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Tide - edition 5

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Tide - edition 5

Abstract

‘A rising tide lifts all boats.’ This has always been the way of TIDE and the fifth edition is no exception. TIDE submerges us in a myriad of contemporary prose and poetry, aiming to drown its readers in literature. The TIDE literary journal, produced entirely by thirdyear editing students from the Creative Arts Faculty of the University of Wollongong, showcases the compositions of emerging poets, prose writers and visual artists. The publication aims to support and promote the local literary arts and to reinstate their cultural importance within the community. TIDE is the result of labour undertaken by our editors, fundraisers, designers, print officers, teachers, businesses, community members, artists and writers whose efforts have made the publication possible.
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Waiting Still
Kate Fitzgerald

I made mix-tapes and may
or may not
have left them at your door,
wrapped up in cigarettes.
If I had told you,
there would be no proof,
I saw your sister smoking them
on the roof.
'Gadates, bring me my back-scratcher!' The god-king’s voice boomed from his massage chamber, echoing off the golden walls.

Gadates sighed, lowering his hands from the sculpture before him – he really had hoped to work on Eleana’s nose this morning. He trudged into the massage chamber and removed the gilded back-scratcher from a hook on the wall. Xerxes sat ensconced in a pile of purple cushions, two attendants massaging his feet.

‘I said anti-clockwise strokes, you inbreeds!’

Placing the back-scratcher by the king’s side, Gadates slipped from the room before Xerxes could call him back. He was just congratulating himself on avoiding the morning ritual of kingly pampering when a heavy helmet was thrust against his stomach, almost knocking the wind out of him.

‘Get yourself to the armoury, we march for Sparta in two days.’ The scowling, beefy Persian glared at him for a moment before loping away to distribute more helmets and menacing looks. Gadates stared at the helmet in his hands, his sweaty palms slicking the surface. Ducking out a side door, he drifted down the scraggly hill to escape the commotion in the hall – there would be time for the armoury later. Maybe if he walked far enough he wouldn’t be back in time for war.

Epialtes inhaled deeply, savouring the freshness of the air as it whipped his shorn tendrils about his ears and neck. Strengthening his grip on his freshly polished hoplon, proudly emblazoned with the Greek Λ for Leonidas, he set off into the gathering dusk.

A brisk walk was surely all that was needed to clear his mind of the ridiculous notions that the other boys were secretly laughing at the size of his manhood and saying he wasn’t valiant enough to be a true Spartan warrior. Glancing down at himself, Epialtes ran his thumb under the waistband of his black briefs.
They were hardly tighter than anyone else’s. He broke into a steady jog, ignoring the feeble attempts of the gravel to cut into the leathery soles of his feet. Gathering momentum, wielding both shield and spear, he began leaping over imaginary obstacles in his path and throwing in the occasional commando roll – making a mental note to prove to the others that he was in fact capable of doing this without impaling himself.

He had been carrying on in this manner for quite some time before he realised that he was in unfamiliar territory. Eyeing his surroundings suspiciously, he caught sight of a figure slowly approaching from the east. As it came into clearer focus, it didn’t take long for Epialtes to register that inferior, pitiful profile: a Persian.

It wasn’t until Gadates was only a few metres away that he noticed the armed Spartan soldier creeping towards him with knees bent in a half-crouch, shield and spear positioned in a hostile fashion. The helmet that Gadates was still contemplating (dreading the moment he would have to don the cumbersome thing) clattered to the ground. Interpreting this as an aggressive action, Epialtes bounded forward, hissing and circling Gadates as if he were a cat. Unsure of what to do, Gadates mimicked the Spartan, wishing he had turned back when he had first felt a stitch developing in his side over by the river.

‘Persian scum!’ Epialtes growled, thrusting his spear dangerously near Gadates’ left ear.

Gadates cried out and shielded his face with his arms. Letting his adversary out of his sight, however, was not the wisest move; Epialtes whacked him in the side with his shield, knocking him to the ground.

‘Thought you could infiltrate our camps, did you?’ Epialtes poked the cowering Gadates in the ribs with the blunt end of his spear. ‘Thought you could spy on the mighty Spartans?’

‘No!’ Gadates gasped. He tried to get to his feet but this proved difficult with Epialtes still poking him. ‘STOP IT!’ he finally screamed, with a fierceness that surprised himself.
Epialtes, who had been quite enjoying watching the Persian squirm, reflected that this probably wasn’t the manliest way to behave. He let Gadates rise. It was also getting dark; he would be missed at the mess hall if he weren’t back in time for dinner.

‘I’ll see you on the battlefield, Persian,’ he said, as Gadates dusted himself off.

He turned to start the long trudge home, when he heard the feeble voice of Gadates call out, ‘Ponce!’

Gadates had decided to be bold for the first time in his life. Too bad there was no one to see it.

Epialtes spun around; Gadates was scuttling back up the path, bent almost double with his head cradled by his arms. Throwing back his head, Epialtes let out a roar of laughter – this whimpering Persian was not worth a bloodstain on his spear. He continued to laugh with increased gusto until his voice suddenly caught in his throat, ending in a squeak. He gasped and clutched at his throat.

This Persian would rue the day he witnessed Epialtes’ voice break.
you’re intense in your intentions
but you’re weak in your physique,
you’re on a self-defacing diet
and though you keep your riot quiet
you don’t waste time being silent
when it comes your turn to speak.

you can feel this war is over –
soldiers lost their way back home,
for the streets they were once marching
now you’re roaming on your own.

sent there by the men of power,
killed there by the men of faith
you keep waiting for the hour
when there’s nothing left to hate.
Vidkun Quisling
Anton Pospelov

in the land of Vidkun Quisling
no one talks about the listening,
no one’s longing for the freedom
and the sincerity no one knows at all.

in the land of Vidkun Quisling
Wilhelm-Tells are reported missing,
Robin-Hoods are working night shifts,
and Zorbas jailed for writing on the walls.

in the land of Vidkun Quisling
Adam’s chained to the gates of Eden, hissing,
Eve is bleeding, crumbled on the pavement
as Satan dances on the tomb of broken souls.

in the land of Vidkun Quisling
you and i were once seen kissing,
naked, unaware of the glass doors,
we flew too high, forgetting not to fall.
'So, Angela, what do you think?’ Simon glanced sideways at me. He was struggling to make eye contact, not wanting to be part of this conversation. He rubbed the calluses on his palms and picked at his cuticles.

‘Be honest,’ said Julia. She had insisted on his presence, if only because she didn’t properly understand why he resisted so much.

Don’t be honest, lie through your teeth.

‘I’m honoured,’ I nodded, keeping my focus on Julia’s hopeful face. ‘But can I have some time?’

‘Doctor’s appointment isn’t til Friday week. So yeah, Angela, take some time.’

Stop saying my name, Simon. Stop it.

Julia sat down next to me, leaving me between her and Simon. Between two loving and committed people. Between the perfect match. Their only flaw was that they could not conceive. And that one of them had once been unfaithful.

I looked at myself in the mirror. Turning sideways, I rubbed my belly. Flat – not much definition, just flat. I tugged at the front of my jeans – about half an inch of room. I wondered how much longer it would be before I couldn’t wear them. I turned to face the front again, looking up at my bra, a B-cup. I wondered, do I look forward to the swelling?

How do I feel about the changes taking place in my body? When, in the end, I’ll have nothing to show for it except a happy family that doesn’t include me.

I remembered the appointment with the psychotherapist that morning. His job was to determine whether or not I was mentally fit to undergo the next ten months.

‘Usually, women who do this already have children of their own. You haven’t yet decided to have children yourself?’

‘Well, no,’ I said. ‘I haven’t yet had a boyfriend fit for child-rearing.’
‘But you do have one potentially life-changing plan. You’re going overseas to work for a year. Why have you cut that—’
‘Because Julia asked me to be her surrogate mother,’ I interrupted him. Just the bare facts, I thought, you don’t need to give him detail.
He nodded. ‘And that’s all?’
‘Yes.’
He nodded again. I wasn’t convincing.
He had assumed Julia and I were very close but he wanted to know about my relationship with Simon.
‘Relationship?’ was all I could say before I could think. He raised his eyebrows. I can’t tell him, I thought, he won’t approve me for surrogacy. ‘Well, I’ve known him as long as Julia has. I was there the night they met. That’s all, really. He’s always been Julia’s boyfriend.’ I fixed my gaze on the window, crossing my arms and legs.
‘Okay, Angela. The thing about this is that you don’t have your own child or children, you were planning something huge and important in your life and the only explanation you’re giving me is that “Julia asked me to”’. He caught my eye. ‘Does that sound like something to you?’
‘Sound like something?’ How much longer was this going on for? ‘Sound like what?’
‘Guilt,’ he said. ‘It sounds like you’re guilty.’

‘You know, the clinic we went with, they almost didn’t accept Angela to be our surrogate,’ Julia was saying, as the radiologist swooped the transducer across my stomach. ‘The first psychotherapist she spoke to thought that Angela was only doing it out of obligation. But, of course, the second opinion was far more reasonable!’

Julia laughed and held my hand, looking at the foetus on the screen. Looking at Julia’s hand, I moved my thumb down hers and watched her grip harder.
‘Look, Angel!’ she squealed. ‘Is that an arm?’
The radiologist nodded. ‘And there’s a little leg,’ she pointed. ‘And now bub’s rolling over. Say bye now, we’re done.’
The mirror would never lie to me. But I never knew there could be this much of me. I had to go to the toilet again, the fifteenth time that morning. I was fit to burst but I didn’t want to go through the drama of yanking my pants down one side at a time, pushing on the walls as I lowered my pregnant body for three seconds of piss then the agony and getting back up again. It was a horrifying thought. A hard dry lump formed in my throat and I scrunched up my face as tears started down my cheeks.

