



COASTLINES 7

An anthology of creative writing
from Southern Cross University

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7

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Southern Cross University

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Southern Cross University

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Libido and Life Lessons of Fish contains an extract from *Forty-Seventeen* by Frank Moorhouse

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COASTLINES

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To the students featured herein, praise be! To those in print for the first time, hearty congratulations, and to you, and the seasoned authors featured amongst these pages, may strength, persistence and courage remain your constant.

Coastlines 7 Production Team

COASTLINES

COASTLINES 7 PRODUCTION TEAM

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COASTLINES

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COASTLINES

INTRODUCTION

The world keeps turning: you will find this to be an undeniable truth.

Despite gender, nation, race, creed, if we stand silent, eyes closed, we will hear the gentle *whoosh* of the universe as it drags by; feel the slight, dizzying tip as the ground beneath our feet turns.

Coastlines 7 invites you to plunge onwards towards the eternally hidden future of the horizon. With the grip of the past on our ankles, these narratives ask, how do we move forward? How do we love and liberate our ghosts? Can we gather the best of ourselves and leap up into the blue expanse? Or will we sink, fossilise in the hubris, hardship, and heartache we hold?

Uniting in their humanity, these intimate short stories and poetry from Southern Cross University students will take up permanent residence on your heart's bookshelf.

They will make you giggle aloud in the library. You will recognise yourself and your loved ones through the little windows the authors open, exploring the impact of our pasts and the looming, indeterminate future.

We all know the anchor of grief, the light of midnight laughter, the blindfold of rage. Plunge into *Coastlines 7* and walk with us as we forge forwards, taking one brave step at a time over the ever-turning earth.

Coastlines 7 Production Team

KISSING IN KASHMIR

MICHAEL SMEE

It's Monday morning and I should be in English dissecting J. Alfred Prufrock. Instead, we're cutting through cane fields on our way into town. The sky is boiling with late summer storm clouds. Roadside stalls are selling pumpkins big as babies and mangoes by the dozen. My sister's driving, still reeking of weed from the weekend. She finished high school last year while I'm just starting. We're planets apart, yet spinning in the same sad orbit. She likes having

me around because it'll make it easier for her to leave. She flicks me a sideways glance.

'You going out with Leilani?'

There are no secrets around here.

'Yes,' I say, though I'm not totally sure.

'Yay. Your first date and you take her to the cemetery. Don't you think that's a bit creepy?'

'Maybe if you're alone. But then, you're never alone in a cemetery.'

She shakes her head. We might share the same genes, but we don't share the same sense of humour.

'So it's all about Leilani being a Goth?'

'No,' I reply. 'It's all about avoiding the losers in town on a Saturday night.'

There's no comeback to that.

*

Leilani's so pale and her skin's so translucent you can see blue lines snaking under her skin. She looks good in black, and she understands how I can be happy and sad at the same time. She calls me a poet, and maybe I am. Not because I write poems, but because I like words more than people.

On Saturday night, Leilani took me to her favourite place. I hadn't been back since the funeral. The cemetery crowns our only hill. Perhaps they were worried that floods down on the flat would wash away the dead. The oldest tombstones, weathered green and barely readable, belong to the pioneer families whose names signpost the landscape.

From here they look out forever over the country they conquered, the land they cleared of trees and people. So many stories are buried here.

‘So many guilty secrets,’ Leilani said, as we climbed over the cemetery gate.

We walked to where a stand of pines stood dark against the sky. They’d started the crush, and in the distance the cane fields were crackling. The night was warm and sweet with the scent of molasses. We sat on a bed of pine needles and shared a goon sack, while below us pale rooftops lay scattered like shredded paper.

‘Mum had another fight with her boyfriend. I think he’s moving out,’ Leilani said, hugging her knees. ‘I don’t know where she finds them. She deserves so much better.’

Since Leilani’s father left, the men her mother brings home only make it more obvious he’s not around. Now both our mothers are sad, so that’s one more thing we have in common.

Leilani leaned over and we kissed, her tongue urgent against my clenched teeth. She tasted of riesling.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked, pulling away. ‘I won’t bite.’

Leilani understands me better than anyone, but I could never have explained how I was scared that if I opened my mouth I’d swallow the sky. I don’t understand it myself.

‘Next time, I promise. And you can bite me if you want.’

I curled cat-like and curious into the curve of her body. Leilani’s strong and determined, but with my arms around her she felt fragile and small. In the moonlight I traced the

outline of her birthmark with my finger. Like a faded rose, or a bruise that won't go away, it nestles like a secret on the inside of her thigh. Yellow smoke drifted up from the cane fields and settled on us soft as a blanket.

*

My only other friend is Raj. He lives nearby in another of the tin-topped fibro houses dotted like an archipelago through the cane fields. He's the graceful and confident brown-eyed counterpoint to my freckled and awkward uncertainty. We play video games after school. There's a shrine in the corner of his kitchen, decorated with flowers and fruit, and a silver bowl where a portion of each meal is offered to the gods. When Raj makes sandwiches, he offers Hanuman a piece of his crust.

At school, there are nerds, bogans, jocks and hippies. Or as Raj calls them – hacks, hicks, hunks and herbs. The hippie girls – boho, barefoot, infused with coconut and fragrant with frangipani – Raj seeks out in the schoolyard. With palms pressed together, he offers them visions of nirvana and Hindu folk tales he gets off the internet. He's just cute enough to get away with it.

'You know, if I was a sadhu in India,' Raj said to me one afternoon as he wrapped a sarong around his waist, 'I could actually walk around naked ...'

I was loading Final Fantasy on the Xbox.

'... and smoke some quality ganja.'

I was tempted to remind him that the only time he got stoned, he crawled behind the couch and fell asleep.

‘I don’t know, Raj. Isn’t this whole guru routine kind of racist?’

‘Racist? How can it be racist when I’m Indian? Are you racist when you’re acting like a white boy?’

That’s a proposition I’m still processing.

*

My sister drops me off at the Medical Centre. Locals call it The Lab because it’s shiny and sterile and the staff all wear white. The Lab’s where you’re sent for counselling when you’re thirteen years old and your father comes home from Tarin Kowt with a Taliban beard, and a month later walks into the cane fields with a gun and never comes out. And all you can think is *What about us?* The whole time he was away I was terrified he’d step on a bomb. Instead he brought one home. Medication softens the edges, but there’s no drug to mend the shattered sky, no way to put so many jagged pieces back together. It’s almost a year and people still avoid me, like I’m wrapped in a force field of pain. Like tragedy’s contagious.

The brass plaque in the lobby lists services alphabetically, from dermatology to psychology. I ride the elevator to the third floor. The orthodontist’s waiting room is typically depressing: lights too bright, chairs uncomfortable, all the decent magazines stolen. Everyone looks everywhere but at each other.

A solitary tooth hangs like a stalactite from the roof of my mouth. When I was little, Dad called it my snaggletooth. I’d chase him through the house, then he’d turn and

roar like a dinosaur and I'd run away screaming. It was a game just the two of us played. Before he left, he took my finger and rubbed it along the roof of his mouth.

'From father to son,' he said, 'all the way back to the Stone Age.' He laughed then, and called it our Neanderthal curse.

When I talked about it later with Raj, his response was predictably enigmatic.

'Kashmiri weavers always stitch a fault into their rugs, so each one's unique. A perfect rug in Kashmir is a fake. And,' he added, 'that's not some cosmic insight off the internet.'

Even so, he was sitting cross-legged on the floor and I swear I could smell incense.

*

'It wouldn't be easy extracting this tooth,' the orthodontist says, after a cursory investigation of the inside of my mouth. 'If it's not bothering you, I'd leave it alone.'

Even as he's telling me this I know this isn't the answer, and I can't get out of there quickly enough.

As we're driving away, I see Leilani and her mum walking into The Lab. She looks like she'd rather be anywhere else, so distracted she doesn't notice me. I'm wondering what she's doing here, and in my head I'm scrolling through the services on the brass plaque in the lobby. Could she be getting her birthmark lasered off? Can they even do that? I can't imagine Leilani without her birthmark. It's part of what makes her, *her*.

We're driving home and my sister's singing along with Lana del Rey on the radio. The sky's closing in and it starts raining. Big fat drops that sizzle when they hit the road. I'm thinking that I'll miss my sister when she's gone. I'm wondering when the local radio station started playing decent music. I'm dreaming about Leilani and kissing in Kashmir. The cane fields are smouldering in caramel smoke.

*

I'm waiting for Leilani when she steps off the bus the next morning.

'Hey. You have a nose ring!' I say, stating the obvious.

'I've been pestering Mum and Dad forever,' she says, looking down and tracing an indistinct shape in the dirt with her foot. 'They agreed, but only if I got it done professionally. And even then it was a bribe.'

'A bribe? For what?'

She looks up and gives me her goofiest smile, and her shiny new braces sparkle in the sun. Leilani might be the one to save me, but our next kiss just got a whole lot more complicated.

WINDOWS

VICTORIA NORTON

Define window: *eagþyrl*, which literally means ‘eye-hole,’
and *eagduru* ‘eye-door’

Windows
In my life
N/Ever fearful
Daddy dear
Only you
Will never save me
From something
Evil

‘Jeopardise values within the family,’ I heard the priest say quietly in the special confessional voice priests use. Whose values I wondered, his or mine? The laundry window was open just enough and the secret conversation crept into my young ears. He stood in the open doorway and the light bounced from the collar around his neck. I could see the anger in his eyes.

iv

Do not try and shame me now because I speak ill of the
dead.

Guilt is not diminished by the death of the abuser.

Sensitive threads of memory tilt the feelings into
overdrive.

Do not try and blame me now for there is no window to
his soul.

v

FAMILIAL COMMITMENT

~~Support responsibilities watching over commitment love~~
= *What else is a family?*

~~Courage discipline positive outcome justice respect and
confidence~~ = *Family is this.*

~~Windows watch the act unseen~~ = *Safety is far away in the space
outside the window.*

~~Pain and fear with each contact~~ = *Running away is not an
option for a small and scared girl child.*

Near the window is a small bed: a kapok mattress and a pillow worn and thin, on a frame of creaking iron and steel mesh that rusts. The thin cover tries to hide the ugliness both of the bed and on the bed. An imprint of a tiny body. There is nothing else. A pile of books on the floor. A shelf with all her clothes exposed. She keeps them tidy in fear. There is nothing else. Time ceases and begins with a breath.

The long day bled

into sunset as the girl sat outside the window eating
oranges

with teeth set tightly into each fleshy piece until she
ceased.

The room has two windows. One opens inwards and one opens outwards. It is a small room, long and narrow, created from the corner of the back veranda. Naked fibro walls meet a tin ceiling. Outside the roof meets a grey sky. When it rains, the roof drips and a can collects the rusty water. The open window leads to freedom. It opens outwards, all the way, the pane taps the outside wall, hangs

loose. I can climb from my bed onto the ledge, and then up into the orange tree, swallowed, and covered, and hidden.

The closed window hides the darkness of the laundry room with its copper and its mangle and its concrete tubs. It is dark in there and sometimes he takes the bulb out of the ceiling fixture. Once he stamped on it and crushed it like a bug under his work boot. All bad things happen in this room. The window watches and sees all, but tells none.

ix

Mistykes = a young child's endeavours when looking

Mistalks = a preteen's words when seeing

Misy=takes = the number of times it went wrong when watching

x

EXHUME

Senses drifting (non-consensus, non-consensual). = Absence disorder stagnant.

Moral outrage blasphemy forgiven forgotten. = Forgone conclusion.

Don't cancel the current format. = Petition its perpetuity instead.

Sympathising seriousness dubiousness forgiveness. = Arrest.

Try uphold reasonableness for broken humanity. = Loss.

xi

The little girl hides her face in her arms. She lies face down, curled around herself under the blanket so there is no light. She hears his heavy boots coming. His heavy farm boots coming. And she knows it is going to happen again. She succumbs to the abuse. Her body rigid and unyielding yet powerless to resist. She floats upwards to the ceiling and she sees all. Every movement is recorded like a tape in her head, never to be forgotten. She looks to the window inside and knows her punishment isn't over yet. She'll be banished to the laundry until he forgets what he's done. Her father her protector. She'll never forget what he's done. She looks to the other window. Escapes in her mind to the tree, to the fruit, to the blossoms and the scent and the tang of the oranges.

xii

Vale, not. = Mourning, not.

Rejoice in the shadow disappearing from the window in the wall. = So easy not to act.

We spend our lives finding excuses not to. = If we concentrated on the action, the reaction, we'd all be better off.

Morals, evils what's the difference when praying doesn't work? = Poleaxed.

Imbroglia*Painful secretive silence**Injury ordeal suffering**Living embodiment of hell**Voice cracked and crying**Truth hits home, flawed memory**Delve into memories of decades past**Frontline expands vision, hypnotic rituals**Unnerving sensations wrestle forceful pressing**On guard, aware, hiding behind hands that try to see
through panes**Focussed eyes screwed tight, voice loaded with tension**Vindication validation rebellion**Maelstrom inadvertent disbelief**Incredible unbelievable**# Liar!*

A) A window is an opening in a wall, door, roof or vehicle that allows the passage of light and, if not closed or sealed, air and sound. [*And pain, they can let pain in or lock it out.*]

B) Translucent, frames, ventilation, inclement weather, latch, lock, mechanism.

WINDOWS

C) Single-hung emergency exit protect the inhabitants. [*Yes it was an escape hatch like in a spaceship.*]

D) Windows of ordinary homes; modern windows are filled with glass. [*Grimy glass.*]

E) An awning window is a casement window that is hung horizontally, hinged on top, so that it swings outward like an awning. [*It wasn't one of those, it swung sideways.*]

F) Window sill is the bottom piece in a window frame.

G) Window sills slant outward to drain water away from the inside of the building. [*Wide enough to stand on when I knelt down to climb out.*]

H) Casement window is a window with a hinged sash that swings in or out like a door comprising a side-hung frame. [*It was one of these, except it didn't open right out in the laundry, just enough for words to creep in.*]

I) Good window seals and meticulous frame construction to prevent entry of air and loss of efficiency.

J) Windows allow natural light to enter, but too much can have negative effects such as glare sun angles. [*There're lots of negative effects not listed here.*]

Eyes are the window to the soul. Window of the soul. Soul of the window. Eyes of the soul. Eyes of the window. Eyes are the windows in your soul. Windows are the eyes of the seeing soul.

TRUST

CATHERINE PERVERSI

‘Stay there! I’ll be back.’

Evie sits in the back seat of the green Humber parked outside a modest blonde-brick house on a long, busy stretch of road. She admires her dad, dressed in a dark blue pin-striped suit, as he walks through the gate to the front door and knocks. A woman with long black hair, straight blue skirt and white cardigan opens the door and smiles. Her dad leans in, nestling his face in the hair at her neck. Just

as quickly he pulls back, hands her flowers, rests his hand on her thigh, and moves aside.

She's pretty; I wonder who she is, Evie thinks as her dad retreats indoors. Before closing the door, the woman glances right, then left.

Her dad's a puzzle. One moment skinning rabbits in the kitchen, chopping onions, his voluminous operatic lungs belting out *Nessun Dorma, Nessun Dorma*, the next, leading her outside, belting her with the leather strap.

Last night, as Evie tentatively turned the corner into the passageway, hearing her dad's raised voice, she saw him put his foot out and trip her mum who fell, hitting her head on the wall clock. Evie saw her mother, hand to her head, stumble into the bedroom at the end of the corridor.

Evie absentmindedly picks at the green leather car seat and yawns. She's going to be late for school, again. The thought of Sister Agnes sends a shiver down her spine. It's been a couple of weeks since she'd used the ruler on Evie's knuckles, but she can still feel it. Climbing onto her knees, she looks out the car window at the seagulls riding the grey sky. Like handfuls of piano keys cast high, a kaleidoscope of whirling and tumbling, they screech and glide, colonising the sky with their sharp, raucous cry.

Wiping her nose on her sleeve, she runs her hand over the grey pleats of her school tunic. Finding a lump in the weave, she pulls. The fabric goes all wrinkly, and she smooths her hand across it. A pale lady with a turned-down mouth and curlers just visible underneath her scarf, pushing

a pram on big skinny wheels, hurries past. She wants to get out of the car and follow her, tell her she's late for school.

Taking the cotton wool out of her ear Evie examines its damp yellowishness. She turns it around in her fingers, puts it back in her ear. Yesterday, on her seventh birthday, her mum had taken her to the doctor to have her sinuses cleaned out. She'd shivered uncontrollably in the frigid room. The doctor was tall and skinny and had bad breath and cold hands.

'Shoosh,' her mother had said with a frown, looking back at Evie from the window when she'd cried out in pain.

Looking out the window into the distance, Evie can see steam belching in prodigious plumes from the grey towering Meccano set on the bay. Her dad says it's where they make petrol. On their long return to Geelong from Melbourne each weekend, six kids in the back, her mum silent in the front, the colossal steel and concrete jungle was a sign they were nearly home. She swears she can smell the briny, crisp vitality of the sea.

Her feet are chilly in her black orthopaedic shoes. She hates them. Nobody else at school wears shoes like hers, and she feels stupid.

That's what her dad says. She's stupid. She never knows the answers to the questions he fires at her and her sisters at the dinner table on Sundays, so she guesses she must be.

'Open your damned *mouth*, you *stupid* girl!' he would roar, glaring at her.

Wind blows leaves along the gutter as a sudden gust takes hold. Weak, wheatish light shifts to cement as a squall

picks up, and the clouds compete for the sun, eager to be first to subvert its pleasure.

She pulls at her eyelashes, scrutinizing her find. Sometimes she's surprised when a whole clump comes out, and she counts them, one by one.

Something's wrong; she feels uneasy, sick. I'll count to twenty, Evie thinks. If he's not back, I'll walk to school.

Finally, she reaches for her satchel, opens the car door and steps out onto the pavement

*

Forty years later, Evie finds maintaining relationships as straightforward as navigating new cities in a peak hour rush. Men are maddening. They either talk too much or too little. Where do they hide their curiosity? Do they simply have none? Moreover, what about that guy last month who'd danced from the neck up! How can you not move your feet when there's music in your ears? She wishes she could defrag her veins of the clotted, dark river of beliefs she carries about men, open herself to a new paradigm. The folly of perpetuating the belief that all men are bastards is absurd. Like the unwelcome voice that still suggests she's stupid. Not believing was one thing, thinking another. If only she could silence the internal narrative; perhaps then she'd have a chance. She's difficult to please, capricious, and easy to anger. She'd love a dollar for every time someone's said so!

Evie unscrews the cap of her pale ale and takes a swig. Picking up her phone she sees a new message has landed in

her Messenger account. It's Mr Maybe. They've spent weeks emailing, the pitch rising to an intimacy that's surprised them both. Why she continues to trawl online dating profiles after so many failures is beyond her, but she has to admit it's a kind of panacea for not having a relationship at all. Her latest is driving 800 km to meet her, due tomorrow. She's asked that they meet during the day. He's agreed. She hasn't explained it to him, but the swampland of the night is unsupportive to making decisions in the heat of the moment about whether to sleep with someone or not. Daytime provides a safety net; time to contemplate your options. They'd shared their vulnerabilities; her history of abuse, his bankruptcy proceedings.

Habitually, she picks at her mascaraed lashes, pulling a clump of black from its roots. A perverse pleasure exists in examining the harvest. For a moment, a relentless kind of reward lingers.

Evie's phone beeps with a message.

'Sun in my eyes, you on my mind! xx,' Mr Maybe texts.

'Onion tears in mine, beer on my mind!' she texts back.

Evie grabs her pouch of tobacco and heads outside. She feels foggy and unfocussed after last night's over-indulgence, pissed off that she still answers her demons by turning up at the obsession sessions at the glasshouse. They were just excuses to get stoned and pissed with her so-called friends; to gossip disparagingly while masquerading as *let's have a great time playing some tunes* evenings. Fucking pity parties, that's what they were.

