legally blind student. I don't understand how to use the photocopier or how to even insert the staff ID card. I've tried turning it off and then on again. It actually takes a really long time to turn back on.

There's a long line of people all waiting for it to warm up now. I wish I could gather up all their frowns and funnel them into a machine that runs on negative energy. We could all save money because it has been so very cold.

Sometimes I stay behind correcting student manuscripts and it is just me and the cleaners here. I encourage them to play their rap and death metal music very loud and it echoes down the empty hallways. We have an understanding. Sometimes I creep into the Dean's office to play his piano, but it's not like they are going to tell anybody that I spend a lot of time in there late at night with the mood lighting turned down low.

Sometimes when I am playing the Dean's piano I like to pretend that I am the Dean. "Bla bla bla," I will say to some imaginary faculty member or starstruck student sitting beside me at the Dean's piano. "I am the Dean," I will say to my sexy imaginary companion. "Bla bla bla. Bla bla bla," I will say to them.

"Ha ha ha," my imaginary companion will say, "ha ha." Because the things I had just said to had been so funny and charming and literary.

"Ha ha," I will say back to my sexy imaginary companion beside me on the Dean's piano stool, late at night in the Dean's office.

"Ha ha," she will say again. She cannot stop laughing, I am so funny.

I am sick of this shit and I am going to resign. I stayed up late writing a very good resignation letter. I am proud of this letter. I am certain that the Dean will appreciate my sense of humour, if not my candour. I keep reading and rereading it and giggling to myself. It's the best thing I have written in years. I burst out laughing on the tram and I am not even reading my letter, I am only thinking about reading it. I am emboldened. I feel as powerful as a horse. I barge into the Dean's office, but there is someone else sitting at his desk.

It is The One Who Complained About Me. She is sitting in the Dean's chair with her legs wrapped snug around the Dean's ears. I don't think the Dean can hear me clearing my throat. Her eyes are still half closed, then open. "Stop," she says. The Dean has his back to me and thinks she is having a powerful orgasm, but she is trying to get up, slapping him on his bald head, making a loud thwacking sound. He likes being slapped on the head by her and his fingers clutch her cheeks even tighter, pulling her even closer so he cannot breathe. He cannot hear anything but the pulse of her heart beating through the veins and arteries of her thighs. The Dean has carpet burns. He dies a little death. He thinks he is being a very good lover. She is trying to get up but the Dean is too powerful. She cannot move. The Dean is making a mewling sound like a kitten.

I cannot move, there is no point now she has seen me. I leave the resignation letter in my pocket. I am already recording the whole thing on my phone.

I have an agent now. I'm not allowed to say anything to anyone. You will need to talk to my agent first. I can't say anything about the incident without my agent's say so. She will eat you alive. You can read all about it in the papers if you buy a paper, otherwise you will just have to wait for the book to come out. Late February, my new editor says.

It became so easy to write, after the incident that I can't talk about. Then everybody wanted to know what I was writing. A lot of friends from the old days drop by and we laugh about that hilarious time at the awards night when my drink was spiked and I caused all that damage to the window and that lady's dress and how wild it was back in the old days. When I see them in the street, they ask how I'm doing. "How's business?" they say.

One day, they say, I will have to write a book all about those old times and how noble and good looking and hilarious we were back then.

Manuscript 4:

I Always Thought I Would Remember This Guy's Name But I Don't. He has very long hair which he wears in two long braids and writes in the first person from a girl's perspective. His writing is probably the best in the class but it is not actually about anything. He really just needs to go out and have an adventure with some real people and come back and write about that. He hasn't done anything yet and you can tell by his writing. He has written a chapter about a novel class which resembles the novel class that I teach. The novel teacher resembles me and is portrayed as some kind of idiot. The main character of his novel is also a writer and also an idiot. I love it and I hate him for being so clever. It's a good book even though it isn't about anything. It is much better than the book I am writing about the same thing.

The main character in my new novel is a novelist and a novel teacher who is writing a book about teaching novel writing. It's called *The Novel Teacher*. I am told it is bold and postmodern by my new publisher. I haven't quite finished it yet but I have already spent the advance. It was gone in three days. I had to borrow money off my mum to pay my phone bill.

The main characters in my other two novels were writers as well. I am just not very good at making stuff up.

Everything is happening so fast now. My agent calls. She just sold the movie rights to my latest novel and I am told the movie will be finished before the actual novel is. I am relieved that somebody else will be planning the plot and story arc from now on. I was never good at that part of writing novels or teaching those aspects of novel writing in my novel writing classes. My students were right to complain about me. →

The Dean has actually been very helpful in providing detail to the screenplay. He keeps having drunken dinners with the screenwriters in Collingwood. He has told them everything. It has been embarrassing for everyone. I'm pretty sure the screenwriters know too much. If there weren't so many of them we could have them killed. Our budget just won't allow it. We may be able to have them killed in the future, depending on sales.

We all stand to make a load of money. Even *The One Who Complained About Me* wants to be my Facebook friend now.

One of the screenwriters corners me in the pub. "It's the drama of the whole thing that excites me," he says, "and your attention to the minute details throughout the transgression." He can hardly stand up, he is so close to me. "Your writing just breaks my heart," he swoons, "it makes me laugh, it makes me cry." He smells like one of those shops that sell soap.

Look at me. I am trapped, literally trapped in a corner.

It's my agent again. There are some big names being tossed around. There is talk of Craig McLachlan in the starring role as *The Novel Teacher*, and Bert Newton as the Dean, and Dannii Minogue as *The One Who Complained About Me*. All I know is that Bert Newton would have to stand on a box. He has the face for it, at least. A lot of actors have the height but not the face.

I am Facebook friends with my agent now. We are very close in real life too. I think my agent wants to fuck me, I'm not sure. Maybe she is just happy for me.

"Who will they get to play you in the movie," I joke with her over the phone as I tag raunchy pictures of her from the pub on Facebook. She can't think of anyone, she can't think of anything to say, there is only dead air. I can't fuck you, I think. There is no way. I just want to hang up. It is like talking to a dead person. It's embarrassing for me and it should be embarrassing for her.