‘Is it such a depressing sight?’ Simon had appeared behind me. He was leaning on the door frame, looking at me through the mirror. Well, looking at my belly.

‘Excuse me, sorry.’ I took a tissue, then thought better of it and bent to wash my face in the sink.

‘Aren’t pregnant women supposed to glow?’ he continued, a smile forming across the right half of his face. The left side was almost a scowl. ‘You know, aren’t you meant to be one of the happiest human beings alive? Especially in this situation, such an honourable sacrifice.’ His twisted grin leered at me through the mirror.

‘Well,’ I said, sniffing. ‘I wouldn’t know, I’ve never been pregnant before.’

‘Do you ever expect to be again, Angela?’

‘I don’t know, Simon,’ I mumbled his name so quietly it was lost.

‘How are you coping?’ he leant in further. ‘Apart from the random fits of tears and angst.’

He came in the door.

‘I have to go to the toilet now,’ I said, backing away from him. I sat on the toilet seat and listened to him walk away.

‘How much more of this?’ I said to the wall, a paralysing pain enveloping me.

The pain subsided as quickly as it had come. I came out of the toilet and paced through the house. Simon was gone. I couldn’t work out why he’d come. It was practically the first time he’d bothered with a real conversation for months, despite Julia’s best efforts.
I fell onto my knees as another stab of pain came to me. It was attacking my chest.
That's not a contraction.
Once again the pain began to subside, but it lingered – a strong pressure weighing down on my ribs. I pulled myself up and leant on the kitchen bench.
‘Heart burn maybe,’ I said to the fridge. ‘Mylanta.’ Ten minutes later I was calling the hospital.

‘She’s going to have to give birth.’ I don’t know that voice.
‘But she’s only 28 weeks!’ That’s Julia.
‘She can’t carry this baby anymore.’
‘Is the baby okay?’ Oh shit, that’s Simon.
‘It’s too soon!’ Julia again.
I started to move.
‘Julia!’ I cried but I was blocked by something on my face. ‘Julia, I need to talk to you—’ I couldn’t breathe. ‘Julia,’ I gasped, ‘I need you to know that it wasn’t just sex for me. It wasn’t just drunken sex. It wasn’t just experimentation and I’ve felt this way forever. I need you to know that I completely love you!’

Julia was gone. There was only ceiling rushing above me. A hand came down on my head and told me to stay still and calm. Still and calm. The ceiling stopped.

‘Angela?’
What!
‘Angela, I know you can’t say much. You’re in a lot of pain.’
What?
‘But we’re going to have to deliver this baby. You’ve been induced. So when I say push, you just go on and push.’

A daisy appeared in front of me: all its petals were closed. I visualised one petal opening. It gracefully broke away from all the others and started to fall. Push. Two petals fell away all together. They drifted down beyond my vision, floating on an airless abyss. Push. I focused on another closed petal. It moved outwards, floating down to join the other petal. Push. I could see the centre and the pollen. The daisy slowly began to release
its remaining petals. Push! Each one uncurled and stretched. Push! A sudden jolt shook the daisy and all the petals broke and fell away.

The stem curled and shrivelled into itself and the hospital room appeared in front of me.

A deathly silence filled the room. I turned my head one way and then the other. No one was moving.

Then, ‘Wrap him up, before she becomes coherent.’

Simon walked into the room and I put my pen down. He stood at the end of the bed.

‘Julia and I are going to go for another surrogate,’ he said. ‘We don’t feel you’re up to the stress a second time.’

I folded the pages I had been writing on. Putting them in an envelope, I watched Simon’s face. I wrote ‘Julia’ on the front and handed it to him. He nodded, taking the envelope and putting it in his pocket before walking from the room.
Off work and hungry. Flashing lights within lids. A klaxon rings distant as cars zip past.

Hunching, I follow giant flows of human traffic, urban blood criss-crossing asphalt. Dusk is approaching fast, light fading from a dull sky. I want stimulant and loping down back roads, finish up at a shop. Girl manning cannons is a crank but knows classic translations of roast to cup, so it works out alright. I sip slowly and walk right into gloom.

Round a wall and spy a hobo crouching in a filthy nook. Damn, too obvious. His pupils glinting, spots my look. Cap’s off with a flourish and lo, it’s full of tin foil. With a grin full of stain, says it:

‘Stops martians. Buncha mind burglars, suck you dryyyyy …’

I’m wary. Paranoid, as months go by. It’s a gradual pollution. Rust. Hobo yanks down zip, pulls it out and grunts. Warm piss casually spills on brickwork, zig-zagging through a mortar ditch. Stops, up and shuffling, closing in. I’m hanging just past flight, waiting.

‘S’vry dryyyyyyyyy,’ that grin, slurring, ‘y’ fading to hiss.

I back away, angry that I didn’t think to go via lights. Hobo spots moving and shifts hard. A snarl twists his cracks and dints, mug scrunching. Rummaging in a grimy throw now, his hand
draws a razor and in a flash it’s humming, swaying at my throat. ‘I SAID s’vry DRYYYYY,’ mad, awash with agitation.

His pupils darting round, scanning, sounds of his stubs clawing at my drums and I’m thinking: it’s all loathing, loathing and you coat it on your skin as a film of smoggy blood, you pull it on as a shroud and it stings tight, crushing without hands and until your thoughts vanish in black.

‘Fuck you,’ I croak, shaking.
Hobo blinks, mouthing air.
Grimly, ‘Fuck. You.’ And all of it is rushing out now and I’m on him, snarling as an animal and this city’s filth is manic in my blood, smog clouding my vision, pounding my skull and I’m lost, lost and wild and afraid.

Klaxon missing, hands warm and dark.
Lay down now. Lay down and wait.
Lilith
Claire Garrett

A small town whore, older than sin,
she struts along the only street-lit strip
in town. She’s hated by the checkout-chicks
who yap around her ragged leather heels
and whine with big eyes at male customers.
Once she aped their uniform in pleather,
frill-stitched shiny apron, black hair netted,
lips to snare the farmers come for milk.
The chicks went crazy. Called in the Big Boss
who sent three trolley-boys to call her off.
(Instead the trembling teens were promised pleasure,
a weekend of free lays with her on top.)

She runs a lively trade; there can’t be grief
when every manly farmer really longs to lie beneath.
The next words that your eye can see are false, the last line that your eye blinked back was true.
The eliphile must throw a grain of salt to keep snake petalled scales from being dewed.

The last line that your eye blinked back was true, grown downwards gag into an earthy bind to keep snake petalled scales from being dewed, to write yourself in tattarattat line

grown downwards gag into an earthy bind. O – able was I ere I saw Elba to write myself in tattarattat line and think on Elba’s seldom madam lord.

O – able was I ere I saw Elba, ’tween two mirrors, sees him drift away, thinking on Elba’s seldom madam lord who stands denned in by constant soldier days

’tween two mirrors, sees him drift away, himself and I, a trapped and total nun who stands denned in but constant. Soldier days level our winding circle staircase run,
himself and I, a trapped and total nun
of constancy. Debed the casual bedder,
level our winding circle staircase run
til chewed feet stain the winding plain still redder.

Of constancy: Debed the casual bedder!
Your peep from lofty stairs ends on your boots,
while chewed feet stain the winding plain still redder.
In choosing not to see the level truth

your peep from lofty stairs ends on your boots.
The eliphile must throw a grain of salt
in choosing not to see the level truth:
the next words that your eye can see are false,
the last line that your eye blinked back was true.
The eliphile must throw a grain of salt
to keep snake petalled scales from being dewed.

The last line that your eye blinked back was true
grown downwards gag into an earth
to keep snake petalled scales

grown downwards gag into an earth
O–a
The beating of fair lady’s heart stopped abruptly when a stray shard of wood, flying from the prince’s lance, embedded itself in the back of her head. Damn and blast – she thought to herself, falling lifeless to the floor – if it wasn’t frightfully inconvenient. To be struck dead at the very moment the charming prince, her accidental slayer, had favoured her so graciously with a gentle tilt of his visor. It was at least fortunate that she had chosen to turn her head away from the joust at that instant, else the splinter would surely have buried itself in her face – a disfiguration far more difficult to overcome. As her body hit the ground, the impact of the fall drove the splinter of wood deep into her skull. This was satisfactory; it would barely be visible.

Nevertheless, as footsteps and concerned voices surrounded her, fair lady did experience a flicker of distress. It was true that she admired the prince and had intended this – his moment of triumph – to forge an attachment. Yet she found herself wondering if he would not be somewhat perturbed by her present condition. For whilst it was true that an ivory hue was much becoming, she could not deny that a mortal head wound was not.

Yet surely her beloved prince would be able to see past the inconsequential matter of her appearance. For it was not the body that loved but the heart. And though her physical heart may have ceased to function, her spirit was heart enough. Fair lady would not allow this impediment – the small matter of her death – to stand in her way.

There is no obstacle to our love, she told herself, as arms hoisted her back into her chair. He will look past this mortal casing, she repeated firmly as hands fanned at her.

‘The lady must have swooned,’ the prince heard someone say as he pushed his way roughly among the stalls and knelt at fair lady’s side. She was once more seated in her chair, though
looking rather poorly, and the prince called angrily for the
crowd to be cleared so that the lady might be given room to
recover from her faint.

He sat himself down beside her, careful to keep an arm
about her shoulders – lest she fall into another swoon, of
course. The prince would never encroach upon the honour of a
lady and she did seem to him very pale.

They sat together in thoughtful silence until the crowd
dispersed and they were alone. Then he drew breath – now was
his moment.