In the feverish tangle of wires in the back room of her head, Evie can't work out the seesaw of opposites she feels. Is she eager or on edge about meeting Mr Maybe tomorrow? Or both? The weight of her constant bedfellows, the anxieties and disappointments that plague her waking life, are like walking through life with a fridge strapped to her leg.

Careful to apportion the tobacco, so it lasts until payday, Evie rolls another smoke, tucks it into her wallet, and drives to the beach. The full moon rising across the Pacific is a ritual she's observed for years. Down at the ocean, all her worries are reduced to bad company.

Sitting on her preferred rock at the end of the breakwall she pulls her jacket close. There's a storm coming. The cloying humidity of the day, its greenish-greyness building for most of the afternoon, has turned. As has her mood.

Feeling the vibration of her phone in her back pocket, she pulls it out and squints at the screen. The night's frailty has landed.

'Hi, Evie! Guess where I am?' Mr Maybe teases, cheerfully.

What! she thinks, crooked with doubt. Don't tell me he's here already. A microsecond is all it takes, this shift from thinking all is well, to its parallel other. Her gut is thick with anxiety, her mind racing.

'Hi ... ah ... Mexico?' she responds.

'An ugly motel near the main drag wow, the lorikeets are raucous ... making a racket nesting in the palms. This place is impressive.'

‘You’re here?’ she asks.

‘I’ve booked a table at the pub in town ... the one on the corner in the middle of town ... at 8 pm.’

‘Ah ...’ she stumbles, pissed off he’s disregarded her request to meet during the day, rather than night.

‘OK ... see you then.’

*

It takes time and effort to find him in the dining room at the pub. Feeling self-conscious, and on the verge of leaving, she spots a likeness. If it’s him, his online photo must be ten years old, she thinks, his hair greyer than the blonde depicted in his profile. Placing her hand gently on his shoulder, he looks up and jumps to his feet. Standing too close, he avoids looking her in the eye, taking hold of her arm with a pressure that feels forced, and pulls her body to his. His lips are wet and stiff. Freezing, Evie is repulsed.

As the evening progresses, and his whisky consumption intensifies, the atmosphere feels choked with performance and anxiety. He doesn’t draw breath. One anecdote follows another in quick succession. Becoming bored and frustrated, she gives up on the notion of connection.

Nervously standing on the pavement outside at the end of the night, he reaches out and places his hand on her thigh. Evie recoils, stepping back.

‘I’ll see you in the morning,’ she stutters. There’ll be no seeing you in the morning, she thinks.

‘Oh ... what?’ he says, spraying her with libation, ‘... come back to the motel ... come on!’

A LETTER FOR DEAF DEAD FRANCISCO GOYA

INGRID ANNABEL MASON

You have been exhumed and reburied below your radiant androgynous angels in San Antonio De La Florida in Madrid, minus your head. Stone deaf for half your life, it seems ironic that your bones lie in a chapel honouring Saint Anthony, so gifted in speaking that his tongue, jaw and

vocal chords are displayed for veneration in a reliquary. I hear you laughing at the absurdity of it all.

Separated by centuries, culture, languages and oceans, your symbols make an immediate connection here and now. How extraordinary that is. You lead me, the willingly blind, to see. I am one of your little dogs full of pathos peeping over the edge of the world. You rub my nose in blood. It smells of oil paint and lead. In the long shadow of your genius, I sit faithfully, following every brush stroke. Look, look. Look at suffering, say the strokes. You force a moral choice. What is important? What matters? What are you going to do about it? All of this is transmitted with colour, line, form, shape, value, texture and space.

Radical, the last master and the first modernist. A risky life, a bull fight interweaving illusion and delusion. In *The Third of May 1808*, Napoleon's Egyptian mercenaries, faces hidden, lean into the recoil of their muskets. I anticipate blood soaking the lamp lit white. Innocence flings up his arms into crucifixion position, right palm bearing stigmata. Red paint is spattered and smeared roughly on the dead at his feet. The victims are completely vulnerable, trapped by a hill behind; others wait their turn to die.

In May 2017 the same scene will be replayed in Africa and the Middle East, by lunatics just like Napoleon. Dear Francisco, nothing has changed.

LAYERS

MANDY BARTLETT

LAYERS

'You have layers,' he declares,
peeling me open.

'Like petals on a flower
I want to devour.'

I feel vulnerable;
Too vulnerable.
Afraid in my own skin.
I've given over all control
To a man with no soul.

'You surprise me,' he says,
A look of disdain
on his face.
'I don't like surprises.'

He lays me on the floor,
Closes the door.
'Time to explore
all these layers.'

No more surprises.
All my petals have fallen.

DUST STORM

JO-ANN KELLY

Some see no beauty in our trees without shade,
our flowers without perfume ... the dweller in the
wilderness acknowledges the subtle charm of this
fantastic land of monstrosities. He becomes familiar
with the beauty of loneliness.

—Marcus Clarke, 1876

DUST STORM

I will forgive you if you drive through Bedourie and forget it as it disappears in your rear-view mirror. Many people drive through it and see only dry, red, rolling sand dunes and the tumbled mess of Mitchell grass splotching the canvas. But if you look closely you will see beauty. Watch the peregrine falcons soar and dive and kill. See the occasional western taipan sashay across the sand, nothing impeding its long, grey, sliding body. You will also hear beauty if you strain your ears. Rumbling wind sweeping the coolabah trees, their leaves – long grey spears – doing their best to protect the township. Bedourie or ‘Dust Storm’ is a town on the edge.

I’ve been living here for all my life, though now exiled to the outskirts. This distance does not stop me, however, from knowing about everything and everyone. We all knew about Vera Maloney before she stepped foot in this community. Good ol’ bush telegraph. It must have been eleven years ago now. The town’s population of two hundred gathered outside the front of the pub that day, to see her get out of the car. Her white silk shirt, white jeans and brown leather high heels teased the unforgiving landscape. She was too beautiful to be confined by the Simpson Desert and the summer floods that left inhabitants stranded for weeks. Even now at fifty-seven years old, with her smooth translucent complexion, curvy figure, red hair reaching her ribs, she continues to remain an enigma to the scorched and lined faces of the cattle folk.

Vera has been the owner of Bill’s Bedourie Hotel for the past ten years. She never took a day off, except for a

couple of hours to attend his funeral. That was a stinking hot day – fifty degrees. My prickly legs stuck to my seat during the service. That day, I had to wear the thickest armour to shield me from two hundred daggers of disgust. I was a public disgrace. Again. I kept my eyes focussed on the casket. I shed no tears.

I officially met Vera a month after she arrived. We grew close over six months. Vera struggled with the seclusion. Not a word was ever said, but she was not invited to Ginny's hen's night, or Edwina's baby shower or on the girls' trips to Brisbane. No female in town would have a bar of her. Except for me. Her crime was to love Bill. He fell in love with the woman from Brisbane. She had no right to follow him to Bedourie. I knew the feeling. I escaped their venom thirteen years ago, by moving to Cuttaburra Crossing, alone. I had slept with Daisy MacLuen's husband.

She told me she had never spoken to Bill about her loneliness. Or of me. I never encouraged her to try. I figured it was her business and left it at that. Most days, Vera wrapped herself in one of Bill's long-sleeved shirts, its cuffs hanging over her long, painted red nails. Then she would sit atop the stony wall outside the pub to pull on her boots, push down Bill's favourite Akubra over her forehead, and turn the key of their thirty-year-old Land Cruiser and head out to Cuttaburra Crossing. She sat with me for hours, talking. I braided her hair, to stop it from sticking to her face and neck. Bill loved her hair. She told me she had been dyeing it for the last ten years. She never told him.

I said, 'You know those women in town, they're full of hate. I don't think you'll ever fit in.'

She swatted the flies that were sticking to her face and murmured how lucky she was to have me as her friend.

'I want to leave,' she said. 'But Bill loves this town. It's part of him. I could never take him away from this.' She stretched out her arms to the landscape surrounding us.

I looked down, cupped a handful of red dust and slowly poured it over my feet. I wondered why they did not really talk. Perhaps Vera had been silenced by life, like me. I watched as she tipped water from her flask into the lid and splashed it over her face. The flies would not give up.

'I'm tired of not sleeping cause the fan keeps squeaking during the night. Bill says to turn it off, but then I would not sleep cause it's so hot,' she said.

I kept silent. I never felt the heat.

Vera asked, 'How do you do it? The isolation, the loneliness?'

'Look at me,' I shrugged. 'My skin has surrendered to the sun, my hair is matted like bush grass, my lips cracked and lined. I was taken long ago by this country. It is what it is.'

'Bollocks!' she'd snapped. 'Charlotte, there's not a man within a hundred kilometres who would not run to you if you just removed that scowl from your face.'

I remember staring at her crimson face, uneasy. We had been friends for a while, but did I really know her? Or did she know me more than I wanted her to?

‘Sometimes you look fierce enough to skin someone,’ she had continued.

I thought to myself sometimes I felt fierce enough to skin someone.

A diamond dove fluttered its way through our words and perched on Vera’s Akubra, pecking at its leather tassels. Its arrival had shattered the stillness of the desert air. I had my survival to attend to and I did not need to dwell on petty township gossip. I had worked hard for years to buy land out here to make a living. Over a hundred hectares, including a portion of Eyre Creek, Cuttaburra Crossing, where during even the most arid season there was always water. Cattlemen paid me hefty fees for this water in the dry season, pausing with their beef cattle on their way north to the markets. I got to my feet, said goodbye to Vera and walked away – I could hear a road train coming.

It has worked out alright for me – being exiled.

*

I hadn’t seen Bill in over a year, not even in the six months I had known Vera. He travelled to Mount Isa or Brisbane monthly, to meet with brewers and wine makers. He stocked only the top brands from Margaret River, Hunter Valley and Clare Valley wineries. Vera hated when Bill went on those trips. She sprayed his Paco Rabanne on her sheets to help her sleep. I couldn’t stop laughing when she told me.

I heard his voice before I saw him, when his land cruiser broke down at Cuttabarra Crossing.

‘Bloody car!’ He kicked the Land Cruiser’s front passenger door shut.

He had a new car, a sleek red mustang, but he never took it out of Bedourie. He said the gravel roads would tarnish it. Cars were made for driving and it seemed like a waste to me. For years it had always been Bill and his beaten rust-brown Land Cruiser. He even had a picture of it behind his bar – in its earlier days.

‘You might need a place to sleep tonight,’ I yelled as I walked down a dune. I had taken his hand in mine. The white-plumbed honeyeaters’ song flights disturbed the silence between us. ‘Chirrapo-we-weet!’

Bill stayed with me that night. It was as it has been for the past twenty years. We wrapped our bodies tightly together. He told me how much he loved Vera, and her vixen, red hair as he kissed my neck, my arms, my stomach. He was lying, I told myself. He would always come back to me and I would never turn him away. Perhaps it was his hardworking qualities or loyalty. Dependable, that must have been it.

I awoke alone to the searing heat of midday. Dark grey waves of clouds were rolling in over the horizon. The wind plastered red sand onto my exposed arms, legs and face. I took a deep breath and smelt the sweetness of rain before it erupted from the sky.

I sheltered in my hut for days, then weeks, I can’t remember – it was such a blur.

Vera did not visit me that morning, or any morning after that. I did not see Bill again either. He died that day, his car crashed into a tree.

Speed they said.

THE HANDKERCHIEF AND A MILL WORKER'S COTTAGE

RAINEY GOULET

I am suddenly curious about the cottage within view of my front verandah. After seventeen months of living on the Eastern Dorrigo Plateau, I have only just become aware of something strange. The cottage is derelict, and yet the grass around it is always neat and trim, as if it sits proud in a Canberra suburb. I have never seen a car parked in

its driveway or anyone mowing. I am told the cottage has been empty for years. I want a closer look.

The cottage, tired, leans on crumbling pillars. Its weatherboards age and crack in the sun. A grey front door hangs askew on weak hinges. The filthy windows reveal nothing. The simple shack's rusted roof is pitted from a century of Australian weather. Smoke-blackened bricks scattered along the verandah roof show the remnants of a chimney. Ragged rugs hang, forlorn, over the railings until a hot gust of wind whips them into life.

A massive old pine tree stands sentinel beside the cottage, scarred by sulphur-crested cockatoos. An old man, bow-legged and weathered like the hut, shuffles out from behind the tree. Seeing me staring, he walks toward me with an awkward gait and a warm smile. A sodden cigarette stub is perched on his lower lip.

'Hello, my name is Rainey. I live over on Pine Avenue and I can see this empty cottage from my verandah. I was curious about its well-kept lawn.'

The old man smiles again. He pinches the stub from his mouth and shoots a jet of spittle into the dust. He carefully unwraps the sodden paper and dumps the charred tobacco remains into his pipe. A stained thumb tamps it down. Striking a match, he inhales deeply. A stream of smoke exudes through the cracked corners of his lips.

'She were built by a lad, story goes. He were just fourteen when 'e arrived. They give him a life sentence for stealing an handkerchief for his ma. Them pommies was bastards.'

Suddenly I am entranced. I know of the convicts sent to Australia, but I am appalled at a life sentence, especially for someone so young.

‘Jus’ don’t seem right. He were put to work in the mill. Bullocks hauled the logs in them days, weren’t no tractas. The young’un had to tie one of the bullocks to the railing, but he ain’t got no learnin’ with them animals and the bloody bullock rammed the lad, crushin’ his leg into the fence post. That were when she first took him in.’

My gaze follows his crooked, oil-stained finger as it points to the house next door to the empty cottage and I am struck by its life and aura, in such vivid contrast to its neighbour. Bright green and white shutters give welcome shade. By the verandah, a noisy cloud of bees feast on orange grevillea nectar. Finches and wrens flit through shadows after hiding insects. I can usually only catch glimpses of the driveway when the trees sway in the wind.

‘She were an ol’ widow what lived there. Ain’t never had young’uns herself. She set to coddlin’ that kid like he were her own. But he ain’t never recovered proper. He limped real bad. Not many knew his name and he weren’t one to talk much, so people just called him Limpy.’

He takes a metal flask from his back pocket and swigs long and hard; rivulets trickle down his chin. He offers me the flask but I smile and shake my head. He shrugs and wipes his lips with a grubby sleeve and points toward the abandoned mill on the other side of this pot-holed, dusty road. The mill is sullen and desolate. I can see its roof through the trees from my verandah, but now I see it

sags with termite-worn rafters that seem to bow toward the ground. The upright poles look shaky. A great cone of aged, hardened sawdust rises tall and I sense the aimless ghosts of old mill workers.

'It were slave labour. Slave bloody labour orright. Them young'uns was worked from dawn to dusk, 'til the grime of toil turned a soul to charcoal. Made 'em hard it did. Hard and mean. They was filled with hate, and not one bugger could blame 'em.' The old man spits in the dirt at his feet.

'But Limpy were different. He never did turn hard like the others. Dunno why, he had every good reason. Ya see, the overseer were an evil bastard. But he ain't got no clout with the old sawyers, so he took it out on the young'uns. He'd think nothin' to kickin' a steel capped boot, good and hard in a bony backside if he thought they was slacking off. And if they wasn't slacking, he'd kick 'em anyways, every chance he got. He were pissed when Limpy got done by the bullock. He took to blight that poor young'un from sun up to sundown. Weren't enough Limpy were already maimed. That rotten bastard had it in for him and for no good reason that anyone knew, nor could figure, least of all the poor kid. He stomped his steel caps into Limpy's bad leg more'n once and the last time landed Limpy in a wheelchair. He were only fourteen for Chrissakes.'

The old man's voice falters. He swipes at a tear gliding down a deep wrinkle in his cheek and, sniffing, he looks away from me and the mucus drops on his shirt. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a long thin nail and his pipe. He unscrews the mouthpiece from the base and tucks it

back into his pocket. He gently scrapes the nail around the pipe's bowl, up and down and around and around in rhythm until the sticky contents loosen and his hands gradually lose their tremor. He taps small tufts from the bowl onto the fence post. He retrieves the mouthpiece and twists it back on. A final tap produces a smile.

He gazes back at the mill worker's cottage as a breeze ruffles the hanging rugs. Tucking his pipe in his pocket, he grins and I yearn to take this old man home with me. I imagine endless nights with timeless stories. I remember my grandpa.

'Dulcie, the ol' lady, were tough as an ol' bullock and she took herself off to the big boss after Limpy's last stomping. She demanded he pay for Limpy's wheelchair and sack the overseer. But it didn't make no difference. They says like attracts like and I reckon it's true 'cause the old boss were an evil bastard too. All he cared about was gettin' the quotas filled and if people was hurt, well he didn't care. He'd turn a blind eye as long as his filthy wallet were fat.'

The old man gently scuffs at a solitary tuft of grass, growing at the base of the fence post. The loosened dirt turns into a small cloud and drifts off in the breeze. A white cockatoo screeches across the skyline and lands in the battered pine beside the cottage. It watches us, ambivalent. The old man wipes the sweat from his forehead.

'Well, the ol' lady nursed that kid back to health. He'd sit in his wheelchair on her front porch spyin' an' grinnin' at the overseer every chance he got. There weren't no question of him goin' back to work, she wouldn't hear of it.'

She had this 'ere land beside her house. Ol' Dulcie reckoned the devil fancied the idle, so she got Limpy to buildin' his own house and afore long there it were, standin' all proud and spit polished like.'

We both gaze back at the empty cottage, with spit and polish long gone. It retains an aura of a proud beginning.

'Limpy mastered his buggered leg and didn' let nothin' stop him. He never chucked his wheelchair out. He kept it on that there verandah and sat in it, watching the mill, whenever ol' Dulcie weren't around to nag at him. He were only sixteen by this time but he were fast becomin' a grown man.'

The old man chuckled and took another swig of his flask.

'There were one time ol' Dulcie got real mad at Limpy. She were seen chasin' him all 'round the new house with a broom, screamin' and a hollerin' at the poor kid. She'd caught him puffin' on an old pipe that were her dead husband's. He cussed at her for hittin' him and she went berserk. Ain't no one got away with cussin' and she reckoned it were the pipe what killed her old man. She threatened to skin Limpy alive if she ever caught him smokin' or cussin' again. Silly old cow, makes me laugh when I think on it. He never did smoke again. He reckoned she put the fear o' God in him. More'n likely it were the broom what put the fear in him. She sure could wield that bloody thing.'

As the old man guffaws, a spray of spittle escapes his lips. He fumbles in his pocket and draws out an old stained handkerchief. It is neatly folded into a square. He carefully

unfolds it, wipes his lips and blows his nose. Gently, he folds it back into a square. With a throaty cough, he puts it back in his pocket and chuckles again.

‘She were a funny ol’ stick, but she were a good ol’ soul and sure ’nough, she had a soft spot for Limpy. They had a shindig at the local hall on Sat’dy nights. An old joke ’round town says the womenfolk ran the town water dry on them days with all the washin’ and preenin’, so the men had to wash in the creek. Most blokes reckon it were a waste of time havin’ a wash ’cause they was only gonna get sweaty again anyways. Funny thing, it were just a laugh ’cause the town never had no water supply. Everyone had tanks in them days and still do.’

‘Yeah, we could do with another one though,’ I smiled. ‘I love the rain water; no chlorine and no fluoride.’

‘Yep, I hates the smell of that chlorine stuff. Ain’t nothin’ better than a nice dram o’ whiskey with a dash o’ pure rain water.’

The old man makes me laugh. A solid drenching of rain is bliss, making the trees and shrubs shimmer with delight. Our back verandah becomes a haven for small wrens playing tag between steady drops falling through a sieve of twisted wisteria vines. And rain brings a long, deep soak in the tub instead of my usual quick shower.