"I have to eat," I say, just before I hang up. My mum only has instant coffee. I make myself a sweet hot milky cup of it before I brush my teeth and go to bed.

I have been thinking of movies that were just as good as the books. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a good movie. *Great Expectations* was a good movie, as was *Lord of the Flies*. *Breakfast of Champions* was a very bad movie of a good book. *Stand by Me* was a very good movie version of *The Body* by Stephen King. Any Stephen King book is usually better as a movie.

I have decided not to bother writing the ending to my new book. I am just going to wait for the movie. It will be better than any ending I could have written myself. This time they will not be disappointed. The book will be just like the movie and the movie will be just like the book. ●

26 BIG SKY PARADISE

ANNA KRIEN

We've been driving naked for days.

Every now and then
the prime minister visits us
on the radio,
letting us know about our war
in another desert
where men and women wear camouflage
in the colours of dust
and the red of burning oil.

Steven makes wanking gestures
at the speakers,
his own dick flat and sticky
against the vinyl seat.
He says it is easy
to pick out the dictators.
They're the ones
with the emotional speeches.
Big arms,
long pauses,
and a whole lot of footage.
But this one is tricky, he says,
pointing to the radio.
This one made up his mind
a long time ago
that we're not worth convincing.

But we're too far away
from anything
to think about politics.
Driving across a desert carved up
with burnouts and doughnuts,
we pass rusting refrigerators,
dead foxes hanging from cyclone fences,
tails like fiery brushstrokes,
and creatures that still dream
of dinosaurs.

A long empty space
summed up in defence signals
and reverse charge phone calls.
Lone men on the run
from child maintenance.
Craters from American practice bombs
fill slowly with golf balls
as personnel practise their swing.
This is the flatland of donkey votes.
Not even UFOs land here.

Out here
the newspapers
read like sci-fi
and the radio
visits like bird poo
from above.

The service station boy,
30 miles back,
said to steer clear of any bikies.
Filling the jerry cans with liquid gold,
he told us stories about skeletons of men,
their jaws snatched back in scream,
white-yellow bones
tied with rope around termite mounds,
those red tombstones along the road.
But the only ghosts we see out here
are those of five dead teenagers
wrapped round a stringybark tree,
its trunk split like a cut lip
as bourbon blood leaks sap into the ground.
Perhaps you only see the ghosts
you can relate to.

Sweat pours
down the inside of our thighs.
We wave at flies like queens.
Prescription pads, vitamins
and plastic containers of medicine
are stuffed in the old leather briefcase
at my feet.
His scrawl is on the dotted lines,
the letters of his name
piling up and slipping off the page
like a child's handwriting.

One night
Steven tore the prescriptions
into little white and yellow moths
and threw them
into the black mouth of the desert.
He didn't cry but gasped
like an almost dead animal
on the side of the road.
There wasn't anything
definitive about the moment,
it just meant more time at the next town
getting a doctor to write out new ones.
→

My hands have almost healed
from washing dishes
at the resort,
but skin still flakes from my palms,
falling like fish food
into my lap.
His hands
are almost finished.

I remember a long time
back when I collected cicada shells
in my floral landscape dress,
my grandma leaning on the broom,
a pile of bogong moths at her feet
Her hands had hooked
like burnt koala paws
around the wooden handle.

She looked at me,
asked me to
gently
remove the broom
from her hands.
They had locked up.
From the floor
the moths had started to rise
and the dead cicada shells clung
to my dress.

Two nights ago
I had to help Steven piss
after the hot yellow spray
ran down his legs.
I had to wrap my hand
around his dick
and lift it away
so he could stop
pissing
on his feet.
It was like he was holding
onto an electric fence
and couldn't let go.

Once a year in the desert
the propellers of
rundown aeroplanes spin
and lizards clamber to the
tops of rock boulders,
opening their dragon frills
to catch the smell of kelp.

Displaced albatrosses,
solitary figures like wandering men,
startle out of their depressed stares
and flap their Boeing 747 wings.
They fly-fish shadows across the dunes,
and empty Coca Cola cans roll in,
tinkling as if tied
to the back of
an invisible wedding Buick.

I wind down the window and lean out,
flocks shaped like boomerangs
fly overhead.
Perhaps with fuel prices as they are,
we may have to learn
to fly our aeroplanes in formation.
We pass a caravan
the colour of aluminium
boarded up to protect against ghosts,
strange outlines seen only in dust at night
illuminated by headlights,
and a satellite dish
flattening itself
like an ear to the sky.

A dingo pup next to the highway,
its eyes a blue heaven milkshake.
A goanna guards it,
waiting in a patch of shade
for the pup to give up,
its legs flexed like poinciana trees.
We try to give the dog some water,
but it can't swallow.
Flies begin to
file out of the dog's mouth,
undertaking its last breaths
up into the blue belch
of a sky.

At night
the car becomes a boat,
lifting at the corrugations of a silver sea.

The doona ruffles at my chin
like the foam of waves,
and when we fuck
he holds me down with his wrists.
Together
we tug our bodies
out of dark places.

I trace his moles
with my fingers.
Like rain
they spill down his back
and join into one.
And when he comes
he opens his mouth
revealing a small
fossilised bug
hiding behind his teeth,
pressed in his gums.

But still the lighthouse
from the desert's edge
calls out for us.
Its one eye
searching across the red dusty plains,
saying Aroooo Ba.
Aroooo Ba.
I dream of men
digging up graves
and killing the dead bodies
all over again.

When my grandma
was in the home,
hands under the bedsheets,
twisted like ginger.
My brother and me
brought her oysters.
We squeezed lemon over them
and tipped the shells into her mouth.
Feeding her the sloppy flesh
that she barely had to chew.
She said they tasted
like the sea.

We'll put our clothes
back on when we reach
the end of the desert.
I'll help him with zips,
sleeves and shoelaces.
And tonight,
this long stretch of desert,
is like a one-night stand.
At the end, we won't know
what to say.

