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A Small Dead Thing by Luke Johnson

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Luke Johnson lectures in Creative Writing and Literary Theory at the University of Technology, Sydney, and the University of Wollongong. His stories have appeared in numerous journals, and in 2014 he was shortlisted for the Josephine Ulrick Prize. He has a PhD in Lacanian Psychoanalytic Theory and Creative Writing from UTS.



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A Small Dead Thing

Each morning Raymond's father passes Raymond in his car on his way through to work. Often he slows down to call to the boy to hurry along now or to remember to look both ways. There is only one road between the house and the school anyway and of course Raymond knows all about looking both ways and not dawdling: he is seven years old now.

This morning when Raymond's father leaves for work he drives from the house right past the front gates of the school without passing Raymond. When he reaches his work he calls the house to tell Raymond's mother that he did not pass the boy on the way.

'You did not pass him?' Raymond's mother says.

'I'm sure it does not mean anything,' Raymond's father says, altering the tone in his voice.

'God, what does it mean *you did not pass him* then, Harold?' Raymond's mother is not taken in by adjusted voice tones.

'At most it means you should give the school a call to make certain he's there. Of course he's there. That's all it means.'

'God,' Raymond's mother says. '*God*, Harold.'

'Look, Gloria, I can't talk. It's hell in here. Just ring me back if he hasn't arrived at the school. Okay? I'm sure it does not mean anything. Most likely it means he took a shortcut through the creek again. I'm sure that's all it means. I can't talk. It's busy as hell. Just ring me back, okay?'

Raymond's father hangs up the phone and leaves Raymond's mother standing alone in the kitchen with the handpiece rested on the top of her shoulder and her stomach feeling like it is full of coals.

It is no big thing, Raymond's mother assures herself, putting the phone back on the receiver at her end. Raymond only left twenty-five minutes ago. Twenty-five minutes ago Raymond was standing right here in this very kitchen and surely that counts for something. Harold has it: he has wandered down through the creek again. You remember the last time he wandered down through the creek and came upon the carcass of that dead Rottweiler and it was more than an hour and a half before anyone found him. That has to count for something. Remember how you worried that day? And for what? Boys and their curiosities. That has to count for something and that makes two things that count for something.

Raymond's mother decides that she will wait before calling the school. She tells herself that if she calls in a fluster she will only increase her chances of hearing bad news. She sits at the kitchen table instead and puts her fingernail in one of the chip marks Raymond made with a hammer and nail when he was three years old and the table was brand new. Raymond is seven years old now and she is sure that must count for something also. Three is enough to stop counting, she tells herself. Sitting at the table, she picks at the chip mark until a little piece of grey laminex breaks away and cuts open the skin beneath her fingernail. The piece stays embedded beneath her fingernail and the blood drips out through the tiny gap and down the print-side of her finger and she blots it on the table like a child making finger drawings. She decides then that she will call the school. The blood is a good distraction for her to call the school and not bring bad luck upon the situation and she recognises this much.

Raymond's mother has the school's phone number stored in the phone's speed dial. It is stored under *Ray's School*. It is such a little piece of paper to have to write on, she thinks. She thinks like this because neither her nor Raymond's father ever call Raymond Ray. Their neighbour Mr Langford calls Raymond Ray and the policeman who found him playing with that dead Rottweiler that other time called him Ray but they are the only two people Raymond's mother has ever heard calling him Ray. She feels angry at herself for writing it Ray when she would not have said it Ray. In future you should write it like you would say it, she scolds herself. Ray-mond. The fingerprints on the table look to her like paw prints, as if a cat has come in through the window and shot across its surface. She remembers a story about birds coming in through a window once and it frightens her.

When the phone picks up at the school it is not the regular secretary but a woman calling herself Mrs Stokes. Raymond's mother knows the regular secretary quite well and always calls her Mrs Lamb. Raymond's mother calls all of her seniors by their polite titles. She cannot help it. Mr Langford is only seven years her senior and she calls him by his polite title, while Raymond's father calls him Teddy. Raymond's mother has never heard of this Mrs Stokes before.

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'May I speak with Mrs Lamb please?' she asks.

'I'm sorry,' Mrs Stokes says, 'Margaret no longer works Mondays. I'm her replacement for Mondays and Thursdays. I'm sure I can help you all the same. Is it to do with the new canteen roster?'

'I am Raymond's mother,' Raymond's mother says. She feels herself starting to cry then and she quickly hangs up the phone and puts her finger in her mouth and bites down hard until she can taste the blood coming out through the tiny cut beneath her fingernail. The piece of laminex stays lodged in there and when she pushes her tongue against the area to taste the blood more strongly, she feels the sharp edge of the laminex and makes the tip of her tongue stiff and pushes against it thinking that it will either pierce through the tip of her tongue or be pushed far enough down into her finger that nothing will be able to touch it anymore anyway. Neither happens and finally she takes her finger out of her mouth and is surprised to see that there is not any blood on it. The piece of laminex looks clean, like a shard of fibreglass, and she easily picks it away by pinching it between the thumbnail and index fingernail on her opposite hand. When she has pulled it away the finger starts to bleed again. The blood is thin and bright.