It appears nothing has changed here since Limpy’s time and it’s why I love this tucked-away village in the hinterland. It boasts a primary school, one small store and a veteran’s club for the two hundred or so people who live here. Two abandoned timber mills and a rundown old

movie theatre, its rusted roller door and windows long boarded up, whisper their history to anyone who'll stop and listen.

'Well, the whole town'd be a swingin' on a Sat'dy night. When he turned seventeen, ol' Dulcie spruced poor Limpy with a bundle of spit, clean shirt and tie and made him go. She reckoned the kid oughta meet some lassies. I reckon he wouldna minded, but for the shirt and tie. Of course, ain't no bloke what likes a spit wash from his ma neither.'

'Did Limpy meet anyone special?'

A glint sparked his rheumy eyes and he winked. With a broad grin, he gazed back at the empty cottage.

'Oh aye, that he did. Her name were Mavis. She were a grand lass. Prettier than a picture as the sayin' goes, an' she were real smart too. They went every Sat'dy after that and a couple of years later they got hitched and had four young'uns of their own. After a while, the ol' lady died and left everything to Mavis and Limpy. Years later they sold ol' Dulcie's house and moved on. They never sold this 'ere old cottage though and it ain't never got touched since. Still sits like the day she were left. Yep, she were built good and solid by that kid. I think of me dad and all his stories and this 'ere old house and I'm proud of the pommie bugger. And me ma, well she made it a real good home and I ain't never wanted to be anywhere else while they was in it.'

'Oh! Mavis and Limpy were your mum and dad. What a wonderful story. I often gaze at their cottage from my verandah, but now it looks different.'

The old man looks at me strangely.

‘It just doesn’t seem so lifeless anymore.’

He smiles, ‘I live away over in another village now, but I like to come back regular and keep the grass from taking her over. She’s full of lovin’ memories, this ’ere old house. Yep, built by Limpy Smith, the old limpin’ pommie. Me dad.’

The old man reaches into his pocket and pulls out his pipe. He gently wipes it with the sleeve of his shirt.

‘This ’ere were the pipe what nearly got me dad skinned. Ain’t life funny. You never ’eard the likes of the tales ’e tole of his old ma,’ he chuckled, ‘But ’is favourite one always began with, “Ya’d never guess where an ole’ handkerchief could lead ya.”’

**TO MY *WRITING*
FROM THE EDGE
TEACHER, DR MOYA
COSTELLO, WHO
ASKED FOR A POEM 2
WEEKS BEFORE THE
END OF SEMESTER.**

SHELLEY-ANNE SMITH

TO MY WRITING FROM THE EDGE TEACHER

Feeling inundation. Fantasy healing.

All this work to do

All these letters to be jumlebd to discernible,
knowledgeable account.

And yet, now?

Semester long I have rued the lack of ritual on black magic
buttons, summoning story.

I have tamed my words
to the drudgery,
the learning of theory,
satisfying you.

I have glued the valuable mementos of another to my grey
cortex.

It's okay – the book is written – it sits

Dis

Rega

Rded by Discontented Me.

Waiting for more letters behind my name that say, 'it's okay',
I have learnt the drudgeries (word: symptom of my fettered
fingers): I have smelt the flowers of wild theory and run my
hands through the sticky seed-heads of artful idea

I have trudged amidst this riotous rite of passage.

And this rite

takes me down
another rambling
tributary,

tinkling tidbits
invaluable additions
to my river
of concious
ness.

And yet still, now?

Two weeks till I can:

- Vacuum
- Clean windows
- Mop
- Dust
- Take dog for walk
- Wash clothes
- WASH UP!
- Look up

and drum ... daDa di daDa ... oh to drum
to practice point three of the filter gates
to unpetrify
to move more than my fingers.
Move the world.
Shift.

And so I write to you,

yes, now.

Of the freedom of fingers dancing on the precipice:
The end of the Edge is nigh.

**TOO DEEP TOO SOFT
TOO ALIVE**
LINDA BROOKS

Too Deep

I am drowning, fighting, screaming for the surface. Kicking the dark aside. Fleeing the sucking depths that drag at my feet. My lungs cramp; pain and pressure sears. I swallow, and keep swallowing.

The world is indigo, fathomless and foreign, and I am its prey. Something's caught in my throat, filling my gullet, expanding, tearing. It pushes at my tongue, probing. I gag. My stomach fills, rejects, and explodes. I hurl fiery liquid that burns like a naked flame.

My arm is gripped, squeezed. I want to open my eyes, but I don't want the water to burn them too. A woman's voice moans. Is someone else drowning too? Is it me? Clanging metal scrapes my eardrums.

I hear a slap and the back of my hand smarts. Then, the pinch of a needle sting. Then calm. I've heard about that, the peace, the euphoria. I sigh. Open one eye. A gloved hand draws blood into a syringe.

I'm dreaming. Water sloshes rhythmically near my ear. The vein in my arm chills. I hear seagulls, or voices. I no longer know my senses. I'm rocked by the murmur of ocean waves. Without warning my body thrashes. Every muscle jerks, wrenches. I can't control anything. My head connects with a metal bar.

The seagulls are screeching now. I'm thrown on my side. I taste the rusty tang of fear, and know it is my own before the darkness reaches out and sucks me under.

Too soft

I am neither awake, nor asleep. I hear soft footsteps on velvet, the whisper of early morning secrets. Even the *whoosh-slump-burr* sound near me is softer than a newborn's lips.

I'm held tight. I strain. Am I in a shroud? Is it too late? Too late to live. I want to scream and rave, claw at the sky. I don't want to be dead, be gone. Not before I've even tried. Because I haven't. Tried.

Through thin slits of stinging, reluctant eyes, I see dim light. Rows of lights, soft orbs, neatly aligned. They blur and pulse. Like a battered fish being jerked from the sea, I rise through a thousand swift levels of consciousness until my body's throbbing ache rouses me completely. My cramped hands search around me. Thin tubing is wrapped around my arm, but when I grab it, pain stabs my hand. I force my eyes open. It's an intravenous drip.

My face is wet. I've dribbled on a stiff, white pillow. There are metal bars, bedrails. I peer through them. They frame a pair of white shoes. I smell the sharp, sweet tang of Lynx, like my father used to wear. The memory bruises, jars my breathing into gasps and sobs.

I turn away. There's a raw burning in my throat as I try to form words. The agony in my muscles grips. I hug myself and groan.

'That's the seizures, hell on ya muscles.' A mellow voice, soft and low. 'Your first time?' it asks.

I gargle a raw sound. Wha...?

'Your first overdose?'

Too alive

I am at the edge of myself. I am all edge and only edge. My only existence is epidermal. I am hollow, gouged out

of myself. I am skin, and only skin. Every nerve, thought and perception is at the edge of me. I am the edge.

There's a needle in my vein. Nothing new there. I am expert at vein-finding, venepuncture. But this needle is attached to a floppy fish-like bag with the impressive title of Normal Saline, along with other obscure elements of the periodic table, listed in minute print. Too small for my punctured eyes to read.

I am too alive. Much too undead. So far from my mediocre neutrality I cringe. A thousand ants crawl on my skin, not biting, and not entirely unpleasant, but so deeply unfamiliar that I'm afraid. I'm afraid of this skin-feeling, this aliveness. It's not what I expected. I expected spasming agony and disconnect. Screaming rebellion at my loss, the defection and abandonment of my desire, my mistress: Heroin.

Not this, this hyper-awareness of being. It's not what I thought; this purging, this detoxification in this too-bright white place. On my too-small hospital bed that threatens to shudder and throw me off, turn me out.

The breeze burns. I know it's only gentle – the others turn smiling faces towards it. Those normal ones, the ones who've never attempted the monstrous escape from themselves that I have perfected.

It's strange to think that this process of peeling away the numbness of self, the reluctant quest to rediscover an internal me should require such a carving out, hollowing – remaking from the edges.

He said I died, there, alone, the paramedic who bruised my sternum, cracked a rib bringing me back. A man kinder than any other. But, now, I am too alive.

ONE, TWO, MANY

LARA GRANGE

A living room, early evening. SAM and AMY sit on a couch facing the audience. OLIVIA sits on an armchair, slightly left and downstage of the couch. There is a coffee table, two empty wine bottles, a third, almost full bottle, and three glasses atop it, along with some lit candles and magazines. The women, aged in their late twenties, are dressed in 'comfy' clothes, surrounded by blankets and cushions. The

atmosphere is cosy and warm. The scene opens with the women mid-hysterical laughter.

OLIVIA: I kid you not. He stuck the entire tip of his tongue inside my ear. No nibbling, no delicate suck of the earlobe, he just thrust it in full throttle. It literally blocked my ear. Like a bloody earplug. [OLIVIA *gestures her finger plugging her ear*].

AMY: [*Through gasping laughter*] EWWWWW!

SAM: [*Half squealing*] What did you dooo?

OLIVIA: Well I cringed away, obviously! But he was lying on top of me like a deadweight, so I couldn't move far. Then, right ... then he kissed me and all I could taste was earwax. It was so unbelievably disgusting. And this was all while we were doing the deed. [AMY *and SAM are laughing so hard they are barely making any sound*] Like, I clean my ears, but he just went too deep! Then, to make matters worse, as the guy finishes doing his thing, the condom breaks and it goes everywhere [OLIVIA *gestures exaggeratedly*]. I don't know how he got such trajectory. The poor guy was so embarrassed he kind of clambered off me and just stood in front of me pleadingly. I think he thought the polite thing to do was stay, so I kind of just rolled over and accepted my fate as he climbed back in bed next to me. Next morning, he gets up to leave and

says, ‘So, do you want my number?’ I was just like, ‘Umm ... okay, sure ...’ He’s a friend of Eddie’s, so I didn’t want to be rude.

AMY: Ohhh, I think ‘rude’ went out the window when he stuck his entire tongue in your earhole and jizzed all over your sheets!

OLIVIA: Eww, did you have to say jizzed?

SAM: Aww, I feel bad for the poor guy! It sounds like he was mortified!

OLIVIA: That’s another reason I didn’t want to be rude! I’m sure he meant well.

They dissolve into laughter again.

SAM: Oh my god, Amy ... I just remembered that guy from a few years ago ... what was his name? The one who, every time he, you know [SAM *gestures wildly*], was like, ‘Here it comes ... It’s coming ... Are you ready for it?’

AMY: Oh, Brendan! I’d forgotten about that! He’d let out the most ridiculous groan and then insist on just lying there inside me for ages afterwards. He was a sensitive creature. [A *beat*] Aww, I miss casual sex!

SAM: Oh yeah, because the picture we're painting right now is making it sound super appealing!

OLIVIA: Yeah, being in a loving relationship must be awful!

AMY: Oh, you know what I mean! It's the excitement of it all – the flirting, the spontaneity, the surprise package!

SAM: Literally!

More laughter.

AMY: Don't you reckon everything kind of turns to slow mo when you're about to delve into a guy's pants for the first time? [*She begins enacting the slow motion, eyes focussed, reaching as she speaks*] It's as though, when you start reaching for it, everything slows down, inspirational music starts and you get this total 'ahh' moment at the big reveal! [*She sings 'ahh' as though enlightened, gesturing heavenward as she says it*] You just never know what you're going to get!

SAM: Lady, sometimes there's no 'big' reveal – I mean, c'mon. Liv, what about that guy – you know – the one who was only the size of your thumb?

OLIVIA: That was a different kind of ‘ahh’ moment! I felt so bad for that guy – not out of pity, but because of what he’s probably had to deal with his whole life. I honestly didn’t know if there was anything I could do with it. [*With a smug smile*] I tried my best though ...

SAM: How kind of you!

The girls erupt into laughter again.

AMY: Sammy, you have an awfully good memory of our exploits.

SAM: [*Laughing*] Yeah, they keep me warm at night!

AMY: Oh, honey. [*She gives SAM’S hand a sympathetic squeeze*] Have you heard from Liam at all?

SAM: A few times. He’s living with the woman now.

OLIVIA: Really? That man has no shame. [*A pause*] Umm ... when did we stop calling her Demonic Bitch Monster?

SAM: I guess when I realised it’s not really her fault. He was the one who betrayed me, not her. I’m tired of women always getting the blame. Somehow the guy always gets off more easily.

AMY: Oh my god – ‘the guy always gets off more easily’! [*A beat. They all burst into laughter again*] Sorry honey, I couldn’t resist! But I do know what you mean. It always seems to be the woman labelled the homewrecker, or the other woman, or whatever, while the cheater is somehow protected. It doesn’t make sense.

OLIVIA: That’s double standards for you.

SAM: Yes, but why? When it’s reversed, the man isn’t called a homewrecker, is he?

OLIVIA: Nope. He’s given a pat on the back by his mates. Whereas women are expected to act a certain way, maintain a certain level of decorum, and never display any evidence they’re human – or, God forbid, that we make mistakes!

AMY: Heyyyy ... Not all men are like that. A lot of men are disgusted by cheating. They’d probably offer a right hook rather than a pat on the back. And, I don’t know about other guys, but Eddie loves my humanness [*She shrugs*].

OLIVIA: Yeah, I know ... I’m *completely* generalising. But, call it experience, or just plain cynicism, hypocrisy is still rife in the old gender divide, and it pisses me off.

SAM: Me too! As cliché as this sounds, women actually need to be on the same side if anything's gonna change. I guess that's why I made the decision to stop hating the Demonic Bitch Monster for what happened.

AMY: I agree, Sammy. But, if it's okay by you, I'm still going to hate her.

OLIVIA: Me too.

SAM *smiles at them both.*

SAM: [*Softly*] I just ... even though I'm glad I found out before we got married, and I know it wasn't meant to be ... and I'm better off now ... and I *know* all of these things rationally ... I still miss him.

AMY: Of course you do. Love isn't rational. No matter how poorly we're treated, no matter how angry we might be, or even how logical we are about a situation, we still feel it all.

OLIVIA: It's lucky we're resilient.

AMY: Yeah. So we forget enough to go back for more. Talk about masochistic!

SAM: It's worth it though. Look at Eddie, Aimz. You've both hit the absolute jackpot.

AMY: I know. [*Smiling*] We really have. I sometimes feel a little guilty about how lucky I am. I don't feel like I deserve it.

OLIVIA: Of course you deserve it! You're not lucky, you're *worthy* of all of it. And let's be honest: it's not like you didn't have to kiss a few giant toads before you found your prince!

SAM: Ever the romantic, aren't you Liv! But she's right. You're completely worthy Aimz. Don't question that. I hope I get to have what you and Eddie have, one day.

AMY: You will honey.

A phone starts ringing. SAM reaches into her pocket, retrieves her phone and looks at the screen.

SAM: Holy shit. It's Liam. Should I answer?

AMY and OLIVIA in unison: NO!

SAM: It might be about the apartment ... I'll just be a tick. [*SAM gets up answering 'HELLO?' as she walks offstage*]

OLIVIA: Bloody hell. His ears must be burning.

AMY: What do you think he wants?

OLIVIA: With that moron, it's anyone's guess. [*A beat*] Where's Eddie tonight?

AMY: Aaaactually ... [*Trying to contain her laughter*] I think he's having drinks with Ear Licker!

OLIVIA: Oh my god, no! Pleeese don't tell him what happened!

AMY: Oh, how can I not?! It's too good!

OLIVIA: [*Laughing*] No, no, no, no ... It's one thing you guys knowing, but not his mates!

AMY: [*Laughing*] Alright, I'll *try* and keep it to myself.

OLIVIA: [*Still laughing*] You're a terrible liar, Aimz!

SAM *re-enters, staring at her phone.*

AMY: Sammy? Honey? [AMY *gets up and goes to SAM*] Sam?

ONE, TWO, MANY

SAM: He's broken up with her. [Pause. SAM starts to cry] He ... he wants me back.

OLIVIA: That *fucking* guy!

AMY: Come and sit down. [AMY *guides* SAM to the couch, tucking the blanket around her] What did he say?

SAM: Um ... that he was sorry ... that he made a mistake ... that he loves me ... that he never stopped loving me ... basically every predictable thing you can imagine.

OLIVIA: [*Visibly upset and angry*] So he just used every possible line he knew would get to you. Sounds like a fucking handbook: 'A Cheater's Guide To Gaining Forgiveness'. How *dare* he ... after everything he's done!

AMY: Hang on, Liv. Sammy? What do you need?

SAM: [*Softly*] I ... I have no fucking clue.

OLIVIA: You're not actually considering his offer are you?

SAM: [*Hesitating*] I – I don't know.

OLIVIA: Sam. He fucked someone else. You weren't just dating, you were engaged. Your entire wedding was planned. He didn't just *fuck* someone else ... he's had an entire relationship with her. You and he could never heal from this. Besides, he's probably only come crawling back because Demonic Bitch Monster ditched his arse!

Silence hangs between the women for a few tense moments, as OLIVIA and SAM stare at each other. SAM continues to cry.

AMY: [*Looking pleadingly at OLIVIA*] Let's just give it a minute, okay?

OLIVIA: Right. [*She takes a deep breath*] But, Sammy? He *broke* you. And seeing you that way broke our hearts. [*A beat*] I just wish you could see yourself the way we see you. Liam was never your equal, and he never will be.

SAM: [*Sniffing*] Aimz? What do you think?

AMY: [*Hesitating*] I ... I always liked Liam ... but he messed up, probably irreparably. I feel a bit sick saying this, but if he's what you want, then I'll suck it up and accept it. I just never want to see you that way again.

OLIVIA: Neither do I. You almost slipped away. But I'm with Aimz: if it's what you really want, I'll try and get over my urge to knee him square in the cojones every time I see him.

OLIVIA *picks up her wine and starts gulping.*

SAM: Liv? [OLIVIA *lowers her glass*] I don't know what I'd do without you girls.

OLIVIA *stands and squeezes herself onto the couch on the other side of SAM, holding her hand.*

OLIVIA: You won't ever have to find out.

OLIVIA, SAM *and* AMY *remain snuggled together on the couch as lights fade to blackout.*

EVERYTHING BUT ...

MICHELLE ALLAM

I crossed the Italian woman's room, surely, as a priest performed
yesterday;
by her ill-lit bedside, my blaspheming heathen was born.
Mrs Giuliana, from Valentina, lay foetally, absolute.

EVERYTHING BUT ...

I undertook ablution, catching up her holy mouth, and flittering
my nimble fingers over wide lulled eyes.

I created sculpture – splaying silver feathers around patterned angel
form.

Passing over the wood-whittled Christ, tortured within her palm,
I slid her lavender cloud-slip upon a stretcher frame,
and buried Giuliana inside a tarpaulin coffin of crackling black.

Its zipper clung and fought, more loyal than her husband,
and it crunched along like traipsing shoes, kicking at loose gravel.
Lying half-consumed beneath moans of mud and rusty litter leaves,

I freed the ivy plethora, and delivered a divining prayer.
The Italian arose, Donna glorious. In a maddening wisp!
She sprayed the sky with spittle; confession only would grant my
release.

Two floors heavenward were her dentures,
still floating in glass. Asleep.

LIBIDO AND LIFE LESSONS OF FISH

MARTINE MOORE

‘Ohhh good Lord! Belle, did you have to get everything on tape?’

Sophie had always known her Aunt Belle was a bit of a slut. Belle had announced it herself at a party one night with friends all nodding in the background. The task Sophie had been assigned went far beyond the call of duty. It should have at least come with a medal, or some sort of

memory-erasing device and then a bottle of Remy Louis XIII to help remember the beautiful things in life. Still, here she was, sifting through sixty-plus years and all its anecdotes, recorded on everything from negatives to VHS tapes. There were photos, disks, some of them floppy and then anything that had ever been written by Belle or to Belle, including an invitation on a wine-stained napkin to a swinger's S&M party. At least I'm pretty sure it was wine?