In the city,
people's breath can blow out
like streetlights.
But here, under the odd boab,
a thousand yellow eyes turn on
and black coagulates around them like oil.
Stars streak like graffiti,
a single firework in slow motion.
Burnt out kernels
land somewhere,
out there,
in the desert. ●



I first met Kevin Brophy on Good Friday, 1972, when I ran away from home. He was running a coffee shop on Sydney Road in Coburg, and he allowed me to sleep on a couch in a little cell of a room upstairs. He told me he was a writer and I said I was hoping to be one too. He was the first person to give me any real critique on my stream of consciousness prose, and in essence he became my first editor and a lifelong friend.

He convinced me to attend readings with him and it was exciting to meet real writers; real because they were authors or they published in some of the little magazines or they read their work in public. We were writing stories and sending them off to the few lit mags we knew: *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Southerly*, *Australian Short Stories*. They were always rejected with a photocopied rejection slip. This was frustrating, because it gave us no clue what we were doing wrong. Kevin started to say that we should edit our own lit mag. I thought he was joking, so I laughed heartily. I wasn't even sure I knew what an editor was, so there was no way I could become one.

In the mid-1970s I sent a story to *Contempa*, edited by Phillip Edmonds. I was sleeping on a couch in a Clifton Hill house which Kevin was renting. I came back home after a walk around the streets looking for dropped coins, and Kevin told me an editor had been there asking after me. It was Phillip Edmonds, and I'm glad I wasn't home to see him because I was sure he would have seen that I was a fake writer. Editors were scary people! I didn't answer the door for months after that. In fact, I moved into the chicken coop in the backyard to become more invisible. Kevin would bring meals to me out there and we would sit around discussing our favourite books and writers.

After the Skyhooks released their single, 'All My Friends Are Getting Married', Kevin married a girl and moved north to Queensland; I got married too and moved north to Coburg. When the single fell out of the hit parade both our marriages broke up. Kevin returned to Melbourne and rented a room in my house in North Coburg. We sat around the kitchen table crying for a few

months and that's when Kevin decided we were ready to become publishers of a small magazine. We spoke to a few editors of lit mags and asked them how to do it. The answer was simple: all we had to do was let writers know we were going to publish a magazine, select the appropriate work and then take it to the printers. We weren't told how to sell the magazines because that didn't seem to be important.

We needed a title so Kevin suggested we write down lists of our favourite writers. We looked at the list and saw that we both loved writers who wrote antiheroes, who were always failing at life, who struggled against the norms of society. They included Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Beckett, Brautigan and Bukowski. Kevin wanted the title to reflect our tastes in literature, so after many arguments we settled on *Going Down Swinging*.

We bought a post office box in Coburg and advertised the fact that we were a magazine. We made flyers which we took to writers festivals and poetry readings and submissions began to trickle in.

We were keen to find exciting young talent and we received work from two teenagers. We accepted one and rejected the other. The one we rejected was Tim Winton. It was a story set on April Fools' Day. As editors we made many mistakes. Mistakes are great; that's how we learnt.

The first issue came back from the printers on May 29th, 1980, and it had taken us eighteen months to produce it. Kevin had found a photo for the cover which he thought would encapsulate what *Going Down Swinging* was all about. It was of Ned Kelly in a boxing stance, standing with his left foot forward, in his underwear. ●

CURATED BY HARRY MCLEAN

a history of comics at going down swinging





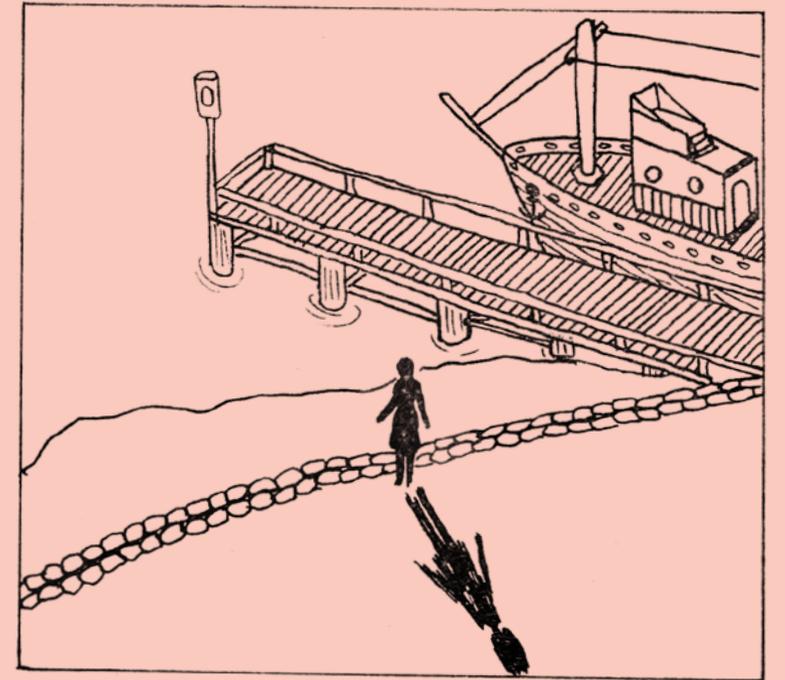
Editorial IV, Edition 24

“I remember when

I first started to meet comic folk. Kirrily rode up beside me on her bike one day and introduced me to underground comic books. Stashing the books in my bag I rode home to my backyard where I sat quietly with a cup of tea and opened them up. In my hands was what felt like a living breathing thing. It struck out at me with the intensity of its energy and it was as real to me as the sun on my back and the grass under my bare feet. My mind was stamped with the beauty of the pictures and engulfed within the rolling waves of story and dialogue. I wondered to myself how something so silent could be so loud. The comics seemed to curse the sky with their angry outbursts and for this they did not apologise. They were obscene, hilarious, disturbing and sincere. They spoke tenderly to me and whispered sweet truths of the everyday and the ordinary. They were wild and crazy and they didn't give a shit about what anyone thought. I think it was love at first sight. It was soon evident that I was not alone. As letters were pulled out of my postbox and later emails out of my computer. I realised that Australia has a very real and very passionate comic community. As the practice of creating comics often requires long stints of isolation, to find like-minded people was a revelation and a relief.”