‘Fair lady,’ he began, ‘you may find it forward of me, but I
must speak to you on a matter that for some time has been close
to my heart and, I do sincerely hope, close to yours.’

The prince explained to her his honourable intentions,
holding her silent and attentive gaze. She allowed him to speak
uninterrupted of her charming disposition, which it was only
right of him to foremost mention. But as he moved to the
subject of her incomparable beauty, her hand fell to his knee
and he sensed he had gone too far.

‘No, don’t speak,’ he told her. ‘Fair lady, I adore you. I
would never presume to know your mind, yet I cannot but hope …’
Here he broke off, tightening his grip about her shoulders.

There was a terrible pause and then the prince felt fair lady
slide towards him, her head coming to lean against his.

‘Oh, sweet joy,’ he breathed and with that reached over and
plunged his tongue into her mouth, thrusting himself upon her
as she tilted precariously backwards. His hands slid across her
back, supporting her frame, grasping her to him. They were
pressed so close he fancied he even felt her heartbeat against his
chest.

The prince moved his hand to the back of fair lady’s head,
catching his finger on the jagged piece of wood protruding
from her skull. At this he withdrew his arm in some confusion
and momentarily released her from his clutches, whereby she
fell senseless to the floor, revealing to him the bloody smear that graced the back of her head. The prince sprang to his feet in some alarm.

His lady? Perished? Oh, mortal agony!
And yet, was this not the creature that had so filled him with ardour just now? True, she was not in quite the state he had first imagined. But he could not deny that in the few moments he had shared with her, he had come to desire her company above all other women. Even now as she lay limp and docile on the ground, he felt his passion stirring.

With a furtive glance about him, the prince scooped the object of his affections from the floor and hurried towards the back of the stalls. After all, he told himself, a man must be true to his heart.
Omniscient Girl
Bede Payne

It’s these that are most broken:
a streetlight breaching early evening,
a scratched record or a question ill-directed,
a cigarette and a take-home fifteen
on a rising Monday morning.
It’s that waitress’ smile serving cupped morass.

You’ve fashioned a captain’s hat
from a 2nd hand Vonnegut,
and scrawled a poem about faeces and cat liver
but listen as your heart paces
and watch as your fingers redden with your face
as I approach.

Slip away into a mush of free newspaper quizzes
and never ending top-ups,
into a sable and bloated vessel for toxin
and shaken greyed sweat.
Slip into that which is most broken.

You’re fastened solid
to the deadeye of moving shorelines.
You murder time.
and suckle at its rigid teat.
I waited with a tall man
 carriers a leather shoulder bag.

An investigator with a dirty tie
and a comic sub-continenental inflection
buttered him with soft admonishment.

And then,
as I removed Billy Corgan from my ears,
the girl’s fingers reached, wrapped for medic's skin.

The man with the leather shoulder bag
began to smoke
and I left on another bus.
He knew something had gone wrong with the conversation as he started telling his date about the link between blue swimmer crabs and a woman’s breasts. Over their glasses of sauvignon blanc and the remains of an excellent seafood dinner, he decided to persevere with the story, regardless of the politely blank smile he was receiving.

While it wasn’t in truth a smutty story, he knew he was in risky territory having even bought up the topic. The unspoken knowledge that she—his dinner companion—possessed breasts, and he—the storyteller—would like to touch them at some point, lay awkwardly between them. They had scarcely got past the preliminaries of first date conversation. They had no need to talk about jobs, because they had met at their place of business. Luckily they worked in different offices and, if this didn’t work out, they would have limited contact. Conversely, if it did flower into some sort of relationship, they wouldn’t be in each other’s pockets all the time, and could maybe travel to work together in the morning, sharing the paper and ordering at the same coffee shop.

The restaurant had been chosen precisely for its expertise with blue swimmer crabs, which he believed were tastier than lobsters and far cheaper. He also believed that lobsters on a first date were tacky—they implied he would be overcompensating for some unseen deficiency. She would be sitting there, enjoying the expensive crustacean while flaying him with her eyes. Did he have foot fungus? Maybe he drove a Vespa? Therefore, blue swimmers still had a touch of elegance, but without the crippling psychological baggage of lobsters. So when he recommended ordering the crabs and she complied, he had a small feeling of triumph.

Perhaps she had some sort of inkling about this feeling, maybe a flush had passed over his face and an inner light kindled in his eyes. Regardless, she politely teased: ‘You seem quite a fan of these crabs, I hope they are good.’
The meal, the restaurant, the entire date had not been an elaborate ruse for him to talk about breasts. It wasn’t a story he told with particular relish or great propensity. It didn’t prey on his mind, driving him to insane bouts of oracular exposure in public places, chasing people in the street to tell them, tell anyone about the way breasts and crabshadbecomeinextricably linked in his mind. Nevertheless, of the three different responses that flashed into his brain at that point, he possibly went with the worst.

‘You know, strangely enough, blue swimmer crabs remind me of breasts!’

Asking her to bear with him, he chuckled intermittently to show her that yes, something funny was about to occur. This was designed to show the empathy he had with her at this moment, that he was aware of the strangeness of his story. Regardless, he could feel the humour sinking away. He was sinking like a fish he had once hit over the head, only to watch it fall off the jetty. It plunked into the water and sank into the green silt, where it could have drowned, or swam away. At the time he had been rather concerned with the idea of a fish drowning – but if he had hit it hard enough, then it would have asphyxiated from lack of oxygen wherever it had been. Hopefully his anecdote, however, would revive and swim on to greater and better things.

Once, when he had been about twelve years old, he’d lived in a small bayside town in a house beside the water. Much of his time was spent swimming off the long and constantly patched-up wooden jetty. Depending on the tides, the bay could be full of wind-tossed water, or otherwise an empty sand flat, stinking of seaweed with only deep briny pools left to swim in. On this particular day, he was swimming in a fairly low tide, spending as long as he could underwater with a pair of goggles on. Everytime he surfaced for air, a skin of beige oil would mark the spot over the deep olive water. His mother was obsessed with skin cancer – as are all sensible Australian mothers – and didn’t trust in simple SPF sunscreens. Instead she used a thick zinc paste that made
him look like a recovering burn victim, which only sloughed off after vigorous towel rubbings.

The reason he duck-dived into the deepest part of the water, zinc swirling in his wake, was to look at the marine life exposed by the low tides. It was possible to see enormous stingrays rippling across the shallow sand, seahorses hovering in the seaweed and, best of all, blue swimmers munching on sediment in the deepest holes.

When the sun set over the bay the water became brilliantly illuminated and almost impossible to look at. At this time, he would take his kayak and Swiss Army Knife past the moored boats and bobbing buoys into the deep centre of the bay. Here the water was always cold and fathomless. Hidden by the sun from the houses surrounding him he would begin his work. Usually bobbing around him would be a couple of plastic drink containers. Suspended from these with thin ropes would be crab traps: large metal cages with a hole situated in the top. Some sort of decomposing fish would be strung inside as bait and when the scrounging crabs entered, they were unable to leave. Regardless of the fact they were illegal, they were common practice.

First, he would haul the large cage up onto the kayak, opening the trap door and dumping the crabs back into the water. Once he found a mould-coloured eel which gave him nightmares, because it looked like it wanted to live in his skull. When the crabs were free, he would then unscrew the doors, thus rendering the trap harmless, cut it free from the floating bottle and dump it back into the bay. The first time he embarked on this mission of mercy he simply cut the trap free, forgetting that crabs would still enter and die inside. In fact, he realised that other crabs would be drawn in by the decomposing bodies of their comrades, creating a horrible cycle of never-ending death. The dozens of rusting, dismantled cages lying in the silt were a shame also, but this subterfuge would have been discovered if he had attempted to drag them back to shore and past his neighbours.

Therefore, each crab that he saw felt like a friend, a personal triumph. And on this particular day, he was finding huge amounts of them in the seaweed choked shallows—proof that his
personal crusade was getting results! He had visions of the bay being declared a wildlife sanctuary, with a large bronze statue of him situated at the mouth of the channel. Each boat that passed would gaze in awe at the shining figure of crustacean liberty, one blue swimmer held upright to the sky, a discarded trap lying broken at his feet.

Deep in thought, he was disturbed by an enormous splash directly in front of him, causing him to inhale mouthfuls of thick salt water. When he surfaced, a topless teenage girl stared at him in shock. He stared back, realising he was wearing a full-body, fluro-green wetsuit, his face smeared with beige cream which was slowly spreading across the water around them. His goggles pressed hard into his eyes, making them distorted and bulging.

He looked at her breasts and then said helpfully – ‘Watch out for the crabs.’

He finished the story, spreading his arms out and smiling wryly, awaiting the reaction of his date. Surely, despite the silence she had kept throughout the tale, she could see its charm. Probably, she had been taken on such a whirlwind ride with his words that she had to collect herself, collate all the hysterical components. She would erupt in a roar of laughter, bring one shaking hand to her mouth to try and contain the mirth bursting from her! She would smash her wineglass with a wild flinging of her left hand, as the restaurant looked on in shock.

She smiled politely and looked at her watch, folding her napkin carefully and putting it under the plate. He watched with narrowed eyes. He suddenly didn’t care, knew now that they didn’t spark. The woman for him was obviously someone with a sense of humour – not like this prune! He shook his head ruefully, wondering at his stupidity. There she sat, her hair as limp as seaweed, her tapping fingers as hard and encrusted as barnacles. The eyes that now refused to meet his were the same colour and consistency as a mud flat. And now that he looked carefully – her breasts were like two enormous crabs fighting to get out of her dress.
Somewhere, in the seconds between negotiating a bundle of bread rolls, acknowledging the exchange of money with the kindly Egyptian gentleman leaning by the cigarette cabinet and holding the exact amount of change before his son— who stands behind the counter with his hand outstretched—you realise this is all a test.