Belle decided she would drop dead two weeks ago. So, she did ... with a lot of help from her friends. She feared that soon she would not remember how much fun life actually was, let alone have the ability to decide when Alzheimer's actually wasn't. Belle always liked the idea of being devoured by the sea in death. One would think this was some kind of grand, romantic metaphor for orgasm, like overwhelming waves surging through the body. Well, Belle's was a devouring of another kind. With her ashes now scattered over the harbour as fish food, she was free to be eaten by fish. They would be caught for dinner and devoured by man, woman ... or cat, digested, then flushed back into the harbour in an eternal ingestion cycle. This also meant she would never be forgotten by those who knew her plan, left always to wonder if she was in their battered chinaman leatherjacket fillet.

Perhaps those early infantile Alzheimer cells bore omen to her cause to record everything and to never forget. It seemed, however, that during her meticulously orchestrated plan to drop dead she had forgotten to remember her memories.

*

Sophie, still grappling with why someone would even record themselves having sex, had opened one of the bottles of Coonawarra Cabernet/Shiraz which Belle had thoughtfully left on the kitchen bench. An envelope lay undiscovered between a bottle and glass. Fast-forwarding through a couple of tapes, Sophie eventually realised they were all labelled with the names of the parties involved. Of course, Aunt Belle was centre stage, submerged in all life's desires. There are just some things that cannot be unseen. Worse still, even with the sound turned down, Sophie found herself mildly aroused. She wondered how many bottles it would take to swiftly induce short-term memory loss. Her first two glasses didn't even touch the sides. Hoping what was in the writing-filled drawers would be less provocative, she scattered a pile on the floor and settled in for the long haul.

Four drawers and two hours in, Sophie watched as the final droplets of wine fell into the glass and she ordered a pizza. Dumping another drawer out on the floor, she settled down with another bottle. The small envelope remained undiscovered, stuck tenuously to the bottle's edge.

Belle had known Sean longer than Sophie had been alive. Belle often mentioned him in conversation and had even spent a couple of Christmases with him, but Sophie had never actually met him. She remembered Belle telling her he had hepatitis. He had tried to convince Belle that high oestrogen levels from his liver were affecting his sexual prowess or something ridiculous along those lines.

He wasn't at the wake. Was he even still alive? She figured he was an old lover of sorts, but there were a lot of 'of sorts' in Belle's life. It's just that this one had a name.

Six drawers and approaching three hours, Sophie sat back down to eat. Her silence was broken by the sound of a man's voice. Looking up, she realised that a VHS was still playing and she must have hit the volume button on the remote, which was now buried under a sea of letters from Sean.

'What ... no fucking?' A little disappointed, she trawled her way through the pile when her attention was caught by a question from Belle.

'Oh, come on. If it is your hepatitis it'll pass. But tell me, what is being forty 'like'?'

Having turned forty herself only three months earlier Sophie sat cross-legged like a good little girl in front of the TV and listened. The tape stopped just as Belle said, *'I think I'll wait until I have to learn some of those lessons'*, then started to rewind.

'Sean, you miserable old git!' Sophie, now standing and shaking the remote at the TV as though it would, in some way, summon Sean to her impending outburst. 'It couldn't possibly be your testosterone, could it? No, how unmanly! No, blame the female hormone instead! That's not forty! If forty was that bad we'd all do a Belle at thirty-nine. You clearly have depression, you stubborn old fart! Fucking oestrogen levels! Seriously?'

She slumped to the ground in her pickled state to top up her half-full glass, when the small envelope fell from

the side of the bottle. It was just wide enough not to fall into the glass; it landed on top.

‘Where the hell did you come from?’

Reading the first few lines, she looked around the room suspiciously. Some higher force was at play, as though Descartes’ evil demon was orchestrating from above.

*

To my darling Sophie,

I can only hope you understand why I chose you to wade through my memories. The rest of our family are all a little less ... well, open-minded, shall we say, and I know you will do what’s best.

I am sorry I forgot your birthday. I wish I could forget some of mine and since I am no longer here to tell you myself, I wanted to give you some advice about what being forty is ‘like’.

*

You learn that you are beautiful because you are brave, intelligent and strong. Darling, you’ve got it, so flaunt it!

*

You doubt your lover and your memory, but never doubt your instinct nor your ability to be brilliant.

In realising how irresponsible it would have been to have children, you realise how responsible you are.

*

You find death succeeds in taking people sooner than expected. You know suicide is the one thing in life everyone should fail at. Unfortunately, depression is the triple-threat actor Shakespeare always needed.

*

Reading your CV, which changes career by the decade, shows your reliability, yet, an unwillingness to stagnate. Time never procrastinates, so neither should you.

*

You should always try something once no matter what your age. Some things are worth trying twice, just to be sure and some, perhaps, even more times than that.

*

You eventually recognise that it's not how big his pencil is, it's how he signs his name. But here are some rules. Judge a man by the type of car he drives, not by his shoe size. Sports or muscle equals short, fast and loud. Mid-size or 4WD equals mid-size and reliable. Small equals anywhere from large, to

'is that even possible?' Two wheels equal adventure and endurance but only if they look good in Lycra or leather. If they don't, they're having a mid-life crisis.

*

You reconcile that all the good ones are either gay, married or dead. The bad ones either can't make up their mind, are married or dead. The one you want is usually the one you can't have. What you want and what you need are rarely the same creature; especially if they fit in any category above and then you're having a mid-life crisis.

*

You learn to take a moment to smile, and then find time to make others laugh.

*

You realise life's too short to be cold or do dishes.

*

You learn not to settle for the easy answer. Always ask why. Always question 'why not'. Why not answer why not?

*

You notice that resistance and lying on your back are not enough to fend off the gravitational pull toward the knees of your favourite bits. You have

to stay fit, get enough sleep and be aware of what you put in your mouth. Luckily, sweat and zinc are also great for one's complexion.

*

Your hormones become as unreliable as lovers and money. They too are replaceable. HRT: Holden Racing Team for men and Hormone Replacement Therapy for women.

*

You recognise there are two basic rules of survival. Expect nothing and be prepared for anything. This is why you should always wear lingerie; you may get hit by a bus or possibly end up half-naked in one.

*

If you find yourself sitting alone in a bar, unable to determine what type of life you have led, go home, get some sleep, then go do what you want to do, what you need to do. Just do whatever 'that' is until you are unable to determine what type of life you have led.

Farewell, my darling Sophie, for now.

*

Well,' Sophie thought, 'I think I may have learned some of those lessons. Some were definitely worth learning twice! Both yours and mine will always be of use.'

CITY SIGHTS

SHELLEY-ANNE SMITH

CITY SIGHTS

City lights are a remarkable achievement.
Their abilities are a juxtaposition.

They make the near world visible
at the expense of obscuring infinity.

Driving in cars is a modern thing. According
to Einstein, it's time travel.

Mist is when the rivers get bored
of reading between the lines.

Disintegrating gravity's hold, it
moves into the air, uphill,

fracturing into a million pieces.
It is breaker of all rules,

proving that a maxim
is only true while left unexplored.

Such freedom is a forgotten dream;
slavery has shackled every ankle.

To revolt against the current paradigm
would but end the bread and circuses.

Freedom is a full tank of petrol,
and eyes that are blissfully blind.

BOOK GROUP

REBECCA SARGEANT

We don't have a set book for December. Instead we have a Christmas dinner and exchange books as gifts. It's a nice ritual; the books are placed in the centre of the table at the start of the night, and then randomly distributed after main course.

One year I gave *The Book of Emmett* by Deborah Forster. There were some pretty harrowing scenes of domestic violence, but it was the capacity of the children to love and

forgive their father that stayed with me. Karen later told me she enjoyed it.

Karen's offering was always beautifully presented. Like a bird's nest, the book's wrapping would be textured with recycled, natural elements: unbleached paper, dried leaves, coarse hessian, delicate lace and soft ribbon. She was clever like that. She won the craft rosette at the Bangalow Show with a Christmas wreath made of crinkled old book pages, and she built a stable home from the barren landscape of her childhood.

Her parents sent flowers on the day she was buried. The card was signed: Your mum and me. Maybe it said: *Love your mum and me*. By then we knew something of her childhood. From what we could gather, there wasn't much love.

*

While book group is about books, it exists within an oral tradition: the books we read are like signposts along the tracks of our conversation. The shape of that conversation marks our identity within the group. As Cyndi said to me recently: *Stories are what make people*. In book group, we read stories, discuss stories, and tell stories. Perhaps our identity lies somewhere in the gaps.

The first book Karen chose was *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon. But she didn't want to talk about Kevin. Marilyn French's 1977 feminist novel, *The Women's Room*, reverberated in a room full of 'liberated' women in 2015; some shared personal stories,

and some did not. Coming-of-age tales spark lively discussion, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, and Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk* come to mind. Yet with novels so playful with meaning, is it in the conversation and stories we are prompted to share that our sense of self is revealed? Maybe that is the true art of listening.

*

When she was diagnosed, Karen was planning to open a shop and sell organic soaps and beauty products under the label 'Make It Organic'. She was passionate about sourcing wholly organic plant-based ingredients.

I'm not sure whether book group would be properly certified organic. Friendships have been fostered in a cultured environment where the kindling of monthly meetings, pre-set reading, and intentionally directed discussion promote growth. But book group really exists not as individual friendships, but as an organic whole.

While this bond was formed around the campfire of conversation, shared experiences have a quieter fusing effect: conversation layered like Karen's craft; memories of domestic spaces and comfortable bodies; the smell of Sally's mulled wine warming on the stove.

Our first weekend away in Binna Burra had been like that. There was one of those fake fire heaters and we rearranged the furniture to make a dining table for twelve, and then squeezed ourselves around the small living area tangled in an oestrogen orgy. *Stung on the vulva!* Gabby had meant it literally; we were discussing insect bites on our

earlier bushwalk. *That woman in that book (by Stephanie Bishop), whose husband moved her to The Other Side of the World when she was vulnerable and exhausted and probably had post-natal depression, sure got stung on the vulva.*

But sometimes life's realities can fray the seams.

*

Marin had a surprise three years ago when her dream of farm life bore fruit in both a country property and an unexpected pregnancy. We'd been meeting for about five years, but Peach was our first book group baby. Camille had the idea to make the quilt. Her Melbourne friends had made her a blanket once, from material salvaged from old clothes. So, we all contributed a square of fabric – some especially hand-embroidered, some purchased new, some remnants from abandoned projects, but all with a personal story or attachment. Cathie miraculously stitched them into a beautiful patchwork quilt, her stippled stitching meandering over each patch. We were all pretty proud of ourselves when we presented it to Marin.

The quilt we made for Karen was draped over the coffin at her funeral service.

*

Driving on our way to trivia night at the Eureka Hall, Tanya pointed out a small cemetery just off the road, on the high side of a gully leading down to a creek. She had been

researching her local ancestors and recently discovered she had relatives buried there.

The Clunes cemetery is not visible from the main road. It is entered through a farm gate, and is sectioned along the side of a private road. The carvings and iron-work on the old graves in the Protestant section sit like a gothic crown on top of the highest hill. The Catholic graves are huddled by a tree about a hundred metres further down. Karen's grave is at the end of a row, in a new section of simple plots with standard headstones that are set on the eastern side of the hill.

We met at Karen's grave for a glass of champagne before book group a few months ago. The bubbles and the laughter of kids helped to lighten our mood. Peach ran barefoot on the grass, and Jules picked ripening mangoes from the low branches of trees laden with fruit. It had been a dry summer; the ground was parched and the air smelt of dirt. But storm clouds gathered on the horizon.

Those clouds marched towards us with clear intent. They were pregnant with heavy raindrops, radiating static energy and impatient to release their power. They were magnificent. We posed warrior-princess style for photos with a backdrop evocative of Hannah Kent's *Burial Rights*. We staked our claim on a landscape marked by songlines long before our ancestors marked their graves. And then we retreated to Marin's verandah to watch the lightning show and discuss *The Psychopath Test* by Jon Ronson.

EMPTY

CRYSTAL HAYWARD

Kate sits on the sticky red linoleum floor in the kitchen. Waiting. The oats are still dripping in wet clumps and oozing down the wallpaper. She hugs her knees and leans her head against the cleaning cupboard. Tyler has gone to get the groceries. He'll be back any moment, griping about the cashier and how she had become unfriendly as soon as he handed over the food voucher. They always were. He will dump the grey plastic bags full of food on the bench.

He might even fold one of those miniature boxes of cereal into a bowl, for the kid.

Maybe, if she can find the right words to ask with, he'll explain why he took the table. He always has an explanation. It's always seemed to her that all the sounds he needs are already perfectly formed, and stored inside him somewhere. All he has to do was open his mouth and they emerge as fully formed sentences. He doesn't have to search his mind for words, the way she does. It is one of her favourite things about him.

When he started emptying the house of their belongings, she didn't fight him. Maybe because, in the beginning, it was just his stuff. His stereo. The surfboard he'd never used. The lawn mower they didn't need since they'd moved to an apartment. She was secretly pleased he was letting go of some junk.

Then he started taking things they'd bought together, like the microwave oven and the car. When she asked, he said he'd loaned the car to an old friend who had a job interview in Sydney. It didn't matter that she needed the car to get to her part-time job. Who wants to work at Red Rooster anyway? She could get a better job, a brilliant job, as soon as they got the car back. He promised. He'd given the microwave to his stepbrother's girlfriend, because she'd just moved into a flat that didn't have a stove.

She always rehearsed what she wanted to say in her head. But when she was face-to-face with him, the things she wanted to bring up would vanish. She'd remember hav-

ing a point to make but couldn't recall what it was. He'd speak faster and faster. She'd bite her lip.

*

Then this morning, when she was adding extra water to the porridge, she turned to call the kid. Instead, she saw Tyler trying to force the kitchen table through the front door. Her white-hot rage bubbled in the back of her throat. She swallowed hard. But it boiled up anyway, spilling over her edges. Leaping across the room, she grabbed at a leg and yanked. But the angle was wrong. The wood cracked, and part of it came away in her hand like a broken tooth. Tyler dropped his end of the table. The kid hid in the pantry among the empty Tupperware. They spat angry words at each other. He grabbed the pot, lifted it over his head and hurled it at the wall. He only did it because he wanted her to shut-the-hell-up. He wouldn't have thrown their breakfast if she hadn't pushed him to do it.

But he would come back with the food. He hadn't said so. He hadn't said anything, as he wrestled the three-and-a-half-legged table down the driveway. But she knew.

*

She'd spent three hours lingering outside a small weather-board building yesterday, hoping to get the voucher so the kid could eat. The rain wet the soles of her sandals, making them slippery as butter. She'd stood behind a skinny bloke with greasy hair. Each time a name was called, they shuffled forward slightly.

It would be easier to steal something from the supermarket. She'd done it before. Hung around in the parking lot. Searching for some old bird who was trying to load bags into her car. All she had to do was offer to help. Slip a bag for herself. Be on her way.

She'd just about convinced herself to leave when they called her name. As she slunk inside, she'd heard Greasy Hair moaning to the volunteers about the unfairness of the system. What was the point of lining up if they were going to choose people randomly? A fat lady with tight lips, and a red shield on her shirt, ushered her into a small room before she heard their response. Kate smiled at the large woman, in what she'd hoped was a grateful way, but was met with a sneer, as the voucher and pamphlet were shoved back at her. On the cover was a pair of hands, with fingers interlocked, and the word 'faith' printed in capitals. She'd screwed it up and thrown it in the bin on her way out. Then she'd walked home, because Tyler's friend still had their car. The friend wasn't answering his phone anymore. This didn't seem to bother Tyler. He'd said she should forget about it. She'd tried.

She should've put the voucher in her pocket. Why was she so stupid? When she'd pushed through the door, the kid began twisting himself around her legs like a hungry cat. Tyler was supposed to be watching him. She checked the spot by the door for his boots, but they weren't there. She called his name, her voice bouncing off the bare walls.

Something thick and dark had filled her head. Memories of her own mother, taking off. She'd sit at the big window.

With her sister. Waiting. Watching the sun fill the sky and sink out of sight. Listening for her mother's heels on the stairs, the key in the lock. Sharing a sleeve of dry crackers for dinner.

She'd dropped the paper on to the table, so her hands were free to pick the kid up. There was no thought of Tyler and what he might take. Just the weight of the child in her arms. The yeasty smell of his skin.

She'd tried her best. When he took the television, she'd stolen trashy romance novels from the public library. When he took the chairs, she'd stopped inviting friends over. She hadn't believed the things she'd heard from them anyway, the whispers about the trouble he was in. She'd told them to shut their mouths, and walked away. We're just warning you, they'd said. But she wouldn't listen. Days became nights. He kept removing things. Sometimes while she slept. He took the knives and forks and spoons. He unscrewed all the light bulbs, except in the bedroom where the ceiling was too high. He took the bath plugs and the coat hangers and their pillows. She went to get dressed one afternoon and discovered that he'd taken all her underwear.

People he knew needed these things more than they did, he said.

Everything they sacrificed would come back to them tenfold, he said.

The people he was helping would soon be in a position to help him in return, he said.

He used words she didn't understand.

Materialism.

Consumerism.

Minimalism.

They had strange arguments.

He insisted they'd never owned a couch. Kate pointed to the indents in the carpet where it had sat. He said the last people to rent the place had furniture there, not them. She was crazy, he said.

Selfish and paranoid.

If she trusted him, she would be patient. So, she waited. Because all the good things, he said, were just around the corner.

*

The kid isn't prepared to wait for Tyler. He's sitting on the lino now, in front of the overturned saucepan, eating his breakfast from the floor. Grey mush on his fingers. Pink tongue licking. Missing his mouth and dropping lumps onto his t-shirt. Leaving smears across his face. A strip of pink flesh shows between his shirt and his pants. He is expanding, she realises, filling the emptiness. He extends an arm and bangs out a rhythm on the floor.

Lee, lee, lee. Thump, thump, thump.

He looks straight at her and repeats his chant.

Lee. Lee. Lee.

It's as though he's trying to tell her something. Kate looks at the pale band on her finger where her engagement ring used to be. She wants to take the kid. Bundle him up and climb aboard a bus. Leave the empty apartment and

the mess on the floor. She isn't sure she can do that. He isn't hers. Or Tyler's.

When he first arrived, she'd expected him to cry for his mother, the way she had when she was small. But he'd stayed calm. Started coming to her almost instantly. Not that she's much use to him. She can't even keep him fed properly. He only wants something to fill his stomach. Somebody to soothe him when he falls. Someone to rock him to sleep at night.

The oats on the wall have stopped dripping and started drying. Turning to a grey lumpy glue that will never unstick from the paper. There is no point in planning to leave though. Tyler will be back soon. With food for all of them. He'll be walking home by now; the plastic bags cutting pink rings into his palms. There will be bread. Sliced ham. Tomato sauce. She won't ask where the table is. She will spread her jacket on the ground and they will picnic. Side by side.

WINTER'S SONG

CHRISTY MANTESE

Iris Whitaker stumbled toward the bank. Disheveled and tear stained, she sought a quiet refuge. The narrow river lay at the bottom of a field, just out of sight of the imposing country house where she grew up. It was a place Iris had often escaped to. The water meandered gently, singing a pretty song while trees overhung its banks. Deeply shaded areas and large rocks offered themselves as perfect perches for reflection. Kicking off her slippers, her stockinged feet

met velvet grass before she pulled herself onto a rock to contemplate her misery.

An unmarried young woman, Iris had just that day received an offer her father gladly accepted. The face of her new fiancé flashed before her, archaic and stern. She received her first glimpse of him that morning after being primped and then paraded into her father's study for an appraisal by the terrifying Lord. Tears overflowed as she reflected on the eagerness of her father's consent and the betrayal she felt from her maid. Mary appeared overjoyed at the prospect of moving to such a grand house. Iris fiddled with her gown in despair and untied the emerald ribbon placed so elegantly and strategically around her waist. She fingered the threadbare seam of her dress, hitherto hidden under the bow, then threw the ribbon into the water watching it disappear downstream. She wept as she mourned her childhood and shuddered as she imagined her future husband's stale breath on her face.