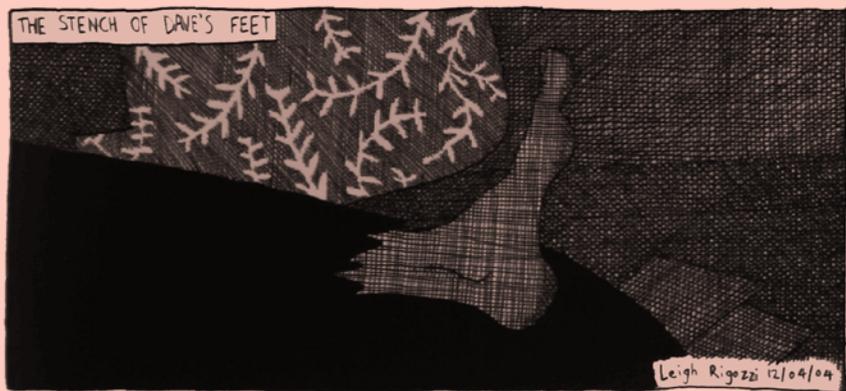
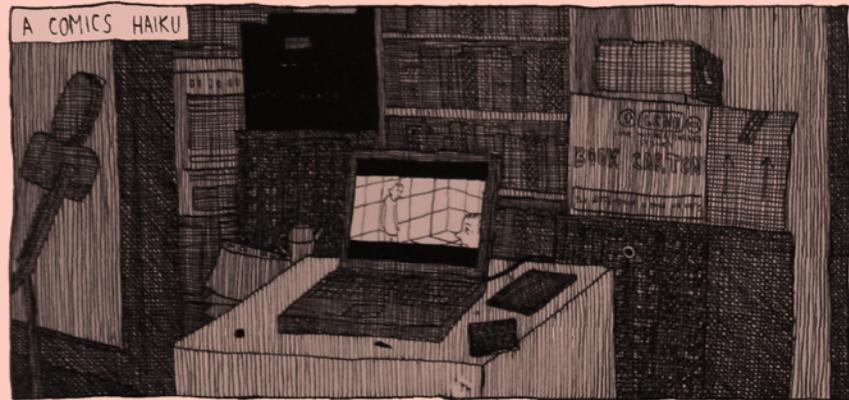


Mandy Ord

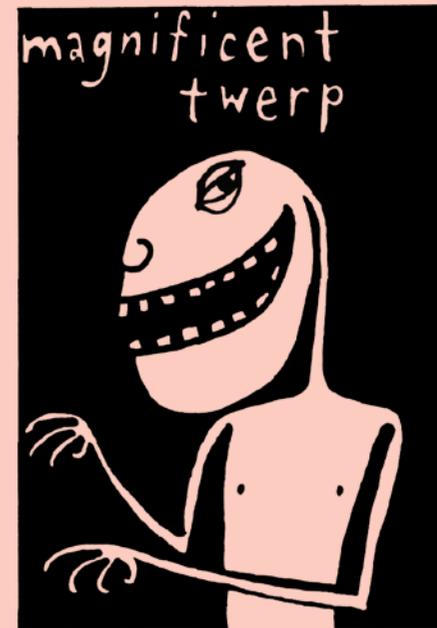


Steve Lennon





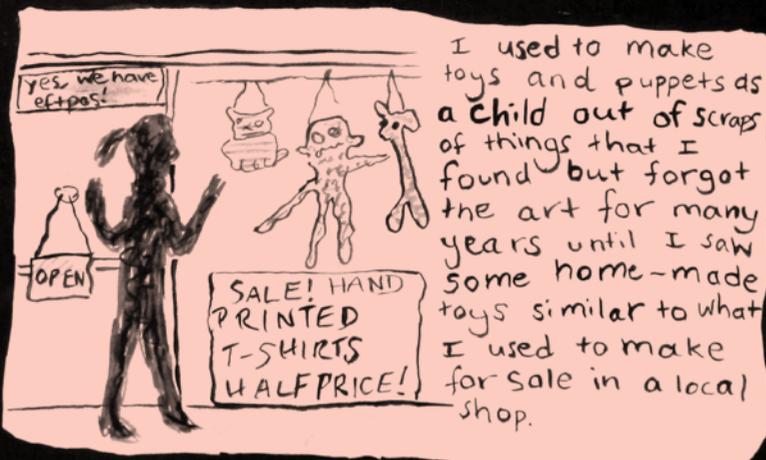
Leigh Rigozzi



Anna Simic

TOYS by Skimma

When I'm not making comics or reading or going to ballet classes or planting flowers or worrying about cruelty to animals, I am usually making toys.



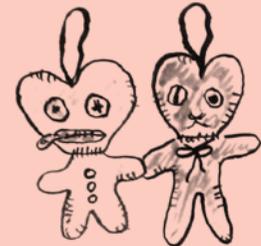
I used to make toys and puppets as a child out of scraps of things that I found but forgot the art for many years until I saw some home-made toys similar to what I used to make for sale in a local shop.



Not long after that I started to make toys again and sell them in small shops. I have been doing so ever since.

The first toys that I made when re-discovering my skills became Christmas presents for some close friends.

I made my ex-boyfriend some toys with heart-shaped heads and that held hands to show him that in spite of everything that had gone wrong, I still wanted to remain friends.



Soon afterwards I noticed that he'd stopped talking to me very much. I asked him what was wrong and he told me that he was having a few problems with his new girlfriend and that he would get back in touch with me as soon as he'd sorted things out.



He never did.



I wonder if he still has the toys.

That was okay. For a while. A year went by and she mentioned a couple of times that she might be going to move to Sydney. But, she said, probably not because she liked the friends she had here. So she would most likely stay.

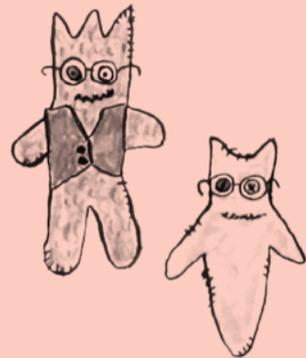


She changed her mind. She's moving away in a few months to be an artist in a big city.



I wonder if she'll take the doll I made with her.