Three o’clock, children.

You notice the sparse black hairs adorning his upper lip: coarse and stiff. If you turn around will they still exist? You assume that if you close your eyes the moustached boy will remain, yet this may be another ethereal mirage. Mere manifestations of assumption these— paper people, the guessing of cause and consequence. At the right time, the right angle you might see the empty gaps where they cease to exist, flat concaved planes. It reminds you of the childhood game, in which kid, isolated, stands against a wall, whilst behind others are moved by the question: ‘What’s the time, Mr. Wolf?’

You must catch them at it, catch your mind unawares.

In the mimicry that is life you have often wondered: would these (paper) people react, calling for morality, if you stripped naked and sang Puccini’s Madame Butterfly at Central station? Paper-people, entertaining immaculate loneliness, fillers of white space. They disappear when you turn your back, assumptions of you: creator of this universe. The pain inflicted by so many – parents, friends, enemies, strangers – suddenly becomes bearable.

Two o’clock, children.

The teenage son’s hand drops slightly; he asks if you need anything else. The snowflake paper cut-out has not realised your double-minded recognition. You hum a Puccini score under your breath: amore, addio! addio! piccolo amor and laugh, knowing his response is a continual manifestation of what you assume shock and fear would be. They have never existed, neither in time nor history, only this moment in which you’d
buy rolls for tonight’s Sunday dinner, and understand that nothing exists – Neanderthal man, the World Wars, the Milky-Way galaxy, all your creations.

By some instinctual action you have reached for paper-boy; he struggles, as you’d expect. His father begins to batter at your encircling arms, how exquisitely predictable.

One o’clock…

You have never tasted paper-human before. You assumed you’d hate the sight of blood. The boy’s flesh is in your mouth, his skin as imagined, hot and wet; you imagine sinew loose on your tongue. Does paper-flesh twitch after being torn, unaware the test ends? Poised, this body you assume is yours. The boy bursts open like rubber whilst false sensations of coppery blood burn your throat.

The paper-father reaches the telephone representation; in a matter of assumed time uniformed paper-men will imitate law enforcers, imitating distress, calling for medical aid for bleeding paper-boy, thinly moustached. You imagine steel, concrete, shadows – not yet existing as do the finger-print smears of blood on the cabinet. Assumption, how blood soaks bread rolls.

You see emptiness where it all ends, white space at assumed angles. Puccini does not exist, the clock stops ticking.
March of the Caterpillars
Dane Naoum

WEL-COME
ComeInsideOurBright
(bab-y-lon)

SIDE-SHOWS
GrinningLikeInsane
(in-sci-sors)

CRACKgoesthepinwheel
BLAMgothepopguns

Glitter-coated-soaked-in-glow-and-bloated blinks
the Big-Top

ROLL-UP
ThisIsWhatYouBeen
(wait-ing-for)

TOP-HATS
DancingUnderGreen
(hal-o-gen)

CLOWNSspewingflowers
SPLATgothebleachers

Jugglers-hug-the-thugs-a-shoving-pigsthroughringsof
neon

TURN-LEFT
RowsOfCandyWall
(sal-va-tion)

TURN-RIGHT
PyramidsOfStacked
(soyl-ent-green)

CLANGgoesthecashdraw
ZINGgothespecials

Sale-sale-sale-sale-everything
is dying
CAT-TLE    TrudgingUpTheSlick    (lit-off-ramp)
BUT-CHERS    SmilingLikeObese    (game-show-hosts)
CRUNCHgoesthehammer
ZOWgoesthebuzzsaw

Sallow-neon-arrows-bellow-let’s follow
the leader

BLACK-JACK    SmilesGivingYou    (the-fin-ger)
RED-QUEEN    RacksYouUpAThin    (pap-er-cut)
BLINGgothepokies
TRINGsingsthejackpot

Dealers-flip-their-pastel-chips-and-sip-their sic-kly
strychnine

PREA-CHERS    HealingCrippledCops    (a-maz-ing)
TEN-BUCKS    StepInsideTheCon    (fes-sion-al)
CREAKgothepewlines
BANGgoesthegavel

Three-blind-mice-to-roll-the-dice-is Christ your
lord and saviour?
CAME-RAS     FilmARazorTooth  (an-chor-man)
WIDE-SCREEN ReadingLikeADrunk  (trou-bad-our)
LIVEsatellitefeed
FIVEfourthreetwogo

Locust-blisters-Communists-apocalypse is coming

CAR-NIES       GatherIntoPacks  (on-your-scent)
HELD-TIGHT     ByTheirGrinningThin  (ring-mas-ter)
BLINKgothelightbulbs
CHEERgothebleachers

Feed-them-speed-and-centipedes-until you find the canvas

CAN-VAS         FadesAwayInBoth  (dir-ec-tions)
SWEET-LIGHT    PlasticInTheWall’s  (re-flec-tion)
SCREAMallyouwantto
NOonecanhearyou

All-around-the-wall-you’ll-find-your-tracks back where you started
Pop always knew just what to get her —
stocks for Christmas,
a Faberge egg after she won gold for public speaking —
though he wouldn’t let her take it
when he threw her out in disgrace,
two months after her sweet sixteenth.
For her birthday, Pop made a charity donation in her name.

From her bedsit apartment she can smell the sea
and through the flimsy walls
she can hear lucky folk murmuring together.
It keeps her awake.
Working at the supermarket,
she develops Stockholm syndrome
and is employee of the month twice before her
skin becomes too tight to continue packing shelves.
She gorges on scrambled eggs and instant soup,
dreaming of truffles on toast and marzipan dipped in coffee.
Her baby is a boy.
Every year on her birthday, Pop donates in her name to the same charity. In gratitude they put her name on a nickel plaque in the church cloak room. She takes up knitting but switches to crotchet, sick of dropping stitches. When she is old she will tell her grandchildren about the good old days, when minimum wage for a minor was eleven-fifty and imported chocolates were ninety-five dollars a kilo.
She stirs the stew, attaches the young one firmly to her nipple and waits for Baltimore. It’s all she ever does. The last light from the sun disappears over the distant church steeple, illuminating the ancient rooster-carved weather vane. It spins. It’s all the rooster ever does.

She looks back to the stew, gives it a stir and hears the baby cry. Momentarily she juggles ladle and baby, before setting one down on the draining board to attend to the other. The child is screaming now. She does not know what has upset him; she is new to all of this and is finding it hard to interpret the little squealer’s needs. She sighs, reattaches the noisy howler to the breast and as if by magic the roaring stops.

The baby sucks and slurps, turning red with exertion. She watches it milk the saggy teat and cannot help but feel as though she is merely a means to an end. The child doesn’t love her. He relies on her for life, for sustenance, but how can that be called love?

It sucks. She waits. Baltimore is late again.

The stew begins to bubble ferociously, threatening to boil over. She reaches for the ladle, adds it to the stew and turns it carefully. She hums a little ditty, nursing the baby and shuffling her feet. She enjoys humming. It seems to be the only thing she does find pleasure in anymore. While she hums, it sucks, and they both wait.

The mother searches for her flint to light the lamps: one by the bed, one by the door and one by the sink. All three flicker encouragingly before bursting into merry flames. By the light, she examines her furrowed hands. Only twenty-four years old with the hands of a sixty-year-old. The lines run deep, etched by curious blue shadows that match her coat. She works at the mill, dying the fabrics and cloths. It leaves her hands permanently coloured and creased but she has little choice in the matter, jobs are scarce. Baltimore says he doesn’t mind, he says he doesn’t love her for her hands. But she silently questions
whether he loves her at all.

The little cottage has been her home for a while now. Baltimore rented it for her when he learnt she was carrying his child. He bought her furniture: a small wooden bed with a straw-stuffed mattress, a tiny wooden table, a rocking chair. All second hand of course, mattress reeking of mildew. But this is her home now, and the child’s, and Baltimore’s on the rare occasion that he stays a night.

She sighs. The child is sleeping now, having sucked her dry, and she eases him gently from her nipple and rests him on the bed. The coarse mattress lumps around his tiny body, protecting him. Like he needs protecting, she thinks. Don’t I give him all he needs? Nasty thing. Lovely thing.

The stew pops loudly and she hurries over to attend to it. Baltimore won’t like it if she burns it. She peers inside intently to study its contents – carrots, peas and mutton cycle through purposefully, sinking to the bottom then catching a bubble to rise again. Up, down, around. The carrots are weeks old and soft, wrinkled but there’s little else to eat and she’s ever so proud she managed to get hold of some mutton for him. For Baltimore.

Of course, he’s used to much better. People like him eat that sort of thing often and they don’t suffer for it. She remembers a time that she worked in a big house as a cook’s hand, serving the food and washing the dishes. She remembers the scraps she used to eat after Sir and Mistress had done with their dinners. Marvellous stuff it was: melt-in-your-mouth puddings and fresh fruits – the likes of which she’d never seen. She remembers the juices trickling down her parched throat, sticking to her cheeks and hair. She remembers him feeding her strawberries, it was the first time she ever saw them. The taste, the smell, the tiny seeds sticking to her tongue. She remembers laughing at the juice running down her chin. She remembers him looking at her in a way she’d never been looked at before – he had intent in his eyes and strawberries in his teeth and she knew what was coming next. She knew.

The sun has long since set now, and as the chilly winds whistle under the door frame she is growing impatient. He is
often late, and sometimes never comes, but he knew she was cooking something special for him tonight. He knew. She told him so. He promised he'd be here.

A bubble of stew spits from the pot and scalds her unprotected hand and she curses, dropping the ladle back in. She grabs a cloth and presses it to her scarred hands, not really noticing the pain, she is so used to it. The baby whines like a pup and she considers leaving it but walks slowly over to the bed anyway.