*

The shadows grew as Iris's breathing became even. Her sobs dissipated as the tranquility of the surroundings soothed her. She sat, knees clutched to her chest and face buried in her skirts, while the sound of water lulled her into submission.

A sudden chill roused her. Goosebumps graced her arms as something in her surroundings shifted. Iris felt as though someone was watching her. Slowly, she lifted her eyes and found him easily. Directly across the stream on

the opposite bank, a young man sat facing her. He was magnificent. Dark eyes glinted as he watched her intently. His thick hair was loosely held back with a fine cord. A heavy white fur draped his shoulders. His bare torso was slim but muscular and his skin was golden.

Her intake of breath was sharp.

He watched her, relaxed and happy as though there was nothing out of the ordinary about him being there. When he laughed, it was as beautiful as his face.

‘Do you know what I am?’ His voice was musical and lilting.

She nodded hesitantly, wet cheeks glistening in the light.

‘You’re a Faery,’ she said, voice thick from crying. His smile was radiant. She sensed frost, pine needles, snow flurries. ‘Oh.’ Her voice grew quiet. ‘You’re a Winter Faery.’

‘I am that,’ he agreed. Iris recalled stories she had been told of the Faeries. Strange meetings with them ending in demise and women, rumoured to have been seduced by them, returning forever altered. Children were warned away from the enigmatic creatures as their ethereal music floated across fields and valleys, bringing the changing of the seasons. The Winter Faeries always carried a bleakness with them. They heralded the cold and brought about endings.

‘Is it really that time?’ she implored.

‘Yes,’ he said with certainty.

Already? Sadness painted her face.

‘All things must change dear girl.’ He smiled warmly, a stark contrast to the frigid air that rolled from him.

He reached for a sack behind him and pulled out a small wooden flute. 'I am going to play the song now. Would you like to listen?'

Iris wiped her face with her hands and nodded, resigning herself to the inevitable.

The Faery arranged himself into a comfortable position and started playing. His long fingers danced intricately along the flute and a melodic tune arose. His body swayed gently with the rhythm. The tune evoked such a feeling in Iris that she sat transfixed. He looked up every now and then, as if to acknowledge her presence. Then he was swept up in the sounds, eyes closed, a sublime look on his face as the sun lit him from behind. Butterflies and insects danced among the grass as if the melody had drawn them there. Even the trees appeared to be listening, intently focused upon this being who was evoking an energy so powerful that everything in his presence was captivated.

Eventually, the music became quieter and thinner. Robust notes were layered with somber tones while sinister nuances weaved through the melody. Disconcerting echoes lingered eerily, blanketing the surroundings with unease. Iris shivered as the Faery peered at her above his instrument. The ethereal timbre penetrated her. Tendrils of frost snaked their way through the trees. Warmth fled as cold infused the landscape. With sadness, she noticed the leaves withering and the butterflies wilting. The light became grey and a shroud of fog settled over the river. The bleakness of winter closed in.

Slowly the Faery put the flute down, his work complete for now. Hands clasped within his lap, his gaze rested upon Iris. She stared at him with large pleading eyes.

‘Help me,’ she said, a tremor in her small voice.

His smile held a sinister edge as he nodded slowly. With an agile bound over the river, he brought his face within an inch of hers. She held her place, though her heart thundered. Her breath was drawn in staggered gasps. He reached out a long finger and lifted her chin until downcast eyes met his.

‘Are you sure you want my help sweet girl?’ His skin gleamed with an otherworldly hue and he smelt of the forest. ‘You must be certain.’

Thoughts of her father surfaced, clutching and hungry for advancement, even when it meant dismissing the desires of his own daughter. She saw her betrothed quivering on top of her to beget more sons. She despaired that she would not even be his first wife, but his fourth. Iris wondered if they had all died of heartbreak, those wives who were outlived. Her future step-son, older than she, had sneered from behind her father’s back that morning and then eyed her body with interest. Humiliation roiled through her. With fists clenched, she focused on the Faery’s eyes. What was this, if not an opportunity? She willed him to whisk her away, to lands and freedom unknown.

‘I am certain,’ she said, eyes clear and resolute. He smiled widely at her.

Ignoring the ominous feeling within, Iris remained steadfast. She gasped as he placed a hand upon her back and drew her toward him. Cool lips met hers in an engulf-

ing kiss and her body relaxed its rigid stance. Overcome by his spell, a soft sigh escaped her.

While being held, a tendril of frost sought her. Iris shivered as it caressed her body. Wrapping icy fingers around her torso, it bound tightly. Wonder grew into panic as she filled with dread. The Faery held her powerfully.

‘Beautiful girl,’ he crooned while she struggled.

He blew gently into her mouth, sending a shower of frozen shards within her. Terror grew as she fought for breath. Her lungs became rigid and her heart grew cold. Her body shuddered. Winter was consuming her.

The Faery rocked her gently while humming a dulcet tune.

He pulled away when her body became still, to see if his work was complete. Blank eyes held his gaze. His fingertips upon her neck confirmed a slow, methodical pulse. He nodded at her, satisfied.

Iris lived, though empty, within the embrace of the Faery.

*

Night fell while birds trilled somber songs, lamenting the new season. Distant voices heralded a search party. Far up the hill, lanterns flickered. The Faery helped her to sit up and she stretched her limbs; the icy flow in her body did not seem to restrict her. She placed her hand over her frosty heart and felt it beating with indifferent precision. The tangle of emotions that had been so engulfing were no longer. Her warmth had been erased.

‘Thank you,’ she said as she stood, her movements pervaded with grace. Iris brushed herself off and straightened her gown. Her hands dipped into the river to splash her face; the water no longer felt cold.

‘I wish you well, dear girl,’ the Faery said, flashing his beautiful smile.

Nodding politely at him, she climbed from the rock and turned toward the hill, ready to embark on her new life.

EVERYDAY CAMINO

REBECCA RYALL

camino (n): way; path

Camino de Santiago (n): the way of St James; ancient pilgrimage route terminating in the spiritual resting place of St James, the first declared martyr, in Santiago de Compostella in the north west of Spain

I had a crazy idea, which coalesced out of a multitude of single threads, some of which I can trace back over twenty or more years. The idea was to walk 800km across Spain,

with my bag on my back and my two daughters – 9 and 13 – by my side.

How do you tell the story of a life? I made a life when I was twenty years old and witnessed the withdrawal of that life twenty years later. The story of that life bursts out of the cracks in my heart, spills on my feet as I try to move forward. I keep finding new ways to tell it.

The idea, and the life, come together in a new way to create another story. As one is nothing without the other, I tell them together.

*

I was a young mother and had no role modelling for motherhood. Those early years were tough. I spent a lot of time fantasising about somehow running away. When she was a small baby, Maia cried for hours at a time. I would pace up and down the driveway under the stars, crooning James Taylor songs as she screamed, thrashed and ripped at my neck with her little nails. I would envisage taking her to the park, putting her down in the shade wrapped up tight in a blanket, and leaving her there to cry and attract the attention of a passing stranger. This passing stranger would be better than me in every way, but most importantly, would be a better mother to Maia, would know how to comfort her, and would never dream of leaving her at the park for a stranger to find.

*

She was not so much interested in travel, preferring the comforts of home and the status quo. I bought a campervan when she was a toddler and we set out on the road, west into the desert. The trip ended in disaster when I rolled our van on the highway in the red centre, but truth was, it was not the romantic idyll I had pictured – toddler wrangling in caravan parks in the outback is not much fun. I figured I had missed the boat on real adventuring, once I found myself a single mother of three daughters. Travel is expensive, and kids are hard work, and given these truths I could never foresee travel in my future.

When she died, I had an intense need to get away, to find some distance from everything I knew, which was by then, tainted. Everywhere I rested my eyes threw back echoes of times passed: sharp memories and the associated blow of remembering her suffering, my suffering. I felt the crushing weight of my surroundings. I thought I could never be happy in my home again because everything here was imbued with her – her red recliner; the knife-block she had bought me and her shiny kitchen appliances; even the arrangement of furniture, placed to accommodate a wheelchair and oxygen compressor. I didn't know how to inhabit the space, no longer being in reference to her. What I sought was a feeling of spaciousness, of being unencumbered and unrestricted by routine, expectation and familiarity. So, I went on a pilgrimage, with my beautiful daughters by my side, as I tried to understand the story of Maia's life and death.

We walked into a new community of belonging, meeting other pilgrims from all around the world, asking the common question: ‘What made you decide to do this?’

Initially, I answered honestly: ‘My daughter died and I needed to get away and do something different.’

As this invariably ended in tears all round, I developed different answers – needing to see different horizons, wanting to spend quality time with my kids, needing a change of pace – these became the stock standard answers for the fly-by-night pilgrims who crossed our path.

*

All along the trail, attached to trees, left on rock cairns and significant sites along the 800km of El Camino, were faded and tattered photos, some wrapped in plastic, others left to weather the elements. Leaving my traditional offering at the Cruz de Ferro, I thought that I should have brought photos of Maia, but she was present for me in every moment. Every hostel I walked into, I appraised through her eyes. She curled my lip at the sight of a dirty shower cubicle, wet undies hanging over the rail of a bunk bed, a stray hair on my hostel pillow.

*

I was packing dusty books into boxes when she came to tell me she had a lump in her breast. Recalling myself as a pubescent girl, I told her it was totally normal to have lumpy breasts at certain times of development. I told her to

keep an eye on it and see if it changed with her cycle, that many times these were just hormonal things.

I told her not to worry.

*

I embarked upon the Camino de Santiago from the small town of St Jean Pied de Port in Southern France, third-hand hiking boots on my feet and three pebbles in my pocket, gifted to me by friends to be left at the Cruz de Ferro some weeks hence – a ritual offering observed by pilgrims over centuries. The first two days involved crossing the Pyrenees – gaining 1100m in altitude over 24km – an appropriately challenging entrée into this new chapter of our lives, facilitated through the judicious rationing of nuts and chocolate and the promise of steaming cups of *chocolat con leche* at the end of the day.

On our fourth day, we limped over a drawbridge into Pamplona, the ancient fortress laid out below us, the crumbling parapets watching over the growing metropolis below. The youngest of our group succumbed to a mild flu, so we rested for a day, indulging in traditional weekend fiesta activities. Unnoticed amongst the crowd, we followed a group of costumed actors bearing firecrackers to a small amphitheatre in the middle of the city, where we watched uncomprehendingly as actors dressed as bulls cavorted noisily on stage, and the crowd around us jeered and cheered. Small girls danced in lines as their elders played traditional music. This was our introduction to Spanish living – this city came alive at night time with throngs of

all ages gathering to eat, drink and dance on the streets. I bought gaffer tape to repair my boots, the soles of which were already coming loose. I refused to buy a new pair, determined that the only boots I would spend money on would be handmade of Portuguese leather.

*

I had promised her that when we moved she could have her own room, and I would buy her a new double bed. I sat on the floor screwing the bed together when she texted me, requesting I make her an appointment with a doctor. She was flying north in a few days and wanted to wear a bikini but her breast was misshapen and uncomfortable; she wanted to get it checked out before she left. As our local doctor was unavailable I chose a clinic at random and booked. I was irritated that she needed me to go in with her, refused to simply catch a bus on her own. Didn't she appreciate how busy I was?

I was missing a day of work to take her in.

*

It was a cold and rainy day in Villafranca Montes de Oca, a small mountain standing implacably between us and the tiny village of Atapuerca – about 19km away – our intended destination for the night. My mood matched the weather and I walked ahead of the kids lest they see my tears. Stopped at a lookout for a rest and a snack, I was approached by an older American couple, swathed in plastic ponchos, cheeks red with good health and exertion. They

were eager to share with me their recollections of travelling and walking with their own children, many years ago.

The road ahead traversed a large pine forest, the constant rain turning the wide thoroughfare into a slippery, muddy mess. The sun finally made an appearance and we stopped for a picnic lunch in the tiny hamlet of Ages. My boots were loosely held together with gaffer tape, my feet encased in two pairs of wool socks and covered over with a plastic bag. Despite these measures, my feet were sodden and I peeled off my socks to dry them in the sun as we ate. I had finally shaken my mood and stretched in the winter warmth as we set out our picnic of fresh bread, boiled eggs, cheese and chocolate. Looking up, I saw the American woman from earlier in the day.

‘I’m so glad to see you again,’ she exclaimed, ‘I have thought about you all day, remembering hiking with my own kids and acknowledging with gratitude all of God’s angels we met on our travels, and the blessings they bestowed upon us. I made a pact with God today that if I saw you again I would pay those blessings forward.’

And with that she pressed into my hand a folded €50 note. I took myself away from the kids and wept silent, gulping, choking tears. The remainder of that day passed in a blind fury as I cursed God and his blessings.

‘I don’t want your fucking money!’ I raged silently. ‘I just want her back.’

Reaching the small town of Atapuerca we learned there were no beds available and we were advised to walk a further 6km to the next village. Disheartened and back

on the road we happened upon our Danish friend, Paul, who recommended a private hotel at which he was staying, suggesting they would do us a good deal. As we had our blessing money and were exhausted by this stage, we decided to stay in a private room instead of the hostels we had frequented thus far. We completed the check-in procedure, presented our passports and pilgrim credentials and accepted a key to a beautiful and quaint room at the top of a heavy, polished wooden staircase. I reached into my bum-bag to retrieve our blessing money. The €50 was gone. The blessing, once bestowed, now retracted.

*

A year after her diagnosis, Maia's three best friends went overseas to Southeast Asia for about five weeks. Though they begged her to come she was firm in her refusal, saying: 'You know I will just get food poisoning, or kidnapped and trafficked for sex.'

She researched travel destinations and found that Vanuatu represented the safest travel option for Australians. I paid for a family package to the island, booked a snorkelling trip and a tour. My girls and I frolicked blissfully in the warm blue Pacific, devised synchronised swimming routines in the pool, and drank mocktails at the swim-up bar.

Floating in the soupy sea one sultry afternoon, I told Maia that I needed to get away. I was exhausted by the year that was ending. I had supported her through six weeks of radiotherapy, while caring for my kids at home, three hours away from her treatment centre. I had guided her

through her final year of school and the monthly medical appointments – about which we were now blasé, given that she showed no new signs of cancer. Most importantly, and most exhaustingly, I had held our ship afloat through the death of the little girls’ father, who had committed suicide in the grip of psychosis, six months after Maia’s diagnosis. I was physically, emotionally and spiritually shattered. I needed time to grieve with my little girls. I planned to buy a campervan, and hit the road.

Halfway through our week in Vanuatu, Maia began to experience chest pain. I took her to a hot spring on the island and she alternated between this and the magnesium pool, and seemed to get some relief.

Back home, at the local rural hospital, an x-ray showed a shadow on Maia’s left lung.

I never did get away for that road trip.

*

About 200-odd kilometres into our Camino, I found myself in a church in a small town called Navarra in Northern Spain. I was the only one there. It was dark and pungent with myrrh and highly polished aged wood. Small votive candles flickered at the back of the room and coloured light streamed through the western windows. I sat in a pew at the back, hands clasped in my lap, contemplating the lustrous gold effigies at the front of the church, disgusted at this display of wealth in a time of poverty. My wandering eyes alighted on a statue of Mary, hands open in supplication, eyes wet with tears. My breath caught in my throat

as I gazed at her and beheld her open grief, contemplated her agony of watching the suffering of her boy, his grace in the face of his own suffering. I knew this agony. We shared this wounding. My heart ached, and my tears flowed for us both.

*

I awoke in a panic to see the clock at 8.30, fearing I had missed breakfast with the kids, had let them down. I realised the room was silent – the incessant hiss and wheeze of oxygen delivery had ceased. My beautiful girl lay still.

She left when I wasn't looking. I bathed her lifeless body with hospital flannels and rosewater, dressed her in her new sunflower dress, and called in her loved ones to say goodbye. I sat beside her for hours, her hand in mine.

When I let go, her hand – stiff with rigor mortis – gripped mine in a morbid parody of reciprocity. I stood, resolute, as the funeral director zipped her into a black vinyl bag and took her away. After four long years of painful anticipation, it was done. Despite my preparation, there had been no great understanding, no wondrous moment of crossing over.

*

After six weeks and nearly 800km, we walked into Santiago de Compostella during morning peak hour, down a main street clogged with buses and cars and marked with graffiti and broken windows. Santiago sapped our energy – there were too many people; too many shops sell-

ing Camino souvenirs; the food was too expensive and the hostel we stayed at charged the most of any we had encountered in the previous six weeks. After two days in the city we needed to get out. We learned we could continue our walk to the western-most point of Spain, Finisterre – which translates to ‘the end of the world’. We had been told that, as an ancient pagan site, there was a fire kept burning on the beach, a place for pilgrims to ritualise their experience. My hiking boots, held together with gaffer tape for at least five weeks, were destined for this fire.

We bought another guide book and left the city behind, walking relentlessly uphill through forests of eucalypt that smelt like home. We met an Argentinian woman who was practicing her English by singing cheesy 80’s pop tunes and I sang along with her. With smug superiority we eavesdropped on the American churchgoers beseeching God to intercede and soothe their weary feet, aching from day one of their five-day walk. The kids played pooh sticks by a creek with an Irishman missing his grandkids and relishing the opportunity to play, as I sat in the sun gossiping with his wife. We reconnected with English Kara – my Camino daughter and stand-in big sister for my girls – who was walking to Finisterre to scatter her dad’s ashes.

On reaching the west coast, we checked into a hostel, dumped our bags, and headed out to eat dinner by the harbour, killing time until the sunset, which we wanted to view from the lighthouse at the very edge of the world. I carried my boots in my hands as we ascended the last few kilometres to the very pinnacle of our journey. The wind

was bitter, throwing sharp raindrops at our faces as we hunched into our jackets and plodded uphill. It was nearly 11pm when we reached the top.

There was no pagan fire to be seen and the decommissioned lighthouse looked disappointingly like a suburban railway station. The setting sun was obscured by thick cloud, the boundless ocean reflecting back the leaden sky in lacklustre grey tones.

When Kara scattered her dad, the biting wind threw him back in her face and she returned to us spitting him from her mouth, her face and hair covered in a fine spray of ash. We were cold, wet, tired and disappointed, standing here at the climax of our physical and spiritual journey. Our Camino was ended, and I still awaited the epiphany. My boots I threw in a rubbish bin and the photo we took to commemorate the act was lost a few days later, along with the camera we had used to document our travels.

*

I told myself that I could walk as an act of atonement, that I could physically embody the struggle and in so doing relieve myself of the emotional and spiritual suffering I had been experiencing in recent years. I beheld it as a profound and symbolic act of conscious suffering that would settle my karmic debt. I embraced the bruising ache in my feet, the constant sharp pain of a worsening shoulder injury. I envisaged myself as a flagellant, wearing horsehair and whipping my own back with a birch branch. As I walked I held myself open, kept returning to the openness. I wanted

to understand. I wanted to find peace. All along the way people spoke of the profundity of this undertaking, of their spiritual cleansing, of their clarification. I waited. I held myself open. But the clarity never came. The understanding eluded me.

My Camino didn't end somewhere in northern Spain, just as my life didn't end when she died. I continue to walk, even though there are some days when that is the last thing I want to do. I couldn't envisage a life without her and yet, with bag heavy on my back and my daughters by my side, still I walk.

**MISS WISP MINDS
THE FUCKS OF RAPE**
MICHELLE ALLAM

Pivoting inside the room
of a withdrawing headache,
she can't pin
the moment she
disappears.

Floating as a veil,
pure, in spirit
dimension,
where her mind
flies at its
body.

So it trips
into the fracture,
of a timeless landscape,
weighty night
breathing acrid morning.

And it bursts from the
guts
of a ravenous forest.

Where a scream will digest its children.