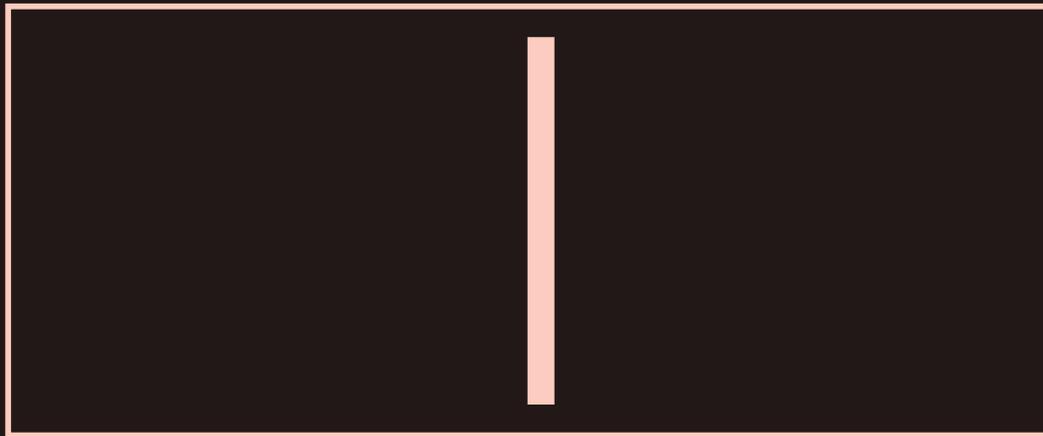
Recently I have made some toys that are inspired by and named after people I know. As recognition for letting me borrow their characteristics I have decided to give them gifts of the toys bearing their names.



But, if I give these friends the toys I made, does that mean that they will go away too?



THE
END



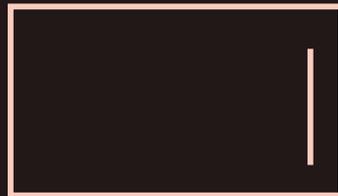
this is what I remember of my childhood



lots of quiet



and playing



the usual stuff



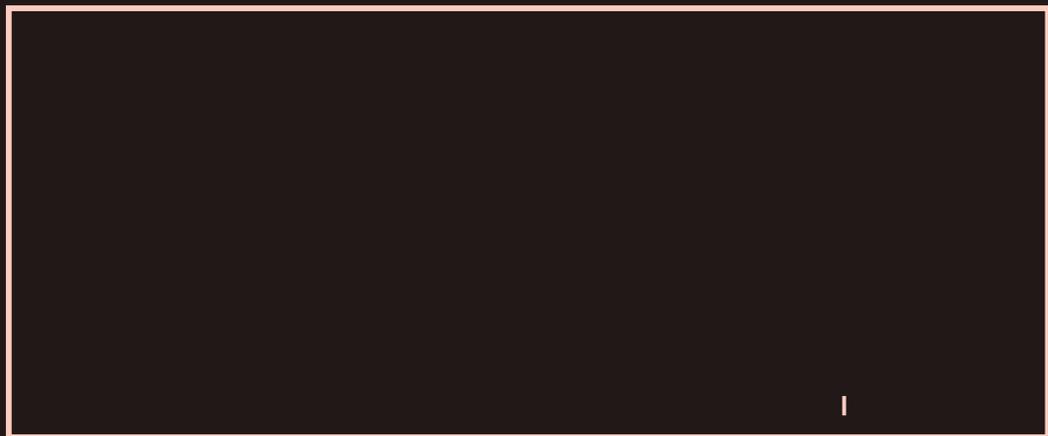
I used to imagine kind voices



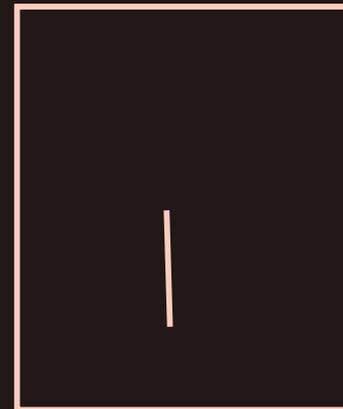
that would ask, "aren't you lonely?"



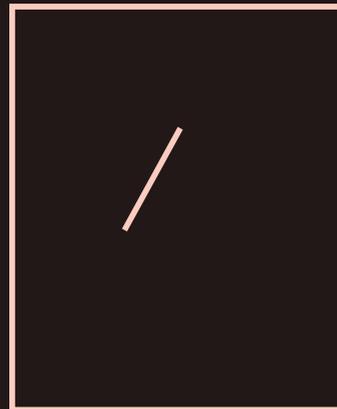
I'd always say "no"



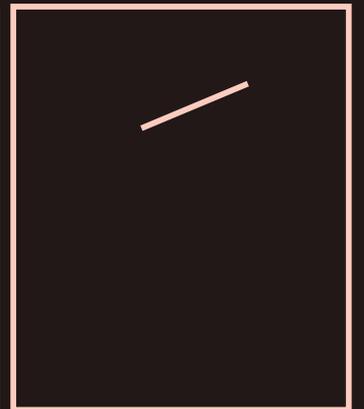
and then be disappointed when they left



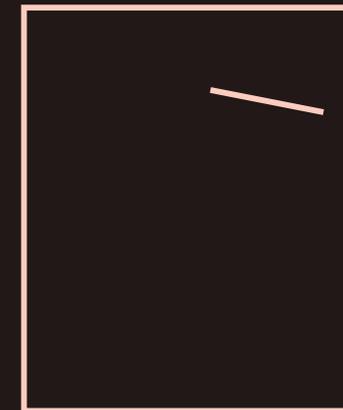
I played so many games



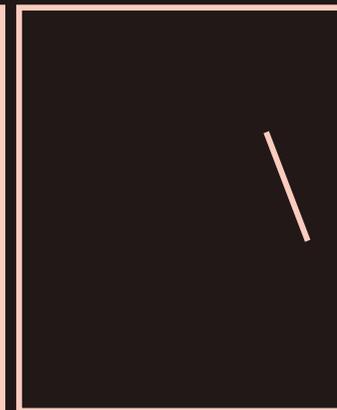
Trung Nhi charging into battle
on her elephant