She stares down at it. It gapes back up at her, wide toothless mouth and pink gums. Look at its eyes. They're his eyes, she thinks. Little ears that are his ears too and funny thin lips. Not like her lips, which are big and pink and good for eating strawberries. She looks over the frail body, examining the similarities between the baby, herself and he. Not one thing does she see that looks like hers. Not one. His stumpy neck, his
stubby toes and his bandy legs. She scowls as she pushes the child over, to howls of protest, noting his dark hair, his perfect peachy arse-cheeks and his broad shoulders. His, all his she notes with frustration. How did she not notice this before?

She is angry. All this hard work for nothing. The child does not love her, it is ugly and whines like a labouring dog. Baltimore does not love her, he does not keep his promises. The stew is beginning to burn now as she’s got to keep it warm for him. Besides, she needs to keep the fire going to keep away the cold. She is angry and tired of waiting.

The creature howls unrestrainedly and, frustrated, she turns away. She is still holding the cloth and twists it through her blue fingers, contemplating the screaming devil-child. Tighter and tighter she twists til her blue hands turn white. Yet the child persists, reaching unimaginable crescendos.

Suddenly the cloth snaps and unravels again as the fingers return to a blue haze. She holds the cloth loosely, looks back towards the baby and then again to the cloth. She thinks how very easy it would be just to stifle its crying. Just to cover its tiny nose, Baltimore’s nose, with the old cloth and stop the noise. How very easy.

She turns the child right way up and places the cloth gently over the red nose, pushing it slightly up the nostrils and covering the rest of the thin face. Holding it down with both hands she pushes the child further into the lumpy mattress in her attempt to stop the noise. The baby waves its fist and gives muffled screams, contorting with efforts to breathe. It begins to turn the colour of her hands.

She removes the cloth from the small face, pleased with herself for her little test. The noise has stopped. The baby is calm and peaceful. She pinches the podgy cheeks to put some colour back into the face and lies down on the bed beside the tiny body. Her hand slips up under her shirt and she pulls out a breast, coaxing the nipple into the baby’s unhappy mouth. There they lie together, absorbing the warmth from the fire and listening to the stew boiling over on the tiny stove. They wait together.

They are waiting for Baltimore.
I crossed my arms and then unfolded them, feeling awkward and uncoordinated. As I stood near the edge of the small gathering, I felt the gaze of the Maasai people searching every inch of my unfamiliar body. I wondered how to say it was rude to stare in Maa and then decided it was probably better that I didn’t speak their language. They were as strange to me as I obviously was to them.

Behind the crowd, the handmade huts rose from the flat landscape and into the greying horizon, the only shade provided by a few trees that speckled the thirsty ground. Everything was sunburnt and the surface of the small watering hole mirrored its dusty surroundings. Some of the cattle waded bravely in and lapped at the water. They were thin, the square of hips and rib cages jutting out at strange angles. The skin around their necks sagged and as some drank, the rolls at their throat slapped nosily on the surface of the water.

Curious, I watched the tribe’s people before me, all of whom waited patiently for the ceremony to begin. Both men and women had shaved heads, the stubble on their scalp almost the same shade as their skin. Children and adolescents instead had long, black hair that looked as though it hadn’t been cut since birth. Their sleek bodies were wrapped in pieces of red cloth, slender shoulders and legs escaping the folds of the material. I watched one woman as she bent to talk to a child, the rows of burgundy beads around her neck swinging freely. As she rose from her knees she smiled gently at the small boy, her teeth a brilliant shade of white against her dark complexion. I made eye contact with the mother and hoped my eyes said what I only could in English.

A quiet expectancy fell over the Maasai and all eyes left me to watch three young men exit one of the huts and walk slowly into the centre of the semi-circle that had roughly formed. An elder led a bull into clear view and the people began to cheer as one of the three came forward, a red stripe across his bony chest
boasting he had killed a man in battle before. He lifted a spear decorated with crimson flags and pierced the animal in the neck. I watched as the three took it in turns to drink the blood of the dying bull and questioned how it was that I treated things I saw as sacred.

Next, three middle-aged women entered the circle, each carrying a bloodstained cowhide which the young men sat cross-legged on. This was the very same mat they had been circumcised on and now today they would enter manhood once their shaved hair fell onto the dried, rust-coloured blood.

It was soon over and the boys stood proudly as men before the Maasai. Their bald scalps seemed polished, a lighter shade than the skin of their faces. The three had transformed: no longer the people who had walked self-consciously up to the bull—they were now dignified equals. Heads raised, they looked their audience in the eyes and I felt an urge to lower my gaze, feeling even more of a stranger in this world.

The crowd began to shuffle and soon most of the women had moved forward, a cloud of dust following their feet as they formed a scarlet huddle before the new men. The three men circled their prey, free to choose whomever they wanted to accompany them in their first act of manhood. The young mother found a place towards the back of the group, her eyes occasionally darting back to her waiting child. No longer able to see his mother, the child began watching me. He made his way towards me and reached out a thin arm to touch my hands. His fingers were small and sweaty—they moved quickly, seeing what was in my pockets, pulling at shoe laces, fiddling with my sunglasses. I saw the mother’s eyes search for her child’s, worried once she saw him with the stranger. The hand of one of the three fell on her shoulder and as she was led away the child slipped on my sunglasses and his fingers crept into mine.
he had that ten month itch
so he raided my cleft chest
for a deformed ruby
told me it was a routine allograft
as he carved the gash closed
with a lock-back blade

he shredded me down to the nail base
the slit agony was a real eyelash wrangler
just sharp enough to bear
he said he felt perpendicular to reality
that I’d marooned him

he sucked the plum flesh
from that crystal clot
crunched on the pit
like it was sugar glass
jewel shards fell like crumbs
from his bloodshot mouth
I flushed like blotchy rust
and dust-panned the glinting splinters
then drank my soul out of my body
til I retched vermillion
I tried not to let the wound
weep through the sutures

I could wait here
for any nominated decade
but you’ve got your glass of red
and I’m on the balcony
watching traffic lights syncopate
It never seemed unreasonable to Walter – this insipid, often irresistible, urge to suck teeth.

By all accounts Walt was one of the ‘good guys’. He was good looking, well spoken and well paid. As I understand it he was a photographer for a niche magazine called Marionette, which catered to an arty crowd that was interested in the art of lifelike doll-making. He went from country to country, meeting and shaking hands with artists who carved children, men and women – sometimes even animals – out of wood. He then photographed their works and everyone went home. He was an American, a classy gent in jeans with a laid-back and easy smile and a penchant for wearing the ugliest patchwork vest I had ever seen. I was an Englishman, a mischievous scallywag at the top of my game and together we were in an Irish pub in Switzerland.

Walt, leaning against the bar with one elbow, said something along the lines of ‘An Englishman and an American walk into a bar …’ and we both had a chuckle and a few beers before he reached into his back pocket and pulled out two shiny white molars and an eye tooth. Winking at me in a way that I otherwise would have found charming, he tipped his hand to his mouth and starting sucking. I was a little taken-aback and I suppose it must have shown on my face because he presently frowned and, sucking the teeth to one side of his mouth like gum, said out of the other, ‘You alright, Alf?’

‘No no, I’m fine.’

He clearly didn’t believe me, ‘is it that I’m sucking on teeth?’

‘Oh, is that what they are?’ I laughed lamely.

‘Do you want to know why?’

I had to admit, I was curious.

It had all started when he was a teenager. Walt was a B student, which was fine. He was mediocre at sport – no great concern. He was popular with girls, which irked him no end. About this time, however, his friend Graeme had got into a
fight and had a tooth knocked out. Walt had broken up the fight and helped Graeme sit up, and as Graeme spat out a tooth Walt was seized by a most incredible shuddery frisson of excitement. That tooth, that glistening bloody tooth, was making his chest flutter and his mouth tingle. He said to Graeme, ‘I’ll throw that away for you mate.’ Then he calmly walked to the boys toilets and sat in a cubicle, sucking away for the rest of lunch break. He kept that tooth for a month, sucking on it in the secrecy of night.

As he told me this, I was hard-pressed not to gag, imagining this Graeme character, face full of blood and his miserable bloody tooth sitting in Walt’s mouth. I tried imagining sucking the tooth and was rewarded by a ripple of disgust down my spine that stiffened my tongue and made my stomach tremble.

‘That’s disgusting, Walt.’

Walt kept sucking teeth in private. After Graeme’s fight tooth had lost its appeal, he moved on. He tried a tooth his baby sister shed, but felt profoundly disturbed the minute it passed his lips. He spat it in the sink and sat at the kitchen table for the rest of the night, wondering where that feeling had gone. He tried his own baby tooth but felt nothing. Just when he was giving up all hope he remembered: he’d once had a friend whose father was a butcher.

‘Oh no, Walt, you didn’t,’ I moaned, clutching my glass in one hand and covering my mouth with the other.

Walt merely shrugged. ‘Well I had to do something, I was going crazy. There it was, something that was making me happier than doing well at school or going out with girls. It was better than anything I’d experienced and as far as I was concerned, if sucking a few sheep teeth was all it took, then why not?’

I took a moment to consider that. If I could feel completely and divinely happy, content, relaxed and at peace and all it took was sucking on a dead sheep’s tooth, would I do it? I found it hard to believe the pleasure I would get would not be completely negated by having a slimy sheep tooth in my mouth. ‘I think I follow you,’ I replied dubiously, tapping my glass on the tabletop.

With utmost secrecy Walt had procured himself some sheep teeth. Later, pig teeth and even one big cow tooth. He sucked
these teeth whenever his want took him. Overtime he got bolder and sucked them in public, merely looking people in the eye calmly until they averted their own or asked him questions. These he would answer honestly. I was a little jealous of Walt.