FIFTEEN

DEBRA TURNBULL

I reckon I made it through the first two years of high school pretty well. Mostly straight A's, captain of the school hockey team, and junior champion in the school swimming competition. Sandra and Debbie were my best friends. We trained together in the pool morning and night and on the hockey field all weekend. We started a book club during the holidays, just the three of us. Every second week we took it in turns to meet at each other's houses. We baked our way through the *Women's Weekly Best Ever Cake*

Book and blasted Sherbet on the record player. The day we finally perfected the lemon sponge cake, Sandra belted out an off-key rendition of 'Howzat' that had my dad threatening to kick us out on the street. We talked for hours about everything and nothing.

Heading into Year 10 felt familiar but scary. Butterflies raged around my belly and hovered in my throat. Sandra and Debbie had chosen business subjects, I had chosen science, so we were moved into different classes. Everything was changing without my wanting it to, but at the same time, I was willing it. I had never been with a guy but told everyone I had during the holidays. I pretended I got my period. Debbie and Sandra got weekend jobs, our sleepovers ended and then they quit hockey and swimming. My childhood was disappearing, and I was unprepared.

Mum and Dad were busy working, going to meetings, hosting dinner parties. I think Mum felt guilty that she wasn't home much. She thought I should get out more and meet new friends. She wanted David to take me along to his footy games and introduce me to some of his friends. Little did she know. My brother warned me when I first started at high school never to talk to him or act like I knew him.

'I'll deny your existence,' he said.

David didn't take me to footy but he introduced me to Josie and Wendy, twins who lived around the corner. I had seen them at school; they were in the year above me. They rolled up their skirts really short and wore Dunlop volleys with pom pom ankle socks. Their hats settled over their mascaraed lashes and their long straight hair shone

down their backs. They were dating mates of my brother. Sometimes I would see them leaving school in a green panel van, a sweet ride that belonged to Wendy's boyfriend.

One Friday I walked home from school with them and they invited me into their house. They grabbed bottles of Coke from the fridge, took some cigarettes from a packet of Alpine Lights and herded me downstairs to the rumpus room.

A dying water plant hung from a macrame hanger in the darkness of the stairwell. The black vinyl couch was pushed against a wall plastered with Kiss posters. In front of the television was a round plastic coffee table covered in empty Coke bottles and an overflowing ashtray. Wendy pushed magazines aside to make room on the couch. Josie plonked herself down in a beanbag.

The girls blew smoke through the yellowing lace curtains that framed the one small window and laughed at my attempts to light a cigarette. As I sucked back, my gut growled at me to get up and get out. Josie blew smoke rings through her pursed lips as I fell into a frenzied coughing fit.

'You know people call you a hermit,' said Josie, swigging on her Coke.

'No,' I managed to croak out, followed by another coughing fit.

'Geez Josie, shut up.'

'Well, when did you ever see her anywhere. And you know everyone says she's up herself.'

I blinked my eyes and opened them wide. My head was spinning, my palms were sweating and the back of my legs stuck to the vinyl couch.

‘Why do they say that?’ I asked, horrified at the tremble in my voice.

‘You and your friends, always winning medals and shit.’

‘That’s stupid,’ I replied, my voice steadying slightly.

‘And why do you have your hair cut short like that?’ Josie said as she wound her hair into a knot on the top of her head. ‘I mean, I don’t care but some people wonder if you’re a lezzo.’

‘Josie, you’re such a bitch. I don’t think you’re a lezzo, Amy. Here, have another durry.’ Wendy offered me the pack.

‘I like my hair short,’ I retorted shaking my head to another cigarette. ‘And not that it’s any of your business, but I got with a boy in the holidays when we were down the coast.’

‘So, what’s his name? Is he cute? Are you seeing him again?’ Josie hammered me with questions.

‘His name is Michael, yes he’s cute and maybe if he can come and stay with his grandparents,’ I lied, staring her straight in the eyes. ‘I better get home now I have things to do before dinner. Thanks for having me over.’

The girls flicked the television on, waved their cigarettes in the air and left me to find my way out.

Mum called out to me when I got back from hockey training the next morning.

‘Josie and Wendy came around. They seem very nice. They asked if you would like to go to their house tonight.’

‘I hope you said I was busy,’ I called back.

‘No, why? I thought you’d love to go. They’re having a few of their friends over. Your father and I will be out. It’s so good that you have friends who live right around the corner now.’

‘Shit, shit, shit,’ I muttered under my breath.

I was curled up on the lounge reading when I heard a knock on the front door. I could see through the window it was Josie, Wendy and a couple of other girls I recognised from school. There was nowhere to hide; they had seen me too. Before I could get off the lounge they were through the front door – the four of them dressed in their cheesecloth maxi dresses and roman sandals, me in my cut-off shorts and t-shirt.

‘Hey, what’re you doing?’ asked Josie, dropping a wilted daisy chain around my neck. ‘I thought you were coming over. Your parents aren’t home right?’

‘No, they’ve gone out.’

‘Whose car’s in the drive?’ Wendy asked.

‘My brother’s. He’s away with mates for the weekend.’

‘Are these his keys? Let’s take it around the block. We can get some weed off Sam.’

‘No way, he’d kill me.’

Wendy pushed through the swinging doors into the pool room. ‘Whoa, no wonder you like hanging around your place, this is cool. Check this furry wallpaper, and padded bar stools. Let’s have a drink!’

‘I don’t think it’s a good idea. My mum and dad wouldn’t like it. We can have a game of pool if you want?’

‘Nah, let’s drink. They won’t even know. We’ll just have a little from the clear ones. We can top them up with water.’ Wendy lined up shot glasses on the bar.

‘I really don’t think we should.’

‘Amy, don’t be a party pooper,’ said Josie.

‘I thought you were having people over at your place. Shouldn’t we go?’ I suggest.

‘Nah, they won’t be there till later, we have to go to the bottleshop then.’

Wendy poured from a bottle of gin.

‘Come on girls, down the hatch.’

We threw the alcohol down our throats. It burnt all the way down.

‘Come on let’s go another. Vodka this time.’ Wendy lined the glasses up.

Again, down the throat. I gagged and dry retched.

‘Come on Amy, don’t tell us you haven’t done this before. Ok, last one, tequila.’ Wendy poured out another five shots as if she had been working the bar for years.

I thought I was going to throw up all over Mum’s red hooked wool rug. Somehow, I kept it in. My whole body shook, and a warm glow seeped from my gut into my veins. Wendy wiped out the glasses, filled and replaced the bottles and bounced out the front door, calling for us to follow.

When we got back to the twins’ house a few people had gathered in the downstairs room. I suddenly had the confidence to talk to people I didn’t know. It didn’t matter that I

was still dressed in shorts and t-shirt. I moved comfortably on the dance floor and made people laugh. They liked me.

After that night, I started nicking off from school. The twins' mum didn't care if we went to school or not. Often we would come home to their house at lunchtime and not go back. I hardly saw Debbie or Sandra, just in passing at school. I quit swimming. I told Mum I had too much school work. She would try and make eye contact when I came home late. She would ask me if I was ok; I could tell she was worried. I wish she had stepped in, grounded me, moved me to a different town. I mostly wish she had stopped lending me the car.

INSIDE

JADE HURLEY

Patricia Cage flicked her duster along the sideboard. Feathers trembled over the ugly sea-green vase from Malcolm's mother; they scurried around the wine-purple bowl of potpourri, and at either end, gently brushed the twin columns of orange-blossom candles. She wiped a damp cloth over the babushka doll, as smooth and robust as a tenpin, polished the ceremonial tea bell.

He always brought home a nice gift.

As she moved about the room, chasing away the invisible particles with her scuttling brush, the afternoon light pooled, lightly golden, behind the lace under-curtains, yellowed on their outer side from never being lifted. The dimmed light dropped in dots and swirls over the olive velvet couch; the four corners of the room grey and filled with crisp air from the air conditioner.

She tugged at the red runner on the walnut coffee table, smoothing it, then she straightened. Her eyes fell on the family photo. Gold-framed with whorls and leaves, it hung over the mantelpiece. She stilled and pressed her soft fingers to her chest. She remembered how painstakingly she had curled her little girl's hair, how many times she had straightened her small boy's tie. And Malcolm's hand: she could still feel it, a hard, tight pressure on her skinny shoulder.

Her grey eyes misted as she studied the young, solemn faces of her children. Frozen. Captured.

Never going back.

Patricia Cage gave herself a shake and plumped the cushions. She made her way down the hallway, the wooden floors shining under her slippared feet. She opened the cupboard and placed her duster back in its special case. Closing the doors, she paused, nipping the inside of her lip. She wondered if her son's hair still stuck up at all angles. If he still had a weakness for Saturday afternoon sitcoms.

The cupboard doors shut with a muted thud and Patricia glided into the kitchen, her gauze peach dress floating. The kitchen was spotless, glinting in the fluorescent light and made up of blue benchtops and stainless steel

appliances. She tied on her flowered apron. Malcolm had been away a fortnight coercing deals for his company and tonight he was coming home. She was going to make a special surprise dinner, all his favourite courses.

She switched on the slow cooker, flipped on the kettle. She diced the onions, added a couple of cloves of garlic, some rosemary and just covered the cutlets in the boiling water. She placed on the lid with a clatter and reached for the bell peppers. She paused. Cocked her head, a pearl earring glinting.

Was that a bell?

She tweaked aside the lace over the sink to her right. It was! It was the postman. She watched him pedal down the road. His legs pumping, pumping, propelling his red flashing bike further and further away. He reached the end of the runway and winked out around the corner.

A chattering seeped through the window and Patricia swivelled her gaze to the other side of the yard. She could see Mrs Cutterfield and Mrs Fell talking over the hedge dividing their manicured mint lawns. They prattled and babbled like boiling water, their heads bobbing like lorikeets.

Patricia's nose caressed the glass. Her eyes clung to the butterfly flutter of their mouths, the tilt of their necks as they bubbled laughter.

They held family dinners every Friday; their golden house-light dappled Patricia's window panes.

Patricia let the lace sway back into place.

She would go get the mail. Her daughter might finally have replied to her letters. She might finally let Patricia see her granddaughter.

She entered the hall, a hazy, whitish figure framed by the shine off the floor. Her face murky, she clasped her hands to her stomach. A breath swelled in her chest. She started forward. Down the seemingly endless hall, edging past the side table with the telephone, past the coat and hat stand, until finally, it loomed in front of her. The large, brown, frowning mouth of the door. She lay her hand on the polished doorknob. Its coldness stung her skin and she flinched and let it go. Backing up, she turned on her heel and hastened away down the hall.

She would let Malcolm get it. She had dinner to make.

She stood in the entranceway of the kitchen, wiping her sweaty hands on her apron. It was very silent in here. She could feel it beating down on her from the end of the hall, all hot and muffling, until she felt she must scream to chase it away.

She sucked in a breath and ducked into the living room and switched on the TV. Mindless chatter from salesmen blared from the crackly speakers and she returned to the kitchen. She washed her hands, dried them and wiped the cooled flesh across her face. That was better. The air was clear again. She finished her food preparations and climbed the stairs to their bedroom.

She showered, wrapped herself in a pale, pink bathrobe and sat herself at her vanity. Any woman too painted was a whore, Malcolm had said. So she grazed her lips with

mocha lipstick, barely touched her cheeks with rouge and skimmed her eyes with black lines. A blonde sort of silver, she waved her hair back from her forehead with a hair-pin. It spun out from the centre, gold and comet-like, the spikes capped with circular diamonds, to clasp her hair. She chose the black dress. Malcolm would never let her wear it out, it was too 'suggestive'. But surely, just for him, he would like it. She pressed her feet into her heels and sprayed herself with perfume.

Blue-black light now dripped through the curtained windows. She coasted back down the stairs, one hand drifting down the railing, to set the dining room table. She lit the two symmetrical candelabra. Their tall, flickering, orange flames glimmered over the arranged plates and cutlery. She organised the entrée on a wooden board like the top chefs did on TV, and brushing invisible flecks from the glasses, she opened the bottle of wine to let it breathe.

Then she sat down to wait.

The clock struck ten, then eleven, but she wasn't worried. Her husband often came home in the dead of the night. He didn't know that she was planning a dinner for them. He most likely would have gone to the club to have a drink with his friends first.

The phone screeched, jolting Patricia in her chair. She stood up stiffly and shuffled into the hallway to answer it. She placed the receiver to her ear.

'Hello? Mrs Patricia Cage speaking.'

Someone on the other end of the line said something. She blinked at the dust she had missed on the side table. Wet her lips.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t understand.’

They said it again.

There had been an accident. They were very sorry for her loss.

Had the woman in the passenger seat been a close friend?

No. No, she was most likely a work colleague.

‘Thank you for calling,’ said Patricia slowly, quietly.

The line went dead. She kept it to her ear, listened to it buzzing and sparking until she realised that it was the TV. It was still on. Two for the price of one.

She replaced the receiver and watched her hand tremble as it gripped the plastic hard. The air began to burn, slumping over her like a thick, furry summer. Beads of sweat dappled her forehead. She forced herself to let go of the telephone.

Barely moving, her eyes twitched to their corners. She edged millimetre after millimetre around to face it.

Slowly expanding, like a hand reaching out to grab her, the door stood there. Waiting.

WHITE LINES

ANDREW SPENCER

The walls.

The walls are closing in.

It's coming.

When?

It's here again.

He's here again.

Who?

This house. It's alive.

*

Alex looks around the room. Silencing his mind. Somewhere, a tap drips liquid in languid stretches reminiscent of Dali's imagination. No doubt there's lead in the water.

Alex falls back, arms splaying out; he lies on his mattress.

The desk sits higher than his eye level.

He spies the mandarin, a luminous orange. Unlike most of the food here, it's yet to rot. Thoughts creep into his mind; everything rots.

It is trying to use mind control.

Eat the mandarin.

Eat the mandarin.

Eat the mandarin.

The thoughts keep comi—

No, don't let *It* in.

It's not getting in here.

I look at the calendar hanging skewed against the wall.

It's February.

Is it Alex? The voice of doubt rises.

I think so.

Who changed the calendar?

It did. *It* must have.

The day is hot; beads of sweat sting his eyes. I can't think. I can't take this shit.

Alex kicks his legs out in a spontaneous spasm. I fall flat on the bed listless in exhaustion.

The dust shimmers on beams of sunlight dancing through the open window.

Alex is suffocating. I'm suffocating. I rip at my shirt collar.

Fuck this shit.

*

To ease my mind, I walk through the house. Graffiti riddles every surface.

One wall screams at me, 'HERE WE PRACTICE CUNTISM.'

Who did this?

'HALF AN HOUR TO NEVER,' scrawled on the fridge.

What kind of madness lives here?

Out of the silence a phone bursts to life.

BRING! BRING! BRING! BRING! Over and over it screams.

Answer me! Answer me! Answer me!

Shut the fuck up. I pull at my hair, pace around in a tight circle. It doesn't stop.

I edge towards the sound. The ringing fills me with dread.

The sound is born of the kitchen.

After a hectic scramble Alex finds the phone. It sits on the floor near Stan's bedroom. A white cable runs like an umbilical cord under his door.

Stan's gone away for a while.

I must answer it.

Alex wants to move, but paranoia grips his body firm. He smells the stench of human filth, a neglected kitchen. Bottles and ashtrays highlight the depravity. Smell *It*.

It's in here; in the piles of garbage, in the corners, on the counter tops.

The floorboards are littered with tins, tuna cans and crushed beer cans.

A condom is a dead jellyfish, formless against the skirting board.

Alex realises the fox must have gotten in again.

I've got to stop leaving the doors open.

I tread around the islands of bags, gutted of their contents, trying to avoid the rotten avocado and broken light bulbs.

I lunge and snatch up the phone, as though grabbing at a poisonous snake.

'Hi Alex.' The voice is suspiciously chirpy.

'Helloo ...' I reply, holding the phone away from my ear.

How do they know your name?

'With whom am I speaking?' I ask warily.

'It's Gypsy, you fool.'

'Gypsy,' my heart eases. 'It's Alex here.'

'I know silly, I called you,' she says.

I look out the window. The day is so bright it hurts my eyes.

Where are my sunglasses?

Alex looks around; hot blood floods his head. He feels the walls contracting, breathing down his neck. The boiling

sky tongues the kitchen walls, illuminating a violent orgy of dried peanut butter, stale beer and curry paste.

He sees the mouse poo, little black pellets like poppy seeds, scattered near the toaster.

‘Do you want to come over?’

‘Okay,’ I reply. ‘This place is doing my head in.’ I hang up.

The car is downstairs. The stairs are connected to the kitchen.

Fourteen steps – should be easy.

No shoes?

I’ll beware of broken glass.

One, two ...

Alex trips down three and four. A piece of glass spears his foot.

‘Fuckin’ Shitbags.’

I told you.

He makes it to the first landing, doesn’t feel pain, just wet under his toes.

The steps are dirty with sweaty footprints, blood smeared on the walls and now bloody foot prints.

Holes punched in the gyprock look like eyes.

‘Stop looking at me house. You can’t have me. I’m getting out.’

Alex moves with catlike agility, whisking down the stairs in a leap, narrowly avoiding a violent collision with the washing machine at the base of the stairs. He notices the paint is still white. That’s good, white’s good, whitegoods.

Outside. Yes.

'God damn it.' The sun pins his eyes in blinding pain as they adjust to the daylight.

Alex sees his ute. It's white, white's good.

Keys?

Yes, in my pocket.

Careful of your feet; there's broken glass everywhere.

One, everybody gets one. Not again.

Who broke them?

Maybe they're not broken.

Keys?

In your hand.

How many beers have you had?

I'm not sure. Seven?

That's okay I'll drive.

Alex opens the door, it's unlocked. He dives into the car.

He is still nervous. He can feel the eyes watching him.

Keys in ignition?

Check.

Seatbelt?

Check.

Music?

Check.

Window?

Check.

The motor growls into life, then coughs its way out of the driveway. Alex looks up at the house. It whispers to

him. Telling him bad secrets. Painful truths. In the window he sees *It*, the ghost that started it all. *Its* eyes stare back, cold, empty. *It* smiles. *He* smiles.

*

The house Alex lives in sits on the very top of Bright Street. A high house but far from a bright place. Once white, the paint has aged like smoker's teeth. Weeds draw up from where flowers bloomed. The tin roof wails in hailstorms and moans under the whip of the summer heat. The house talks; its doors, its walls, tell stories.

Two stories cut into the hill. A driveway lined with yellow grass, a funeral precession to bins that reek of decomposing sanity. Vines take the western side of the house by thick strangulation. They maintain a weaker grip at the top giving the house a beautiful view of Lismore – its only redeeming quality.

Alex drops his eyes under its dark gaze. He stomps the accelerator and speeds off. A breeze blows in the open window and calms his humming fingers. Gripping the wheel, he reads the clock on the dashboard. It blinks 4:17pm. It won't be dark for another three hours. Long afternoon shadows yawn around him. The trees are tired, they've been up all day.

'What are you complaining about?' I yell. 'I haven't slept for 56 hours.'

Five is not a respectable number, but it's better than seven. Six is okay, it's a multiple of three.

Seven is a bad number.

In the car next to him, a family takes their daughter to netball; they have to be there before 5pm. The mother will do the shopping while she waits for the game to end.

I think about this as I drive towards Gypsy's house. The sun hits me in the eyes.

Why didn't you bring your sunglasses Alex?

They're broken.

Is this normal, I wonder: speeding down the road, escaping the ghost that lives with me? My fingernails are caked with grime, no nine to five here.

Are they the freaks or am I?

Outside that house the world still exists. I begin to relax. The steady slash-dot of clean white lines on the road keeps me focused. Navigation of the roundabouts bares no teeth. The traffic is light today.

Sunday?

Possibly.

My hands shake on the wheel, there are cuts all over them.

Why?