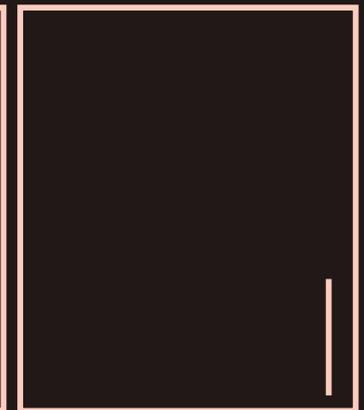
Napoleon escaping from Elba



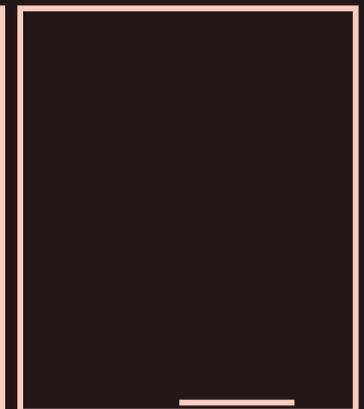
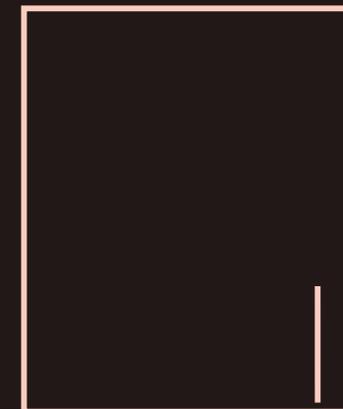
Nancy Wake parachuting into
Vichy France



Hannibal descending on
Italy



Virginia Woolf stepping into the
River Ouse





that was when I first heard it



a low hum



like a mouse trumpeting



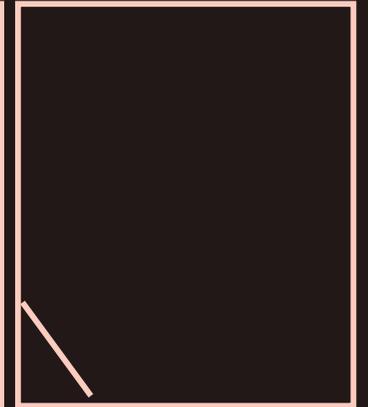
or elephant whispering



I found the note and sang along



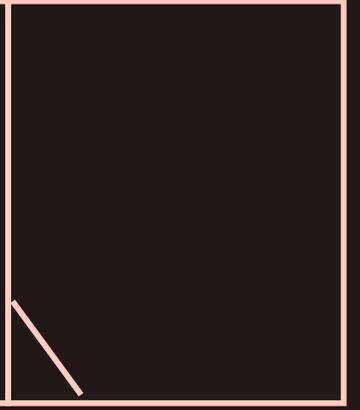
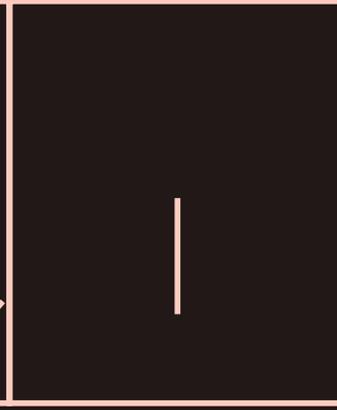
sometimes my body quivered like a tuning fork
exhilarated and filled with sound



and then other times
it would be gone



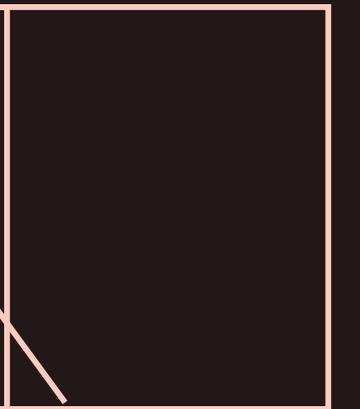
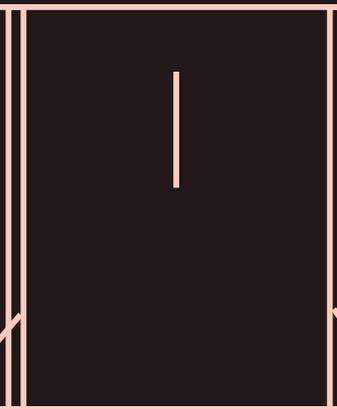
I pushed and pushed