‘So,’ I coughed, ‘when do you stop sucking one tooth and get another?’

Walt gave this serious thought, sucking the teeth in his mouth slowly and quietly. Methodically, even. Well-groomed hands with long fingers sat on the table, fingers splayed evenly, tapping softly in time with his thoughts. It was like all his body parts were giving their own opinion. ‘They have a feeling.’

‘A feeling?’

‘Yes.’

‘Not a taste?’

‘Well, yes, they taste like teeth, but that’s hardly the point.’ Walt sighed and downed the last of his drink, ‘I’ll try to explain.’

I lit a cigarette, blowing smoke rings. Walt looked at me disapprovingly for a moment but considering what was in his own mouth I suppose he thought better of commenting.

‘Alphonse,’ he began, in all seriousness, ‘when you’re alive, all of you is full of being-alive. All of this being-alive starts in your bones and it radiates out and suffuses through your organs and your muscles and your skin. When you die, you stop making blood and all the being-alive slowly starts to fade, out of your skin, out of your muscles, out of your organs and out of your blood. But it was strongest in your bones and that takes a little while longer to drain away. That’s what I feel when I pick up a tooth and I suck on it until I’ve sucked all the being-alive out of it. Then it’s just a tooth and I throw it away.’

I shivered in the cold and dragged deeply on my cigarette, ‘How long does a tooth last?’

‘About a week.’

I nodded, ‘And then all the being-alive has been sucked out? What about other bones, Walt. Why teeth? Wouldn’t the life be stronger in bigger bones, like a femur?’

Walt laughed. ‘You want me to suck a femur?’ Grinning, I just shrugged and Walt chuckled again, ‘Oh sure, it would be like a big gobstopper, just like when you were a kid and you could buy one as big as your fist and spend two weeks wearing it down
just so you could fit it in your mouth. But let’s be practical, Alf, teeth are the only bones that’ll fit. Fingers, individual phalanges, decay too quickly, by the time you get them they’re all drained. Too far away I guess, the extremities.’

It was that night that I vowed to stop striking up conversations with strange men in bars. However, as fate would have it, Walt moved to England the next year, now a freelancer, and I ran into him in a deli, arguing with the butcher. They were arguing over teeth.

‘What’s the trouble, Arnott?’ I asked in my most cavalier fashion, sending a covert wink in Walt’s direction.

‘This weirdo wants to buy teeth. I ain’t got no teeth for him,’ Arnott grumbled. He was a surly man at the best of times unless there was a baby around, and then he went absolutely to mush. Not having a baby at hand, I would have to wing it.

‘Tish, tish. You’re a butcher, Arnott, just hand the man a few teeth and be done with it. I’m sure he’ll leave you alone from now on.’ I smiled my most charming smile but Arnott just scowled at me.

‘No. I ain’t selling nothing to no perverts.’

I frowned, casting a quick look over to Walt. I realised he already had a tooth or two in his mouth – he was sucking away sullenly and all hope of pretence lost.

‘Well I’m not a pervert Arnott, sell me a few teeth and then what I do with them’s my business isn’t it?’ I pleaded cajolingly, ‘Please?’

After being briskly ejected from the shop, Walt and I stood awkwardly on the street corner. ‘That’s the third time today,’ Walt chuckled. ‘Apparently you Brits are a little more discerning in who you sell animal teeth to.’

‘It’s in our constitution,’ I replied smoothly, ‘Number 79 Part 6-b, The Responsible Purveyance of Animal Teeth.’

‘Thank you for trying to help. Let me buy you lunch, we’ll catch up over a – ah ... pint?’

Never one to refuse a free meal, drink or free anything for that matter, I agreed. I also agreed to a friendly game of chess that weekend at Walt’s cottage; the possibility of him drugging me and stealing my teeth only crossing my mind once or twice.
How is it possible, I dispute with the Oak, that the sky can have a hole in it? How can there be a gap in the cloudstuff, if the cloudstuff has no discernible edge? Unabated, unwinkingly cynical, I concluded, the sky cannot have a hole, since it cannot demonstrate its edge. Unimpressed, the Oak shrugs, sending a squirming root to shrug me off.

Something splashed. I think it was me. But couldn’t be sure. Soon I only heard the voice thrumming Drink. Drink, she insists. A suggestion of salt, I complain. Drink, she insists. So I drink as she clasps me, learning sweetness, sips soon soothing my corners. Drink, she insists with a frown, pulling pinched-lip faces that command me to drink. So I drink. Deep.

Running to the old stones, at the bottom, where water has carved walnut faces, who grumble together about the water, about the new pebbles, and those faceless rocks dislodged from further up the burn. They are glad when the drink washes the faceless ones down, rolling them elsewhere. Their granite curls in sound satisfaction. Drink they say, to those left there. Drink. So I drink myself a face. Wearing my rock-face clean to my face. Mine, I said, with hoots of peaty satisfaction. Your face, they concur, gravely, like elders. Elders of the Church of Faces.

And now I’m an Elder, and let my granite curl, and flute, and low, low, beneath the bed, I whisper to my cronies. Whisper about faces and the falling of the water. Sediment. Slow. And snooze.

Far above me slouches the Ash, cankerously thumbing its keys. We eye it with dislike, agreeing that it disagrees with us. The careless thing flings its litter at us. Distracted, we do not see the supping of its deep-reaching roots spoil our sparse moss pools. Not that its intrusions trouble us. Its spiry flutes fall – and the acquisitivestream hastily drag off the greedysnatches along with the gleaming red bead seeds of the Rowan further up. For the main, we on the bed agree to disagree with it. Eye the profit with dislike and keep to our business, smelling the
water and fashioning our faces. Even an unruly neighbour – a prodigal, haggarding sheep, slurped into the pool further up – eventually leaves us. Sucked down, inevitably, frogged green and matted by slime. Once a sparrow jumped. An aftermath of drowsy feathers on the silvery lid, all that remained of its little life. In time, somewhere, its hollow bones will light the gloom with marrowless music as they slowly splinter into softness.

A lesson there, I pondered, as an eddy massaged my itching vein of quartz. The Elders droop, unwatching, as the last sparrow frond cycles away. Distracted, I smell the water. It coughs like a cat’s footfall, stale with fish breath and the spittle of the peckish swallows, stealing about at the edge. Once perhaps, the sinews of a bear, the grit that fires the roots of the mountain. I swallow and recall something the Oak said once, peering into the pool in melancholy mind. He said, There is the bird that never flew There is the tree that never grew There is the bell that never rang There is the fish that never swam -

We swig again, having agreed to. The other Elders work in new grooves. Face-labouring, they admire themselves in the pulsing mirror, deftly arranging wrinkles, and vainly jostle. I shrug, prompting complaints.

Clatter your face, frown!

I won’t! I say, finally. Squinting, I ponder the feeling, vein running thin above us. A brown strain, burbling into the darkness where the Faceless Stones go. Resolved, I work my way loose. My cronies grumble, shifting silt. The surface isn’t a sky, they insist, Not even a brown sky. Because it isn’t an edge. The sky is an edge, isn’t it? A blue-silted edge, studded with specks of water. A broken rattle, the Ash winces, tightens its roots and grumbles. Twisted cord of walnut, I say, Shake my hard skin. Yield something sweet.

A rude arrest as a Faceless Stone trundles by, elbowing me, unseeing: the gloom is luminous. I bounce in the current, snatching a drift. I do not look back to the Elders with their faces. I have my own face. I clack on. Head south with the Faceless Stones and while they cannot blink, I blink on their behalf. A bounce, a puff of foam, the clatter of water stars, condensing against this certain edge. There are fewer elder faces here near the edge. The sky boasts no trees, a low sky, broad and
grey. Their voices different, without that Ash to dispute with. I peer through the silence, smell only the nipping promise of salt. Excited, I rage at the long fingering torques of growth which detain me. Let me through! I insist, supported by a Faceless Stone who also wants by. The green pier has no bottom, backs down, and we slide slick through.
There is a German cockroach sharing the carriage with me. I have never seen a cockroach on a train before and I thought the instance might warrant some record, some slight preservation in case we are one day led to better times. It has disappeared now beneath my seat and I wonder if it too is going to the city to meet its sweetheart.

There is no guarantee better times may indeed be traced back to this cockroach-carriage moment but somehow I feel it has played its part.

Setting my bags down in Railway Square, I look at the Marcus Clark building through the bars of a fountain that resembles an enormous fish diving headfirst into a tiny pond where pigeons have gathered to drink and be merry. But then, fish don’t have heads with which to plunge, or rather they are nothing but head and happy-go-lucky spine. In the spirit of the moment I take off my boots and socks and stretch my toes as far apart as they can go on the sun-baked ground. It is a nice feeling and the fountain is fine; many pigeons wade up past their ankles. A few minutes pass and two pigeons hop down, casually strutting across to my bench. They walk right up to my feet and for a moment I think they have mistaken them for food but they just stand there staring intently at my toes. I’m not sure what they are thinking. No one else I can see is barefoot and I have already received several strange glances from other bench-goers. Perhaps it is the first time the pigeons have seen toes. Perhaps they saw me remove my socks and assumed I was going to join them in the fountain and are here to welcome me. After a while they both amble away without looking back, as if to say, ‘Yes, I thought so too at first, but he is not the one’. The sun remains very warm on my arms.