I wish I had my sunglasses. I have lost six pairs this month. \$8 from the op-shop. Eight times six is thirty-eight, no forty-eight. \$48, that's okay. Forty-eight is a good number, an even number. Forty-seven is bad, uneven. The speed signs tell me to go 60km/hour, that's a nice round number, an even number.

Don't speed.

Don't speed.

Don't speed.

Follow the white lines.

White lines.

White lines.

White lines, the mind echoes.

THE GREY FACTOR

ERIN BRADY

David sat up quickly, fumbling in the dark for his phone. 2:29am. *Same time as last night*, he thought.

Easing his head back onto his pillow, David willed his heart to slow down, worried the urgent thump would drown out the noise. The muffled sound of a tinkling bell floated in through the window.

Bloody roos, he thought. *I've got ya this time.*

Like a stealth ninja just past his prime, David silently slipped his sixty-one-year-old frame out of bed. He pulled

on his corduroy pants, threadbare on the knees, and a black cotton singlet. Ignoring the buckle in his right knee, he tiptoed down the stairs to the front door. David reached for the shotgun that was waiting in the corner like a faithful working dog ready for action, then slowly he opened the door and crept out into the blanket of darkness.

The bell on the trip wire rang again. *Mongrels*, David hissed.

He needed to get there before they got to the roses. David scrambled blindly along the crushed shell track towards Meg's flower garden, the nose of his shotgun leading the way.

*

David had never cared much for the flowers, thought of them more as weeds. His focus had always been on the native species in the bush. But since Meg passed away three years ago, he'd taken control of her garden with manic enthusiasm. He was surprised, as the lonely days extended, to find himself spending more and more time watering hydrangeas, dead-heading magnolias, and whispering to the tulip bulbs before his cracked fingers plunged them into the hard autumn soil. The brilliant blaze of the resulting colours distracted David from the shadows that crept out of the dark bush. The drone of honey bees and darting fantails brought life to his desperate isolation.

But David's floral success stopped short with Meg's prized English roses. Each spring the thorny branches would bud, anticipating a royal coronation. But over-

night, year after year, David would wake to find the plants stripped bare.

He knew his enemy all too well. When David and Meg purchased the property twenty-four years ago, the bush was infested with wallabies. At first it was a novelty. Kawau Island was the only place in New Zealand where wallabies lived, a throwback to 1862 when Sir George Grey bought the island. In consultation with Charles Darwin, Sir Grey shipped exotic flora and fauna from around the world to adorn his private garden, including the wallaby transported from Australia.

Sir Grey's colonial reign over the island lasted three decades, but the hardy wallaby stayed on and thrived. With a penchant for sweet, fresh shoots, the small marsupial feasted on the island's bottom layer of bush, unhindered by predators for more than a century.

By the time David and Meg moved in and marched out their 100-acre bush block they discovered a graveyard. The carcasses of grand old kauri trees lay in various stages of decay, rotting into the forest floor. Rows of manuka trees were collapsed like a pack of cards, the fallen soldiers of erosion. Determined to save the native trees that remained, David and Meg travelled to the mainland, bought a shot gun and began to eradicate the foreign pest responsible for the degeneration of their bush.

*

Lifting the rifle to his shoulder, David lowered himself stiffly onto the wooden bench overlooking the flower gar-

den, his left eye at home on the cold sight. He lined up the crosshairs on a brown wallaby, about half a metre tall, nestled between two bushes, chewing. The bell tinkled again.

My roses, David hissed.

The wallaby's ears pricked up; its neck straightened as it sniffed the air. Leaning back on its tail, the wallaby laid its front paws on the ground, like a sprinter taking its mark.

Boom!

The roo darted to the left, then tracked uphill. The sound of branches snapping grew fainter as it thrashed further into the dense bush.

Bugger!

Shoulders slumped, David trudged back to the house, shotgun cracked open at his side, the smell of burnt gunpowder clinging to his clothes. He'd check the damage to the garden in the morning, maybe even build a fence.

*

It was while David was rifling through the wood pile the following day that he spotted the damp crimson stain on the back lawn. He saw more blood smeared on a snapped manuka sapling at the edge of the bush. Following the bloody trail, David found the wallaby near the top of the hill. He knew it was dead but kicked it over anyway to see where the bullet had struck.

Bloody hell, he said.

Fighting the urge to run, David nudged the animal over again with his boot. A ripple fanned across the wallaby's bulging stomach. Reluctantly, he bent down, his thick fin-

gers fumbling with the pouch. A sour smell like cat urine smacked him in the face. Through the veil of stench, he saw a brown wrinkled ball, wincing.

Christ, where did you come from?

David eased the pouch closed, and stood up, interlacing his fingers behind his neck. He took a deep breath in, letting the damp air fill his deflated chest. Specks of light danced around him as the sun peeked through the gaps in the thick canopy above. In that moment, David felt like his feet were rooted to the forest floor, his lungs invaded by the essence of the kauri trees towering over him, sharing one breath.

He didn't know how long he stood there, breathing with the trees, but eventually David uprooted his feet, picked up the stiffened mother, and carried her back to the house. Gently, he lay the carcass on the front porch, then went inside to put the jug on. Moments later he returned with Meg's canvas army bag slung over his shoulder, a hot water bottle stuffed into the bottom. David carefully pried the reluctant joey from its cold, sour home and lowered it into the dark warmth of the bag. He thought he heard a sigh.

Treading carefully up the track, David set off towards South Cove, a five-hour hike through dense old-growth forest. He'd heard there was a woman down there who looked after joeys rescued from the front line.

*

As his feet found their rhythm and his breathing deepened, David placed his calloused hands over the warm bundle swaying before him and began to pat.

THE GREY FACTOR

Pat, pat. Pat, pat.
You'll be right mate.

LAMENT FOR LOST FRIENDSHIP

INGRID ANNABEL MASON

LAMENT FOR LOST FRIENDSHIP

The airy flats
above the Bremer
midday's humidity, curtained sun
floorboards knotted
gnarled, nailed cheek to cheek.
Blushing deeper red in shifting light, I think of you,
a passing shower, knocking once or twice.

In Riverlink, I saw you for a moment,
your apricot scarf spilling over cream.
Determined, brisk, husband in step.
His acne neon-lit. Your son adrift.

You missed me, your focus on The Exit.
You met glare, and I, optical sensor sealed
froze there in obeisance.

Time has passed
Since you escorted me down cold steps and
out of favour,
one April autumn evening,
softening your adjustment with apologies.

Friendship is fettered.
Chain and key with him.
If you were here, I would
shake liquid diamonds off your winter coat.
Listen to long years unravel.
Free you.

Droplets coalesce,
heavy enough to wear a stone
I dare not bridge the cyberspace between us.
It's wired and detonated.
Still.

Here comes the heavy rain
Blundering down my rusty gutters.
Breezes blow the doors ajar,
And I watch our grievance run.

HENRY KENDA GARDENS

LINDA STEVEN

As I sit now preparing for what my eldest son says will be my last move, I ponder how can I turn this into one last rebellious stand. I look around, how could everything have gone so wrong? What happened to the idealistic dreams we had in the 60s? It seems that while we sat around smoking dope and philosophising, others were making moves to control us all. That glorious summer in Surrey His sitting on the garden

steps eading to the vine grape entwined courtyard. How warm was the sun; how sunny was my mind then.

We have no one to bame but ourseves. Does this mean we shoud give up? Not at a, at east it heps us fee better about ourseves. I reaise I wi soon be iving on the edge, among an outcast group of peope for the most part shunned by the mainstream. Not indigenous, not drug users, not the mentay unstabe atthough a these woud quaify. No, I wi be joining the edery, seniors, pensioners who are swept into their beige boxes in monitored 'gated' compexes, treated to a 'ovey perm' once a month and forgotten.

Now many peope would question why I am making this move, teing me I am too young, I wi never fit in there, I wi hate it. A of these are true; I am 64, and I never 'fit in' anywhere much, preferring my own company and that of one four egged friend, and they are right I wi probaby hate it. We not so much 'it' as the way society ooks at 'it'.

I have been taking stock. Over the years I have gathered many things around me, a of which mean something. Sady to me ony, so the day my edest son ooked around and said "you have too much stuff here" I made a decision. Rather than die one day and think that a my stuff woud be a burden for others to fix, I chose to fix it myself.

I had a nasty bout of vertigo ast year, and woud have iked some assistance. But no one ived cose enough to come, or were too busy to do so. So, this community thing seems ike a ogica answer. I will move into one of these 'ifestye viages' and see if I can stye my ife differenty to the way most of the residents do. I could be kidding mysef: the over-

wheming weight of beige may be too much even for me to overcome.

This move is equa to iving with another species. Wi they a be ike brain dead zombies? Or ‘dinky-die true-bue right-wing get-rid-of-the-foreigners’ types? In which case the presence of my ovey coffee-cooured sons and my grandchidren is going to ratte the status quo somewhat. Maybe it wi be a peasant surprise, with hundreds of untod stories for me to hear and transcribe.

*

The half-life of ii –

The viilla II bought iis pleasant enough wiith a lot of sunshiine. But iit iis very bland, so II must try to add my own character to iit. II had thought ii miight remove the iin-siipiid peachy 1970s tiiles because II iimagiined II would iimplode iincarcerated iinside a piiece of pastime Peachism, albeii in perfect condiitiion. Iin the face of such an assault upon my aesthetic senses money would usually be meaniingless to me. But has become a poiint of priinciiple now. Lend Lease wiill benefit; there wiill be no capiital gaiin for me myself or miine. My dog, Pan, handled hiimself well untiil we moved and now he iis siick to the heart liike me and wiill not eat or driink no matter the meat. He took hiis mediiciine and iimproved before bounciing back to unwell. What iis wrong wiith thiis place that looks so wholesome on the outsiide but iis full of pestiilence iinside?

And diid II tell you what a rort thiis iindustry iis? That purports to ‘look after’ the elderly. No? You are iin for a

treat, let me explain! They tell you there's some capital gain, but it could be a loss. The DMF will at the end be paid of course. Some places keep the profit but pay your balance quicker. If you think you're best to take the gains five years they will be lost. But should you weigh these options and not give a toss, when you think it's all been covered you get the reinstatement costs.

It is this unconscionable group of facts, built into four inches of lease for loan; hidden in corridors too hard for even legal eagles to spy from lofty eeries. All these hard-to-swallow details become fossil fuel that drive me on to champion the weak. Suddenly the colour of my world matters not one jot, only my salmon-hued desire remains: to fight this corporation who so relentlessly wish to fleece the elderly of what little is left of their lifetime's work. Gone now – the chocolate pressed metal, the crisp black and white renovated bathroom – no more fresh winter frosts of the mountains; all decay now in my mind's vision. How could I have imagined this new future would be restful like the grave? I shall not cross the Styx today; the boatman will have to wait for his fee, for I have work to do.

FORGOTTEN

MANDY BARTLETT

FORGOTTEN

Whispers
Of voices long gone
Hang on trees
Like fetid fruit
Waning with time
Secrets
Of lovers betrayed
Drift on waves
Like lonely buoys
With no anchor

Dreams
Of slumbering souls
Light the moonless night
Like a sprinkle of fireflies
Erupting from shadow

Stirring
With the first kiss of dawn
The dream awakened
Fades to mist
And never was.

TALES FROM INDIA

KATINKA SMIT

Manenjanay stood firmly on the platform. His eyes fixed on a thin point on the horizon, waiting for the nightly train to pass. It came in that time of darkness, just after the light had dimmed and the business of the day had finished, when all the villagers had gathered their tools and chattel from the fields, when the children had surrendered to the sunset and gathered around their mothers' feet begging for a plate, when the men had hidden all their oxen in their sugar cane

pens and the birds had satisfied their bellies and nestled down to roost.

At this time, the lone village light came on and the families gathered under the sticky blue lamplight to gossip and gorge on their dinners, their mouths dancing with fingers and tongues. No one spoke of his nightly duty, but the knowledge still passed from person to person like a bowl of fennel and salt, chewed in silence. His old mother kept a plate aside for him, which he returned to after his nightly vigil and supped from quietly, breaking his bread to sop up the thin meal while his mother made her final puja for the day.

Manenjanay turned away from the silently passing train. Some days it was hard to greet their passing. They came to glimpse the fields of their families, to spy friends grown old and withered, to long for lost loves, to see who had arrived newly in the world to take their place. Sometimes he was tempted to look in, to search for that familiar face. To see if Deiwa looked out for him.

Whenever he answered that temptation, every face looked familiar, as though they had all passed by him in the flesh at some point in time. Perhaps during all his years selling tickets in this small village station he had served every single one of these lost souls. They might have touched fingers, or lingered eyes, or smiled in congenial thanks during that small exchange of request, reply, paper, coin. Perhaps longing for what we have lost makes everyone look familiar.

They say that everyone is reborn, unless they have reached Godhead. Life is revisited, time and time again. In this world of karma there is no room for the spirits of the dead. The travellers on this train were the spirits of the living, returned in their dreams. Most were still children, boys and girls who had trusted the hand held out to them, as children must. Others were still beautiful in the flush of young adulthood, when the confidence of life is at its fullest and the determination to undo fate is fatal. Young, glowing women in bright embroidered kurtis, dressed in their unmarried hopes of homecoming, and handsome, proud, youthful men in splendid linen kurta suits, their thick hair combed and oiled, all of them confident of a welcomed return. Some had passed on to middle age, with careworn faces and stooped shoulders, their hands leaning limply on the glass, the acceptance of what life has dealt working its way even into their dreams. There were not many who continued on after that. Slowly they disappeared. Their spirits eroded to nothing under the weather of their fate, the last vestiges of childish hope blown away by an unrelenting wind.

He had glimpsed an old man once, his hands splayed on the glass, his face pressed against the window, filled with years of seasons. The train had chugged silently past at its usual walking pace and Manenjanay walked along with it, his hand outstretched in the dark. A single, shining tear trembled on the old man's withered face and rolled down the window. A thin wind funnelled into the window's channel and sucked the tear out from under the glass, scattering

it out over the dust in a small sparkling shower. Each diamond droplet turned into a glistening footprint, a tumbling pathway that staggered left and right, as though rushing and stopping to search in each direction. The footprints suddenly stopped, and as Manenjanay looked back at the train, the old man had shimmered briefly, then faded away.

The calendar had floated across time, flitting over each day like a field butterfly visiting flowers. Manenjanay marked off the small squares; each day drifted into the next, each vigil become ritual, as unthinking and as automatic as his morning offerings to Vishnu and Lakshmi.

Marriage passed him by; his working life began at thirteen as a cleaner at the station, two years and three months before Deiwa had disappeared. His public grieving had only added to his lowly station; a widowed mother, three dead siblings and no land beyond the small vegetable patch surrounding their hut had put him at the bottom of every family's list. But for Manenjanay this was not a problem; his heart had always belonged to Deiwa. In his daily prayers he had long acquired the habit of imagining them as the divine couple, for all eternity together, blessed. When Lakshmi accepted his offerings, he saw Deiwa's face, the small crinkle in the bridge of her nose when she smiled, her eyebrows spreading like wings across her forehead, and her small teeth glowing like jewels in her mouth.

When he was promoted to ticket seller at age sixteen, his unthinking heart had pushed him along the path to her house, his mind filled with her shining face. He'd slammed the door open shouting the news in jubilation and had

rushed to the small back room where she would greet him. Her eyes would light up at the sound of his voice, the way they always had.

Mud walls absorbed his voice. Manenjanay pushed his face against the musty render, as though he could find her in the rammed earth of her home, her name on his breath as though she were life itself.

His tears ran rivulets down the rammed earth walls until little rivers of mud began to flow and pool around his feet. The room filled up to his ankles. A small sea swirled in the room. It climbed the doorways and clawed at the walls until finally the tiny house collapsed on top of him. But love does not lay down to die while hope still lives. It whispered his name in her voice. It stole into his lungs. Hope forced itself through the muck and put breath where death had hoped to be. Manenjanay hauled himself out of the heap like some kind of swamp monster, eyelashes dripping slurry, and the house had washed away like any pile of earth in the next monsoon flood.

Her parents had never returned; they left the village four days after her disappearance. They loaded their wagon with all their food and possessions and travelled the road that dogged the railway track towards Delhi. They'd heard that some village girls from the next valley had been seen there. Lamplight gossip insisted that they had taken their lives away on a tidy roll of rupees earned from selling her to the Trader. Pitiless tongues had them squandering their wealth and left selling groundnuts in the streets of Varanasi. Kinder mouths wagered that they hoped to be sunken

into the river as paupers and washed clean in the Great Mother when their miserable times came to die.

Manenjanay had asked every disembarking passenger if they had seen her, telling them about her golden-brown eyes, the way she walked with her kurti always clutched in her left hand, her habit of crossing the road away from strange dogs. But no one had ever seen a girl like this, or they thought all girls looked like this, or else they ignored the inconsequential cleaning boy with his broom and mop and bucket. When he became the ticket seller he asked all those departing to search for her, to tell her that he was waiting at home, and they would marry as soon as she returned. Eventually time thinned his hair, and his hope.

Today his heart was heavy; thirty-five years had passed without her. Thirty-four years ago he had discovered the train. He remembered how he'd stood on the platform in darkness that first time, the stupor that had overcome him when he realised it had been a full year since she had gone. Transfixed, he'd stood at the edge of the platform, staring into the darkening horizon. The gloaming surrounded him; the day turned slowly into mysterious night. At some point his attention had settled on the carriages whispering past. They grew thicker and heavier with substance. The train's interior brightened; the more he looked the more he could see. It shimmered with the light of souls longing.

It felt like hours since he had started his vigil. Indeed, his mother had gone to bed, and the pool of village light had long since emptied of people. The train stretched noiselessly into the distance in both directions, a long, glowing thread

aching out over the landscape. He saw that it stretched out over all the years he had been waiting, beginning here, in the dark, in his longing, on this platform thirty-four years ago.

Window after window slowly passed him. Manenjanay turned and walked along beside the train, against the way it was travelling. Finally he found what he was looking for. He grabbed the brass handgrips with both hands, lifted his sandalled foot onto the step and leapt up into the carriage.

*

Deiwa woke to singing. It was the sweet, high, devotional pre-dawn singing practiced by village women on the festival days of Chhath Puja. They would be by the rivers and the creeks, or any piece of water, bathing and gathering water to prepare offerings for the sun god. Soon they would be making thekuas, binding the flour with ghee and jaggery syrup and frying the biscuits hard on hot griddles. They would be wrapping themselves in their finest saris, mentally preparing for the three-day fast ahead.

How many days had they been travelling now? She had ceased to register time since she had asked for a ride to the next village. Only Shiva knew how many villages they had passed since then. She had prayed to him to reveal where they were going, and now he had let her know. She recognised the melody of a folk song her mother sang. They were still somewhere near home.

She poked the driver in the ribs. He had drunk heavily the night before and his breath stank of stale wine. He

snored on. She pushed his flung-out arm off her. He grunted and rolled over half on his side and farted on her leg. Deiwa sat up. She looked at the swine next to her. His fat cheeks sprouted black and grey bristles and spittle pooled at the edge of his rubbery lips. His yellowing eyes rolled half open against his fluttering lids, and the pores of his nose were dirty. Even his skin was piggish, like a pale pig that burns pink in the sun. The first thing she had ever noticed about him was the peculiar green colour of his eyes. He might have been handsome when he was young. But now he was not; he was a solid weight of sweating flesh.

She pulled up her knees and inspected the hobble in the half-light. The rope was sloppily looped around the twist between her ankles. She followed its length to the wheel; the knot was loosely tied around the strut. She looked carefully at the sleeping man. She pushed him again, this time with her fingernails. His pudgy fingers stayed drooped against the dirt. His breath rolled out steadily.

The rope was soft, and the knot opened easily from a little picking. She unwound it from her own feet and carefully wrapped it around his, lifting one heavy foot then the other, winding the rope into the figure eight that he usually did, but three times, then she gently rolled some of the remainder around the twist in the middle until the hobble was snug around his ankles. She ran the remainder through the spokes and up to his hands, which got the same treatment. She knotted the last length back to the wheel.