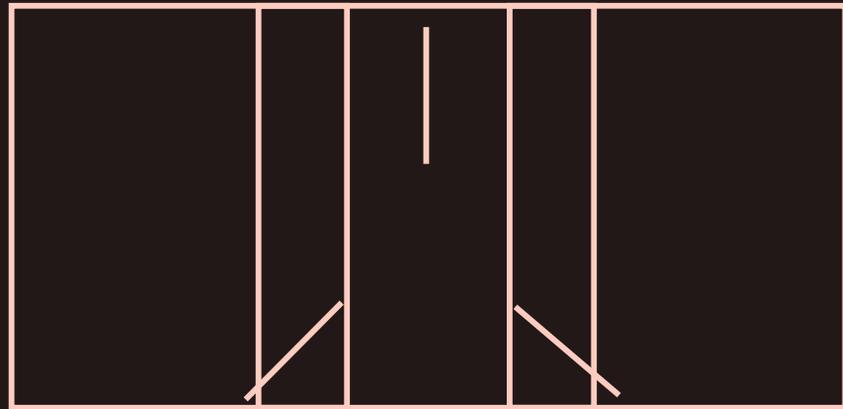


trying to turn myself inside out
to hold the hum

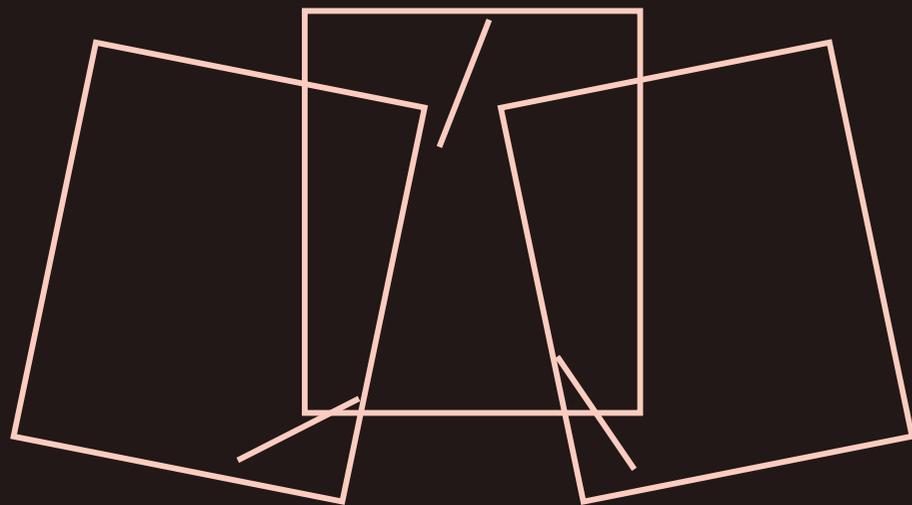


until I began to poke through the membrane
between the world and me

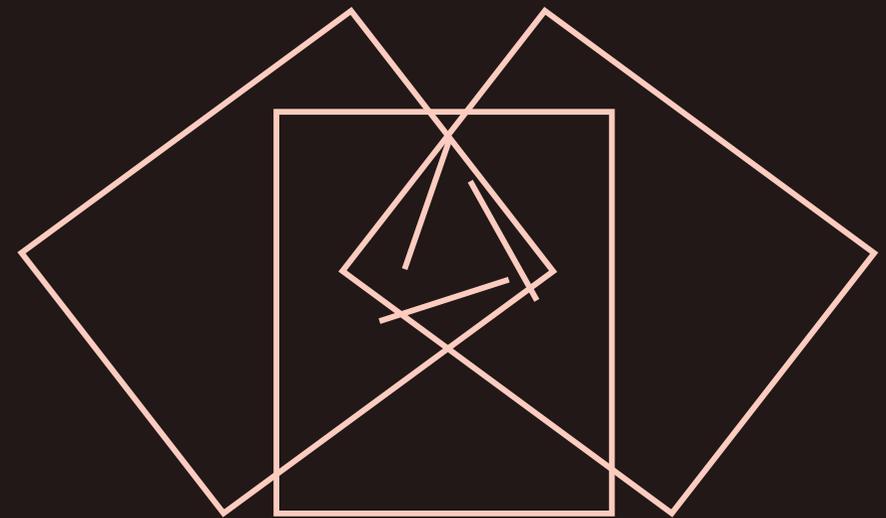




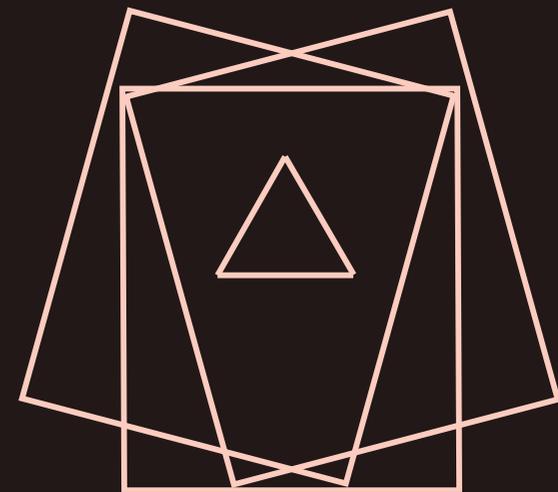
it felt like tunnels collapsing
or icecubes disappearing in your throat