I was reading a particularly moving short story that gave me the feeling of being a gnarled old tree far away from the road, one
that is only ever glimpsed by people moving very fast from a long distance. This happens now and then when I read. I finish the page and think, ‘There’s a lesson to be learnt there’, and I look up from the page just as two dandelions burst apart in the wind and swirl like water-dragons past me into the apartment. When I was young I was led to believe these dandelions were actually little Santa Clauses; if you caught one you might whisper your Christmas wish and it would be carried off to the North Pole to await judgement. I have been living here three months and never really noticed the dandelions before but like the subtlest tic in a friend’s mannerism, once noticed, it is on the face of everyone you meet and the dandelions are everywhere.

Right beside me, hugging the fence like a drunk trying to remain attached to the ground, a Santa Clause is just beginning to open, spores angled at the dirt; no dragon-currents for you. Fate has not looked kindly on these little flowers. Lately, times have found me feeling just like one of those Santas, waiting to open their eyes and finding which way their stem is pointing.

Behind my unit a bike track lingers alongside the Northern Distributor. I’m not sure how far it stretches as my supply of immediate adventures is growing slight and I’m trying to stagger every potential discovery until at least the end of the year. Tonight is one such fortune. I write in spurts as various friends ring to tell me to step outside. It is 8:14. The eclipse is not due to hit its peak until 8:30 but I happily oblige. They are sitting at the Headlands, watching the bloodmoon over the breakers, eyeing the transport ships that drift along the coast like rogue Christmas trees; it’s a beautiful sight in my mind’s eye. There is a palm tree in my front yard and to view the eclipse I have to navigate the moon between the fronds. For a better view I must walk around the house and creep delicately through the backyard; not for fear of disturbing the neighbours or crushing Christmas seeds beneath my clumsy feet but because of the foliage blocking all light and the many roots whose aspirations are not limited to tired old Cthulhuian endeavours. The moon may well burst into flames and still would I stumble through the backyard blind, at least until I emerge from what I style
the Inner Yard to the Outer. Here the trees have fallen back and I have a patch of earth more or less to myself. It is 8:28. Already I can hear groaning floorboards as my neighbour labours to move his photography gear outside. He will not venture this far into the yard for fear of the slippery rain-gutted topsoil or the curious trepidations of roots grasping his ankle and snapping it, indifferent to their actions or my neighbour’s pain as they are too preoccupied with their advance into this relative momentum, this dream-notion – mobility. Should my neighbour attempt to journey to the Outer Yard, photographing the ground in blue-white brilliance with each step to illuminate his way, he would still stumble as all he has really achieved is to give the ground and tree-roots a salutary instance of light by which to guide their way. I, however, am free from such boons. What a lucky scamp am I, to dwell in a shady backyard with my friends far away and nothing to offer the ground beneath my feet but respite from the light of the moon – and so pay no heed when a teenager breaks down a panel in the back fence to make a short-cut for his bike and passing me drunkenly rasps, ‘Fuck, what the fuck do you want? F-fuck you, fuck you. Oi! Whaddya want, you CUNT,’ and all at once it is 8:37 and my neighbour walks inside and the stars are very bright and far away.
I’m a funny person. I know because people tell me all the time. I’m the funniest person I’ve met and that’s saying something because I have definitely met at least 37 people. It’s weird to tell people that you’re funny but it is very important to the story I am about to tell you. Some people might take the story seriously if they don’t know I’m being funny. Or they might not understand some of my descriptions or new vocabulary because they are not clever.

There are two things that you should always remember when you are story-telling. Firstly, swearing is okay if you are quoting someone. My brother-in-law told me that because he always quotes Chopper (a famous hitting man that swears a lot and wrote a book about his strange life) when something annoys him or he hurts himself or other stuff. It sounds silly if someone said the ‘f’ word and you say ‘effing’ or put another word in there like ‘stupid’. You might as well just say the word because people laugh more when you swear. Except my mum.

Secondly, you should never let the truth get in the way of a good story. No one told me that. I figured it out for myself because once I was telling my teacher why I didn’t do my homework and I think she was much happier with the story I told her about how my Nan died (she didn’t really) than if I’d just said ‘I didn’t do it because I’m a lazy sod’. My dad uses the word ‘sod’ (I think English people use it which is odd because I use English, I’m just not British). I basically don’t like my teacher because she isn’t very nice and she smells like toilet perfume and she won’t share her Fantales. I don’t even care if she knows I don’t like her. The only reason I’m telling you this story is because I wrote it down for my year five English project and my teacher gave me a pretty s-h-i-t-t-y mark (that didn’t count as a swear word because it isn’t quoting anyone but my own brain) and I took it very hard because, to me, this is a very exciting story because it really happened.

Well, one day I was chasing a lizard – or a dragon, yeah, a
red dragon. He was very quick and I couldn’t catch him. He kept running further across my yard, then across my driveway, then under the fence into my neighbour’s yard. I climbed one of the short trees next to the fence and peeked over. The dragon was sitting in the middle of their driveway and I couldn’t see their car so I ran around the other side of the fence to try and catch it again, but the guy from next door came outside.

‘Get out of my yard you little dick weed.’

I don’t know what a d-i-c-k weed is but it sounds like it would probably be disgusting. Anyway, that guy scares me, so when he yelled at me to get out I got out.

Later on I went down to the corner shop to buy some Hubba Bubba Bubblegum. The tape one. Grape flavour. My next-door-neighbour was at the corner shop too.

As soon as he saw me he said: ‘There you are ya little shit-head, you think you’re a fucking genius fucking stuffing around in my yard, you little dickhead.’

When the shop guy heard him swearing at me he came out and started yelling at my neighbour, so my neighbour killed him.

That’s the end of the story. My teacher did not have one nice thing to say to me about my story. She said that it didn’t have enough setting stuff in it. I scribbled out the bit about my yard and wrote:
Well one day I was chasing a red dragon blah blah blah. He kept running further across a hill covered in grass so it was green, except that some of it was brown (brown because of a drought perhaps or maybe a cow lay down there and killed the grass or just did a cow-pat in a few places) and there was a little rock that I stepped on, so it was a greeny, browny, rocky hill. Then he ran across a small pond that had some seaweed in it (or something like seaweed that probably wasn’t seaweed) and something brushed against my leg, either an electric eel, a hammerhead shark with slimy eyes or a plastic bag. Then the dragon hid under a very brown log in my neighbours’ yard. I climbed one of the large trees next to the log and peeked across a huge paddock with some flowers in it – one of the leaves on the tree smelt like eucalyptus so there’s a 75% possibility that it was a eucalyptus tree. The dragon was sitting in the middle of their paddock and I couldn’t see their car so I ran around the other side of the log to try and catch it again but the guy from next door came outside blah blah blah.

When I fixed her stupid setting problem she just came at me with more problems. She said my story wasn’t even interesting, which I know is a lie because everyone loves dragons. So I changed the dragon into a seal because lots of people were at the seal show when I went to Seaworld. I thought that there was no way she wouldn’t be interested in a seal travelling across a hill and paddock but she still didn’t like my story.

She said the words weren’t sophisticated enough and by year five I should have a wider vocabulary. Once I’d found out what sophisticated meant I got a thesaurus and found some good words to use. These are the changes I made:

- Dragon = no other word for dragon.
- Chasing = hounding.
- Hill = knoll.
- Green = emerald.
- Brown = russet.
- Rock = granite.
- Plastic = synthetic.
Looking in the thesaurus was very boring. Besides, Mum already told me that she thought my story was probably very sophisticated (she couldn’t read it because I got up early to finish it before my cartoons. She said 5 am was much too early to read).

None of these changes made the story better according to my teacher, she said it ended strangely (she cannot get her story straight). I know this was also a lie because people love it when people kill other people in movies and then they cry (and movies are just stories told by people with lots of video cameras).

I would definitely make this into a movie if I could get my mum to lend me the video camera, but she won’t let me touch it because it cost her an arm and a leg to buy. My mum never lets the truth get in the way of a good story either because she still has both her arms and legs.

I tried to fix my story so my teacher would like it but I couldn’t really see a way to end the story if at least one of the people in it didn’t die. I tried to kill off the seal but that reminded me of the movie Andre (a very sad seal movie).

When my teacher said there was too much swearing I realised that there was just nothing I could do to please her. She is too mean and she wouldn’t know a good story if it stole one of her stupid Fantales. Then she died because the Fantales created a trampoline in her windpipe so the air just bounced back out of her mouth.

The End
By Daniel Cliff

Daniel, this is a very interesting story.
I don’t think it quite fits into the project that I gave you. A recount is just a description of a short event like shopping with your mum or visiting a friend’s house, not what happened when you received your mark for your last project.
Please see me at lunchtime.
Miss Martin.
The frustrated writer sat at his desk, iBook open with minimal text on the page. Virginia Woolf was watching him, ever and always, from the frame on the windowsill. He looked at her imploringly, willing that she offer him some spectral guidance, but she gave him none.

To the Lighthouse, A Room of One’s Own, Mrs Dalloway, her classic works lining the shelves in the small study were a constant source of inspiration for Mitchell, who rested his chin in his hand and looked out the open window.

He wanted to capture it all! That tree, those flowers, the road beyond with its constant flow of traffic and pedestrians. How he longed for a tool to transfer it all from the frame to the page. The whole world and all the beautiful and all the ugly things in it – he wanted to write about them all.

It frustrated Mitchell no end that everything he saw and felt and knew somehow lost its zest by the time he came to type it up or write it down. A little of the colour, some essential part of its being was mislaid, lost in translation. After several years of unpublished works, it was beginning to get to him.

‘Fragmented,’ was the response to his first attempt at publication, ‘Disjointed,’ the next.

The stream of consciousness was there, he was certain it was there, it’s just that his head was too full of other thoughts to make it legible. It was difficult to separate his plot, characters, story, from all his other niggling concerns.

Jeremy, his lover, brought him lunch.