He farted again. Deiwa needed no further encouragement and crawled out from under the wagon.

The ox lifted its head and stared at her as she stood up. She whispered namaste and thanked Shakti for her luck. She would make a special puja and honour the goddess's participation in her escape. But not right now. She straightened her kurti, lifted her feet and ran towards the women's singing.

*

This was of course only a pleasant daydream that she spent days sewing into the fabric of horror that her life was now clothed in. Deiwa's captor was in fact extremely vigilant, and as sober as any pious Brahmin. Except he was a slave trader who specialised in stealing unsuspecting young girls from roadsides, and knew all the tricks a desperate girl would attempt to escape her horrible fate. Her hobbles were bound tight, and her future was very grim.

She had been whipped already for crying out when passers-by came near. But in truth, no one would help her even if they heard her whimpering. This man was well-known in these parts, sometimes even an honoured guest, and no one knew when the time would come when they would need to trade a daughter for some sacks of rice to get the family through a season, or replace a plough nearly a century old, snapped on a stone spat up by the earth's grinding chew.

The wheels of Deiwa's fate had been set in motion that fateful afternoon when she had walked to the next village. It did not occur to her that her mother had sent her on an unusual mission. She did not think about the look that had

passed between her mother and father, or the way her father had trembled as he took the mango hook off its stick when she had wished him goodbye. She did not think about the special package of bhurfi, the milk sweet normally reserved for feast days that her mother had wrapped for her, or how her brother had been sent off to a friend's place to play for the day. But she did wonder if this is what had happened to her friend Smita from the neighbouring village, who had since as long as she could remember graced Deiwa's long hot harvest days with smiles and joking laughter. On one ordinary day in one particularly dry and dusty season, Smita had been sent to another village in great excitement on an ox cart such as this one, delighted at going on such a clever journey for a secret purpose. Deiwa had waved at her friend from the pump where she drew water for her mother for cooking, and Smita had waved back like a flower in a windy field, never to return again.

Deiwa peeked out from under the thick tarpaulin. Stars pricked the sky and the lolling gait of the enormous oxen was slowing. It knew a rest was coming. For Deiwa it would be no rest. The day was when she slept, lulled to sleep by the rocking wheels, cradled by sacks of rice with a small air gap between her nose and the canvas, her limbs languid from the heat. The day was when she dreamed of her younger brother, his hands in their mother's hair, his soft laugh and his delight in small things, like the satin wend of black curled like a snake at their mother's neck.

Night times there was no such forgetting. Soon she would be pulled from the wagon and thrown to the ground,

first to be roughly enjoyed by the driver and then tied to the wheels between which they slept, her eyes globed against the night, her ears thrumming with crickets and the snores of the driver.

It did not occur to her that he was delivering her somewhere, or that the sacks of rice were cover for his precious cargo. For now, it seemed she had been simply kidnapped for his pleasure, and she expected an eternity of nights like these, shackled like a prize cow in a pen.

But if life can be likened to a painting by a fine master, this time in captivity was a small pencil study of a greater, much more elaborate work. Soon they would meet a truck waiting at the bottom of a mountain pass, and the small sketch would have proved its usefulness of detail. She would be traded for a large bundle of notes, much larger than the small bundle that had been given to her father, and shoved behind boxes of ladies' sanitary items, into a dark hole that groaned with the weight of seventeen other lives and kidnappings not unlike her own. Here the full colour and complexity of the masterpiece would begin to take shape; eighteen terrified girls at the start of their menses shivering in a dark hold, none of them united by family or language, none of them able to read a road sign, none of them ever to see their former lives again, and all of them destined for a long, full life in Hell.

EDNA CONVALESCES

KAREN TRAPPETT

Edna sat in the bamboo chair on the terrace. The cool afternoon breeze sent icy fingers through her russet hair – *grey is so dreary* – and she pulled her cardigan close. The clouds looked like a corrugated iron roof, with diamond-shaped gaps where tiny patches of blue peeped radiantly. Her iced tea sat untouched on the dappled white whorls and arcs of the cast iron table.

Startled, she looked down to see small fingers tugging at her cardigan.

‘Found you, Grandma!’

‘I wasn’t lost sweetie, just sitting in the cool air. Here, sit on my lap and tell me what you’ve been up to.’

The girl clambered up, sitting with a bump. ‘I found a dead lizard. It was yuck! And I had blueberries, see!’ She thrust her palms into Edna’s face.

‘Well, I can see that, Catherine, your fingers are blue.’ Grabbing a tissue from the table, Edna rubbed vigorously.

The girl erupted in a fit of giggles and squirmed in her lap.

‘I think we’re going to need some soap, sweetie. Hold Grandma’s hand and we’ll go inside.’

As they stood to enter the kitchen, the heady scent of roses assaulted her sinuses. Stifling a sneeze as they reached the sink, she helped Catherine wash. ‘There, that’s better.’

‘Thanks, Grandma.’ Catherine blew a kiss, then sang and skipped through the doorway. Edna smiled, then quickly returned to the terrace – the fresh air was marvelous.

Below the terrace was Charles’s rose garden. Her late husband had loved them. She thought them loathsome. She could see the denuded stems in mottled, brackish shades; their vermilion flowers rested on the slate kitchen benchtop – waiting for Rose. She was somewhere in the house, probably fussing, finding fault with something Edna had done. Her shrill voice was always correcting and reprimanding: *Get down off that chair. Don’t paint that. Throw that old thing away.*

Absently tracing the motif on the table (it was a paisley pattern that had once been her mother's favourite), she thought, *I'm not a child; if I want to paint the shed, I'll bloody well paint it.* Her iced tea was still cool, faintly quelling the fire of her thoughts.

'Mum, are you out here?'

'Over here, Rose.' The crisp click of stilettos on terracotta tiles became louder.

Rose put her hand on her mother's arm lightly. 'Are you ready, Mum? I've got the car out the front. Do you need help with your bags?'

Edna replied, 'Yes, I'm ready, dear. My bags are in my room. Thank you. You aren't taking the roses, are you? You know they make me ill.'

'I'll take them later, don't worry.' Rose saw the almost full glass on the table. *Didn't I make it properly?* 'You haven't touched your drink, Mum. You'd better finish it before we go. I'll pack the car and we'll go in ten minutes.'

'Okay Rose, I'll be there soon.'

'Good, I'll see you out the front.' She moved her hand away and Edna felt the warmth leave her.

She sighed as she watched Rose walk away. *You can't wait to be rid of me, can you dear daughter?*

*

Catherine sang happily, and Rose focused on the road ahead. Edna sat, still as a mahogany Buddha, watching the world outside the window. Too quickly was the high-

walled, pink monstrosity before them. The open doors were not inviting, but she couldn't shift her eyes away from them.

Catherine's tiny hand sat in her sinewy one and Edna clasped her walking stick firmly as they entered the building, Rose already inside. Dark-hued timber made the waiting room gloomy and the light from the ancient lamps was dim. An old lady lounged in a deep chair, an oxygen tank at her feet, her face red and round, eyes closed, snoring loudly. In contrast, the lone worker at the main desk was fluorescently brilliant, her face criss-crossed in severe angles of light. *I suppose they prefer us to be in the dark.*

The woman, about fifty, came out from behind the desk. 'Hello, I'm Mrs Sewell, the manager of Havershock. Please come with me.'

She led them to a room that was some sort of library or study. The walls were papered in a faded paisley pattern. *From the seventies by the look of it*, Edna thought. It was missing near the ceiling and the edges hung in drab tassels, too high to see unless you were looking for it.

'Have a seat and I'll be with you shortly.' Mrs Sewell left the room.

Catherine sat in the chair next to Edna. Rose sat next to the desk. Edna took her glasses off and reached into the handbag for a tissue.

'Your eyes are red, Grandma. Are you sad?' Catherine stroked Edna's face.

'No sweetie, my eyes are just a bit sore. I must have some dust in them, that's all.'

‘Poor Grandma. Let me kiss it better.’ Reaching up, Catherine kissed her, then skipped over to a toy box in the corner of the room.

‘I hope she comes back soon.’ Rose glanced at her watch and tapped the desk with her manicured nails. ‘I have a hairdresser’s appointment and I’ve got to get the roses to the shop.’

‘I’m sure she won’t be long, Rose.’

The door opened. ‘Sorry to keep you waiting. Welcome to our home. Please call me Patience, all our residents do. Follow me and I’ll show you to your room on the third floor.’

As they left the room, Rose moved closer to Edna and whispered, ‘Remember Mum, I can’t stay long. Come here Catherine.’ The girl came over, but grabbed her grandmother’s hand.

*

The room was unremarkable and Edna inwardly cringed. The manager pointed out and down the hall.

‘There’s a common room over there. Dinner will be at five in the dining room on the ground floor. I’ll let you get settled in.’

A man carried her bags into the room, then left with Mrs Sewell, who pulled the door closed behind her.

‘This room is not too bad, Mum.’ Rose abruptly hugged her mother then backed away.

‘Yes.’ Edna sat on the bed and reached into her handbag. ‘Here are the keys, Rose. Please take good care of it.’

‘I will. You’ll get used to this place; I’ve heard it’s quite nice. They’ll make you comfortable.’ She put the keys in her bag then stood up. ‘Okay, Catherine, let’s go.’

The child hugged Edna tightly. ‘I love you, Grandma. I’ll clean the house every day.’

‘Oh, my beautiful girl; Grandma loves you so much.’ Kissing Catherine, she stood up to kiss Rose, but her daughter was already at the door.

‘Bye Mum. I’ll pop in next week.’

The door closed and Edna was alone. She waited thirty minutes, then picked up the phone. ‘I’d like a taxi please – Church – Havershock Retirement Home – international airport – yes, I’ll be ready in ten minutes. Thank you.’

She dialled reception. ‘Hello, this is Mrs Church, room 381. I’d like someone to take my bags to the front entrance – yes, that’s right – I’ve changed my mind and won’t be staying – five minutes? That’s fine.’

*

Edna stood at the front gate, leaning on her walking stick, her bags sitting beside her. Apart from a verbal scuffle with the manager who wanted some papers signed (Edna told her to get Rose to sign them), there was no impediment to her departure. The taxi was on time.

‘Where to, love?’

‘The international airport please.’

‘No worries. So, where are you headed?’

‘I’m off to the Caribbean.’

‘That’ll be lovely, I hear it’s a gorgeous place in summer.’

*Caribbean Cruise Lines
Suite 381*

Dear Rose,

I love you, but how dare you expect me to live in that atrocity. I'm ashamed and deeply offended that you would think it was a 'nice' place for my convalescence. I would have died in agony in that disgusting house. But don't worry, I'm feeling marvellous now. Everything is so new and exciting. The sea air is amazing.

Did you know Charles bought a suite on the Caribbean Dawn before he died? Oh, that's right, I never told you. Oops. This is my forever home now. Of course, the house is still yours. I hate it anyway – always have. I do hope the roses survive – I accidentally spilled some tree poison all over them, but I may have missed some.

Anyway, the doctor here says I'm quite well now and not likely to die anytime soon. I needn't have worried at all. Isn't that wonderful? Oh, and I have a nurse now; Maximillian says hello. He has magic fingers.

Give Catherine a big kiss from me – she's so precious, and clever, just like her grandma. 😊

Love, Mum xxx

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

MICHELLE ALLAM

Michelle Allam is a published writer with an Associate Degree in Creative Writing. She is primarily interested in the portrayal of violence and trauma in narrative, and is currently studying Psychological Science with Southern Cross University.

MANDY BARTLETT

Based in Melbourne, Mandy is currently working toward completing the Associate Degree in Creative Writing while working full time in Local Government. Writing across a range of genres and themes, Mandy takes inspiration for short stories and poetry from dreams and daily life, and enjoys following ideas to wherever they lead. Mandy has had poetry published in *Northerly Magazine* and is dedicating 2018 to sharing more of her words with the world

ERIN BRADY

Erin Brady lives in Wooloweyah, NSW. She has worked as a journalist in television and print, with the occasional defection to the dark side of public relations. Erin has two daughters whom she has taught to surf and ski. Although she's called Australia home for almost half of her life, Erin's identity and inspiration is deeply rooted in Aotearoa (New Zealand) where she grew up. Erin is passionate about storytelling, and encouraging people to tell their own stories. In 2018 she launched 'The Long Way Home', a short story competition for the people of the Clarence Valley.

LINDA BROOKS

Linda Brooks lives in Adelaide. She gained a publisher for *A Curious & Inelegant Childhood*, a memoir of growing up in rural Australia. She has written and illustrated children's books, fiction and poetry. Her short stories have been published in anthologies: *Coastlines 5 & 6* (SCU), *Wood, Bricks & Stone* (Catchfire Press), *Grieve* (Hunter Writer's

Centre) and *Longing for Solitude* (Stringybark Press). She has won creative writing awards: first prize for The Legacy University Level Creative Writing Award; first prize in the Gabe Reynaud Creative Writing Award and the Mater Misericordiae Grieve Writing Award.

RAINEY GOULET

With a lifetime of dispassionate careering, Rainey Goulet has been impassioned by an Associate Degree in Creative Writing. Whilst discovering a yearning for children's writing when her children were young enough to inspire, her numerous short stories and unfinished novel became bedfellows with the daddy long legs who lay claim to her work in the desk drawer. Poignantly, inspiration was slain with dispassionate careering once again. Having evicted those spiders in retirement, the flesh of her fingers now rests rancid in the cracks of her keyboard as she frantically writes in her pursuit to write well.

LARA GRANGE

Lara caught the creativity bug early, immersing herself in music, acting, singing, dancing and art during her school life. Pursuing singing, Lara's first degree was in Creative Arts – Performance. After working for several years on and off as a professional singer, Lara turned her focus to Speech Pathology and Language Communication, during which she was diagnosed with a life-changing illness. As an expressive outlet, and to promote understanding of her condition, Lara began writing. Consequently, writing

became one of her most treasured skills and greatest aspiration. Lara currently writes a blog as MsMSunmasked, and is in her second year at SCU.

CRYSTAL HAYWARD

Crystal Hayward is a thirty-three-year-old female, living and working in the New England region of New South Wales. She writes in order to relieve the stress of her day job, which involves making coffee and correcting syntax of her employer's emails. When not writing or working, she can be found with her head in a book, blocking out the real world. She has no children, is not married, and is considering adopting a trio of hairless cats.

JADE HURLEY

Jade Hurley is a young student who has had a passion for writing since she could first breathe. She is heavily influenced by Feminism, global mythology and theories about the unconscious.

JO-ANN KELLY

Jo-Ann Kelly is currently a second year student of an Associate Degree of Creative Writing, returning to study after completing a Bachelor of Business Communications twenty years ago. She has resided in Coffs Harbour for approximately ten years. Jo-Ann and her husband have raised two children who are immersed in studying Psychology and Medicine/Surgery. She has worked professionally in writing roles in industries such as Tourism, Corporate, Health and

Government. She has special interest in promoting equality for women. She loves travel, notably destinations such as London and Rome, Italian food and red wine.

CHRISTY MANTESE

Christy Mantese balances writing with raising four children, 1 dog, 3 cats and a husband. While floundering amidst domestic chaos, her feet are placed firmly in the clouds. She loves to concoct and write stories that disrupt the patriarchal paradigm.

INGRID ANNABEL MASON

Ingrid Mason is mostly made of oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus and is very grateful she wasn't born a chicken.

MARTINE MOORE

Martine was born in the county town of Donald, in Central Victoria. After studying fashion design, Martine worked in the bridal industry before moving to WA where she became a picture framer, then a Cat Welfare Officer and Ranger. Retuning east to study Veterinary Nursing in Orange, NSW, Martine is currently studying the Associate Degree in Creative Writing and will continue on into Animal Law at Southern Cross University. Martine hopes to publish works encasing animal welfare for research and educational purposes and has often been heard to state 'one must know the rules before one can break them'.

VICTORIA NORTON

Victoria is a mature student who writes poetry and fiction. She has self-published a collection of short stories and a children's book. Her short stories have been published in several anthologies and magazines including *Northerly*. She has won awards for her short stories and poetry.

CATHERINE PERVERSI

Having once variously described herself on an online dating site as having crawled through the inner sanctum of the Great Pyramid, gutted fish in Iceland, slept with thousands of snorting camels in India, survived -30 c in Turkey wearing cotton dacks, drunk the blood of suckling pig in Sumatra, and walked on stilts in the centre of Melbourne, Catherine now writes life's extraordinary ordinariness in an effort to feel something, and works in service to those in the community who wish to die at home.

REBECCA RYALL

Rebecca is a full time mother and student at Southern Cross University in Lismore, studying writing and cultural studies.

REBECCA SARGEANT

Rebecca enrolled in SCU's Associate Degree in Creative Writing to revive her long-dormant interest in writing and poetry. She has previously studied commerce and law, and honed her creative skills as a tax lawyer. She lives in the

Northern Rivers and, together with her family, enjoys being part of an engaged and engaging community.

MICHAEL SMEE

Michael lives near Federal in northern NSW with his partner, two horses, a couple of dogs and a green frog called Capsicum. He spends much of his time building sand castles, exploring the 100 acre wood, and reading aloud. Anything really, to distract him from doing actual work, like writing.

KATINKA SMIT

Katinka Smit is in her final year of a Bachelor of Creative Arts majoring in writing. Her work has appeared in *West-erly*, *Coastlines* 6, and in the anthology *100 Love Letters*, as well as online in several American publications. She writes regularly for *Northerly*, the members magazine for the Byron Writers' Festival, and blogs at www.talesbytink.wordpress.org. This excerpt is part of a novella, a work in progress begun in Writing Project that she hopes to develop further in Honours. It is inspired by a recent trip to India on SCU's New Colombo Scholarship.

SHELLEY-ANNE SMITH

Shelley-anne Smith has completed an Associate Degree in Creative Writing and a Bachelor of Arts at Southern Cross University. She is currently working on an Honours project studying Australian Gothic fiction.

ANDREW SPENCER

Andrew Spencer has travel Australia working as a social worker after completing his degree at SCU in 2011. After learning a few things, performing a few poems and writing one salacious ill-received novel, he has returned to Lismore to study writing. This is an example of his recent work.

LINDA STEVEN

Hailing originally from Scotland Linda immigrated to Australia as a ‘ten pounds Pom’ in 1966. In the early 90’s she embraced the then new internet wholeheartedly as a medium that fed both her technical leanings and creative juices. A self-taught web professional Linda worked in the field for many years with her last role as web manager to NSW Treasury. Linda decided to study and qualified from CQU in 2007 with a Bachelor Multimedia Studies. Being self-employed now Linda runs a Siamese fighting fish import and auction business while completing her ADCW with SCU.

KAREN TRAPPETT

Karen Trappett is a mature-aged student in Bachelor of Arts: Writing & Cultural Studies. She is married with three adult daughters. She has previously published an online short story called ‘The Mahogany Box’.

DEBRA TURNBULL

Debra Turnbull is in her final year of the Associate Degree in Creative Writing. Her passion is learning to make

every word count and finding the rhythm in her writing. Debra plans to continue her studies in writing at the end of this course and will probably spend the rest of her life re-writing.

The past a shipwreck beneath us, the swell of time pushing us towards an unknown shoreline. From the deep, long fingers reach up to drag us down.

Memories surface, unbidden; the force of acts that cannot be undone. In tragedy's shadow, love gleams. A triumphant escape: surface sparks of brilliant, fleeting rainbows. Under the waves a shadow appears, thick and startling. Clouds loom, press sunshine into cracks. The sky fills with seabirds. Life fragments; the shape of a mind, shattered. Ahead, the hard shape of rocks.

These are the stories of the seas that surround us.

Coastlines 7 is an anthology of outstanding creative writing authored, edited, and compiled by students at Southern Cross University.



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