She calls Raymond's father back at work then. She knows it is not good luck to be calling around like this and in this state with her finger bleeding like this. She thinks that any hope of putting herself out of this state seems distant and calls him anyway. She thinks if she squats herself down on the ground the balance will make up for something lost. 'What is lost?' she asks herself aloud. She is trying pragmatism. 'What is lost, Gloria?' She asks with her name and everything. Waiting for Raymond's father to pick up she wonders why she let him convince her that it was okay for Raymond to walk by himself to school when he is only seven years old—even if there is only one road to cross. She wonders why she let herself get convinced so easily over such an important matter and why she always calls Mr Langford Mr Langford except for when Raymond's father is around calling him Teddy and then she starts calling him Teddy too and she wonders why she lets herself get convinced like that. She thinks of a crow unbuttoning a school shirt with its black and lacquered beak. She puts her other hand on the top of her head and thinks murder is a horrible collective noun.

After nine rings Raymond's father answers the phone at work and Raymond's mother tells him what has just happened. She tells him about this Mrs Stokes woman whom she has never even met and she tells him about the way she started to cry and the cut on her finger and she can hear her own voice and knows the way it must sound and she says, 'Why did I let you convince me that it would be alright for him to walk by himself when he is only seven, for God's sake, Harold?'

Raymond's father listens to her and assures her that it is probably not at all like she is making out and that it is probably all quite okay. He tells her that she should call the school again and speak to this Mrs Stokes properly this time. He says 'damn carburettor' right in the middle of explaining all of this to her and when she asks him what damn carburettor is supposed to mean for God's sake, he says, 'Hang on a minute, Gloria. I need somebody to get this damn carburettor over to Clarke's in the next twenty minutes.' She asks him if he is talking to her and he says, 'Listen, it's hell, Gloria.' He says, 'I'm sure this Mrs Stokes is a shipshape woman. You should give her a call and then give me a call back when you know something for certain. Alright?'

Shipshape is the expression Raymond's father used the time Raymond was lost in the creek for an hour and half playing with

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that dead Rottweiler. Shipshape police constable: find him in no time, Gloria, you'll see. Everything will be shipshape. Slap.

After speaking to Raymond's father this second time Raymond's mother puts on her cardigan and shoes and goes out of the house. She does not put socks on her feet and her shoes are the kind a person pulls on and off without bothering to untie the laces. As she walks along the footpath toward the school she keeps the cardigan pulled closed across her front with one hand, so as to hide her nightshirt. She starts to cry again and walks faster and there are lots of cars driving along the road.

At the vacant block Raymond's mother stops. She looks to the back of the block where the corrugated iron fence has been kicked in and one of the panels is missing altogether. It is the entranceway to the creek. The vacant block is full of rubbish. Most of it has been set fire to. There was a house on the block once and it was set fire to by a lightning strike. Midway between Raymond's mother and the entranceway to the creek is the skeleton of a burnt mattress. The black springs make it look like something used for trapping animals. Staring past the mattress Raymond's mother can only picture that dead Rottweiler now, dumped with its insides coming through the side of its belly, dumped in the creek because dumping fees at the local tip were too high, or because the person who was driving the car felt too guilty to try and find the owner so it might be put to rest beneath a favourite tree or ruined flowerbed. It was Raymond who found the Rottweiler and then the police constable who found Raymond.

The day Raymond found the Rottweiler was the same day Raymond's father hit Raymond's mother with his closed hand. He hit her when she would not stop crying and then everything was fine and the shipshape police constable found Raymond just like Raymond's father said he would and everything was fine. Raymond's mother smiled and the constable smiled too standing at the door and Raymond still had the dog's blood on his hands and on the knees of his trousers and everything was fine that day. Even the bruise that joined the corner of her mouth to her ear was fine once Raymond had been found and returned home by the shipshape police constable who said nothing just smiled.

Raymond's mother puts her right leg through the gap in the fence first and then steps through with the rest of her body. She keeps the cardigan pulled closed in front even as she is stepping through and the wind makes the bent piece of iron move up and down along the remaining section of fence. It is loud and grating and Raymond's mother brings her head through last and thinks of a dog waiting on the other side, ready to latch onto the side of her face like a scrap-metal guard dog.

From the entranceway Raymond's mother can see along the creek all the way to the school now. There is no dog. The oval at the bottom end of the school backs directly onto the creek and Raymond's mother can see all the way to the oval and the oval is empty. At first she does not see Mr Langford, since he is hidden behind the rise in the creek bank. And when he comes out from behind the rise he is no more than thirty metres away from her and he sees her standing abreast of the slope and he waves to her. She does not wave and she watches him until he is standing right in front of her.

'Hello, Gloria,' he says.

She does not say anything to him. Her eyes are red still and her cheeks are tight where the wind dried her tears before they could reach halfway to her lips even. She looks at Mr Langford and at his hands and she keeps her cardigan pulled modestly across her front.

‘Another dead dog,’ Mr Langford says to her, shaking his head. Mr Langford is seven years older than her and he has very white hair and a small round head. His hair is very white and his cheeks are red and his mouth is small even for his head. He bends down and wipes his hands on the grass and when he bends he keeps his back straight and his hands only just reach the ground either side of his feet. ‘Do you remember the day Ray found the Wainwrights?’ he says, motioning to his own hands. ‘Bad street for dogs. Busy. Always busy,’ he says, shaking his head side to side. His knees are bent.

‘The policeman,’ Raymond’s mother says back to him.

Mr Langford looks up at her and she starts to cry again and when she tries to step backwards through the hole in the fence he takes hold of her wrist and her cardigan falls open and she begins to cry really.

‘Gloria,’ he says. ‘We’re only talking now.’

In the distance a group of children come running onto the bottom oval like creatures coming in through an open window. One of them kicks a football and it sails over the fence and into the creek. Mr Langford let’s go of Raymond’s mother’s wrist and disappears through the hole in the fence himself. Raymond’s mother sits down very low to the ground and wishes Raymond’s father were there to hit some sense into her with his shipshape hand.

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