a chick headbutting its way out of the egg

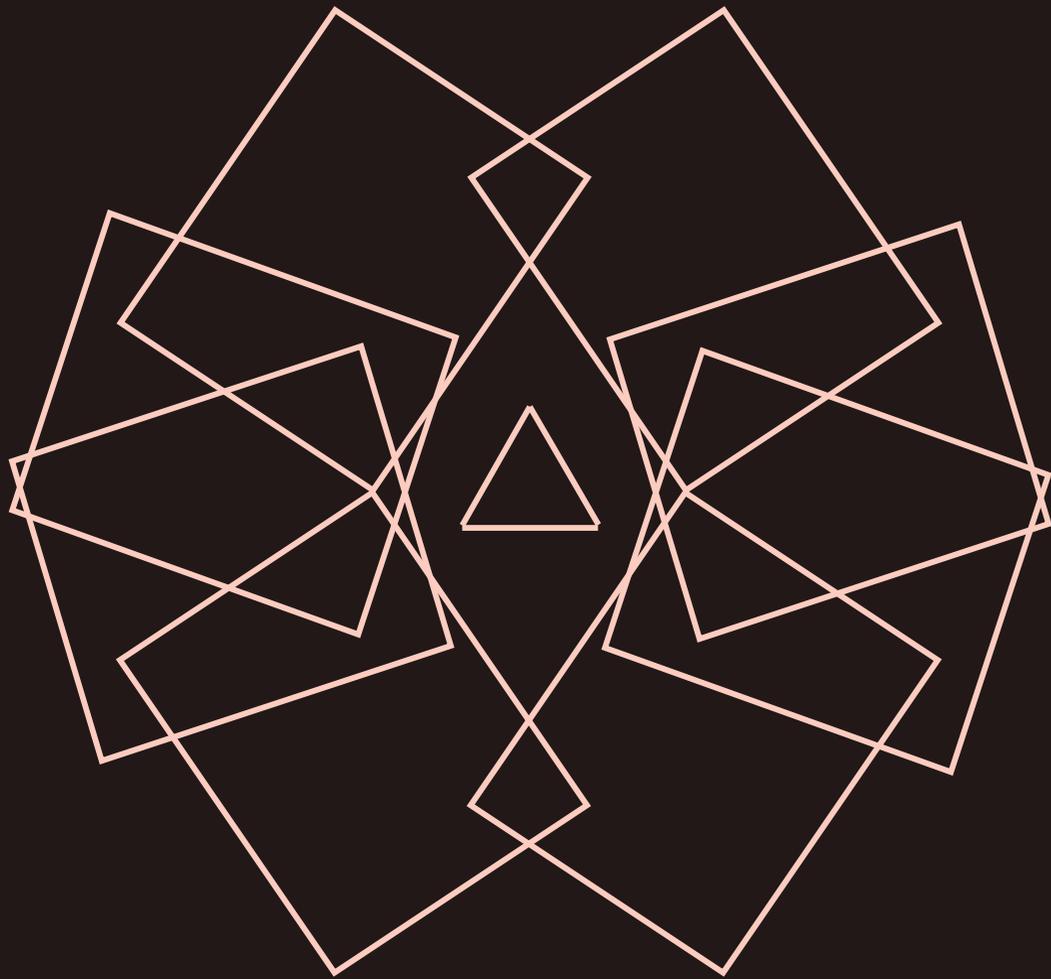


because the shell, I was beginning to realise



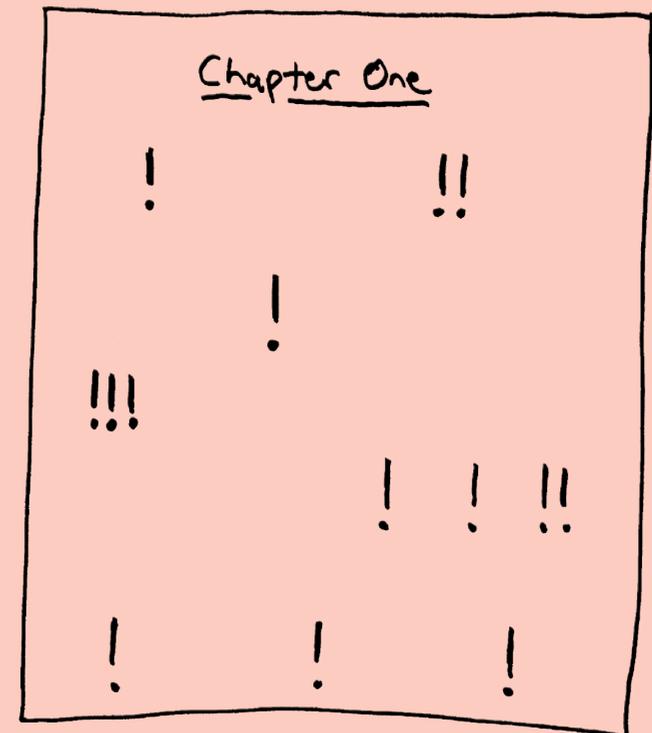
is just bones on the outside

there to protect you



but also to break apart when needed

MATTHEW REILLY'S 1st DRAFT...



AD
2015

Andrew Denton



SELF STALKER!

On the trail of me

It started when I Googled myself.



I found my address, phone number, email and where I worked.

Oslo Davis



Later that night I called myself, but hung up immediately. (What if I would pick up? What would I say?)



On the weekend I wrote me a letter, inviting me for a coffee.

On Thursday I sat waiting in the café wearing, as I had wrote, a carnation in my lapel so I'd recognise myself.



When I didn't turn up I became furious and called my home. (I got the machine.)



The next day I stood outside my office hoping to catch a glimpse of me. Nothing.

Frustration turned to depression,
which in turn led to feelings of revenge.



Later that night, after a few beers,
I went around to my house and
knocked on the door.



After no one answered I broke in.



To my amazement my whole place was
decked out in pictures of me!



By now it was eleven so I resolved to sit and
wait for that psycho bastard to return.

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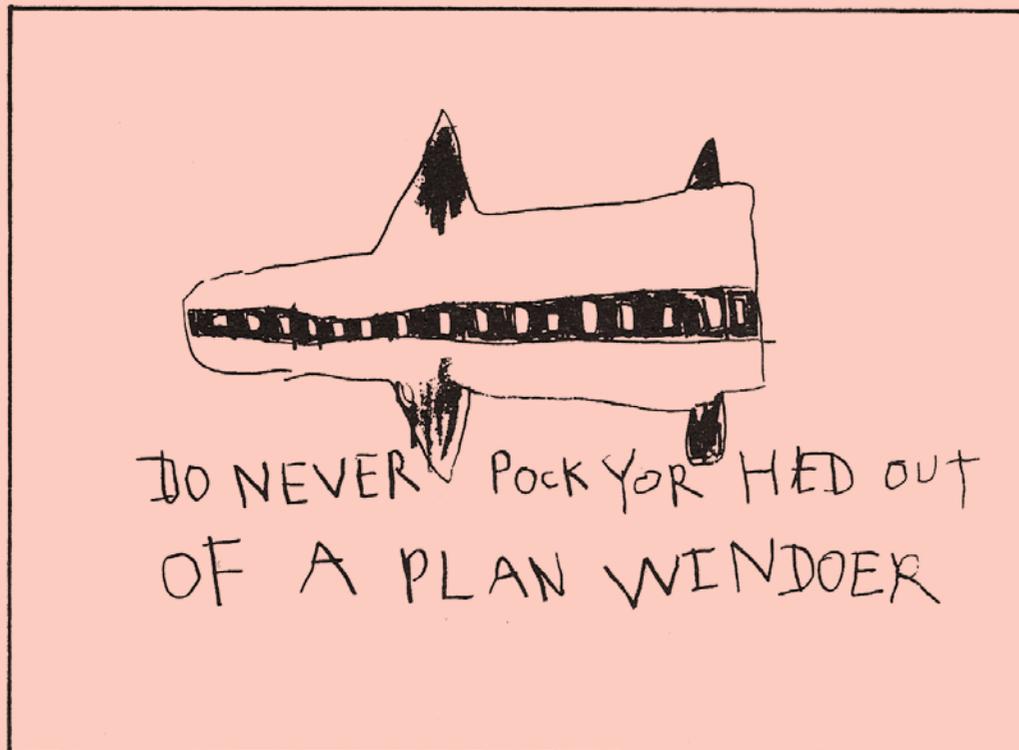
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