‘How’s it coming?’ he asked, setting the sandwiches down.

‘Slowly,’ was Mitchell’s response, not taking his eyes off the screen.

Knowing his partner’s pet hate for people who read over his shoulder, Jeremy instead gave him a kiss on the top of his head, and left again so that he could have his space to write. Their relationship was an intimate and passionate one, but
when Mitchell was writing, he was unable to focus on much of anything else. Jeremy had observed him, on occasion, from the garden, staring at the wall or the ceiling or out the window for ten minutes on end, before feverishly picking up where he left off on the iBook. To interrupt his meditation, it seemed, would be a grievous error.

That night, the sex lacked something too. The day had produced little to no writing of any serious worth, and it was obviously affecting Mitchell more so than ever before.

‘Are you alright?’ Jeremy asked on the pillow.

‘I’m fine,’ Mitchell assured, ‘I’m just tired, that’s all.’

He soon fell asleep, and inevitably the nocturnal monologue began. Jeremy lay awake listening to his lover’s voice, speaking mostly of troubling things, concerns - nothing really specific, but the words he uttered gave the impression of one who was upset over something. Yawning, Jeremy knew what it was.

The next day was much the same. The novel was not working. Mitchell had printed off the first few pages and was reading over them in the bedroom, becoming more and more agitated. Jeremy was dressing when Mitchell suddenly cried out, throwing the pages away.

‘What’s the matter?’ Jeremy asked, startled.

‘It just isn’t working,’ Mitchell insisted, on the verge of tears, ‘This must be the fourth draft of the first chapter, but it never, never comes out the way it should.’

‘Why not?’ Jeremy asked, picking up the work and looking it over.

‘It just…’ Mitchell seemed as lost for words in conversation as he was in writing, ‘it doesn’t feel right, you know what I mean? It sounds a certain way in my head, it sounds perfect in my head, but when it type it all up it just isn’t right!’

With these words, he left the room, retreating to his study, where Jeremy found him later. He was curled up with his copy of To the Lighthouse, the expression on his face akin to that of a small
child who has been denied a toy of his own, but has been allowed the loan of another one, if only for a few short hours.

There was something different about the sleep talking that night. It was somehow more consistent. Mitchell almost always fell asleep first, leaving Jeremy to lie awake and listen. What struck Jeremy this evening was that he had the distinct impression of having heard these phrases before. They sounded practically rehearsed. He eased himself out of bed and made his way to the wastepaper basket where he retrieved the discarded manuscript. Leaning against the cold glass of the window, his eyes skimmed over the first page, and there he found it. Mitchell was quoting his manuscript in his sleep. Yet it was slightly different. It was better. It had more detail, more depth. Whatever was missing from the page was being recited. The holes were being filled in. His stream of consciousness, Jeremy marveled, brought forward by his unconsciousness. He located a pencil and over the next hour, made furious notes with it, little arrows here and footnotes there, desperately trying to flesh it all out.

Within a month, Mitchell’s book had been written in his sleep. And it was right.
Treading Southbank,
head heavy with copper,
I see nine Muses
exude from a saxophone’s
turbulent mouth,
each to recline on notes
across the Yarra,
then syphon home
again.

~

An old man dusky
with all hues of homeless
dips his sallow pate,
opens a long-toothed grin
at a child
unseen.
His shadow
I foretaste in another’s.

~
At my left shoulder, 
Rialto, 
whippet-angled and cloaked, 
outdone 
by a gold-smirked successor 
across the river. 
He concedes defeat 
to a soundtrack swirling 
in corners, 
tunnels. 

~

Thermals buoy and buffet 
the Muses to me 
as I bisect the glare of gods. 
I do deals in copper 
with the well-dressed wraiths, 
delightfully condemned 
to haunt the shores between 
scores of hooded Charons 
and the flux that binds the city.
Please, Sir, may I dissolve, wind toes about the sand, sink to where the world begins and water begs backwards, sucks the travellings grown infinite with cycle?

May my bones soften and flay, marrow to mudeye; flesh feeds mosses, flowers, grasses?

May I stand naked to the gale; lingerings for the birds who pick the fingerlings.

Lap, lap, lapwing daring both worlds, bobble-eyed; at poplar height Death is silver-eyed.
Everywhere I go I see spiders. They appear to be taking over and it makes me very uncomfortable. They’re dangerous and scary and I don’t want them in the car or in the house. I don’t even want them in the country.

I’m sure there haven’t always been this many. I used to see the odd cobweb on my parents’ verandah and wonder who gave them permission to live and breed in our space but now, it seems, I see them everywhere.

The sun came through my window at seven-thirty this morning and woke me up. I pulled the curtains tightly together to shut the beaming intruder out of my space and tried to go back to sleep. Shortly after, I was forced to get up because I thought I was going to shit my pants.

There must be a more environmentally friendly way to stop your housemate hearing your shit plopping on the water than stuffing a great wad of two-ply Sorbent underneath. But no one would really want to re-use something that cushions turds. Maybe one of those dirty hippy camps would give it a crack (or two).

To make matters worse my housemate didn’t buy recycled toot-roll this time. Somehow I feel less guilty wasting something that has already been re-used. She apologised saying, ‘Sorry it’s not recycled, I haven’t had time to go to Woolies so I just stopped at the servo’ (to spend half her pay on criminally expensive petrol). I don’t know how she affords to waste money the way she does. Mummy and Daddy probably help her out with her HECS. Private Catholic school brat. Meanwhile I’m working at a bloody franchise for thirteen bucks an hour – even on public holidays.

At ten-thirty rain battered against my window, reminding me that there was a world outside our little two-bedroom flat. I put my head under a pillow to try and block out the sound. A bird was screeching and it was
very hard to ignore. Birds eat spiders. Maybe I should get them on my side.

As I looked around the room I saw a fuzzy brown dot at the top of the ceiling. The world pre-glasses is a strange one. Everything is blurred. They’re technically for long distance but for me that’s actually about two or three metres. Without them things look more pale, with a hazy outline of colour. Like when you put an M&M in water and the colour comes out, making a little pale ring around it.

I put my glasses on and the fuzzy brown dot instantly turned into a clear, black spider. It was small and I’m really not too scared of spiders, but the sighting confirmed my belief that spiders were taking over the apartment. I was thrust into action.

Although the spider wasn’t moving and didn’t seem to know I was there, I believed that it was deadly and dangerous. At any point it could spring down from the wall and seek its prey. I checked outside to make sure the bird was still there (for backup).

First I got the spray. I was not that scared of it so I could stand on the bed, get as close as I could and spray the crapola out of it. Then I pulled the chair out from my desk and sat to watch. It was at this point in the proceedings that my flatmate emerged from her room and stood in the hall wrapped in a purple towel. The expression on her face said both, ‘I wish I wasn’t awake,’ and ‘what the fuck are you doing staring up at the ceiling?’

She’s always got this plump, bloated, big-cheeked look when she’s just woken up. I’d seen her like that a lot. She’d sleep for most of the day on the lounge watching American sitcoms or with a DVD menu playing over and over until I got home and turned it off. More often than not she’d be out til the early hours racking up on her compact in a porta-loo at some music festival or other.

‘Whatcha doin’?’ she asked.
‘Killing a spider,’ I said.
She took a few steps towards my room and looked around trying to find the offending arachnid. ‘There,’ I said, pointing to it.
‘That’s not a spider’. She shook her head and trudged to the shower.
Admittedly it was small (slightly longer but not as wide as a five cent piece), but left to its own devices, I believed it would not only grow but multiply. This is something I was most certainly not willing to risk. Why should they get to start families here and put our lives at risk with their poisonous fangs? This is my house, I pay the rent and I didn’t want any outsiders around.

When I was a kid, about ten maybe, I was helping Dad cart firewood up and down from the shed to the wood-box at the front door. When we finished, he let me stand in the trailer while he drove up the back. During the thrill of the ride I felt something brush my leg and looked down to see a huge mother-fucking huntsman working its way up to my Steeler’s shorts. I screamed so loudly that Mum came running out of the house, thinking I’d either been run over or chopped my hand off. My parents laughed at me and I haven’t stepped into that trailer since. My Mum always says that most spiders are harmless and although I’ve never been bitten I’m not sure I believe her. They’re all the same to me.

The spider in my room took quite a long time to die. It dropped a web and I think it was trying to lower itself out of the Mortein mist. Then, dangling like a refugee halfway between its home and the battlefield, it started to spasm. It would jiggle all its legs and body for about half a second and then stop. It was almost like a Mexican wave. Watching this performance I realised it was destined to land atop my pillows. Not the pillows I sleep on but those pointless cushion ones you chuck off when you get in. It was now more important than ever that I wait for the spider’s death. After its fit it started a rapid descent, bungee-jumping down the wall until it landed on the spotted green cushion Granny made. I didn’t like this much but I was brave enough to lift the cushions away, leaving the body moving very slowly on the carpet. It had started to shrivel and now looked even smaller. I couldn’t resist giving it one last gassing with the Mortein (as punishment) before heading to get the vacuum to remove any evidence. I felt I was being more smart and more safe. I checked again and the bird hadn’t moved.

I left my room in search of more deadly and dangerous intruders. The morning’s events had proved them to be cunning
as well as poisonous. It was there in the hallway that I saw a cockroach. It reminded me of a spider. Brown. More legs than us. It was looking lazy and reminded me a little of myself the way it was hanging out quietly without its mates around. Only it wasn’t like me. It didn’t look like me. So I gassed it. I got really close and coated its icky shell with a foam of poison. It had no chance. I remembered something I’d seen on A Current Affair about what roaches can survive. An nuclear holocaust apparently. But this one didn’t. I truly killed it. I now believe that to be a myth, even though I have based my opinion on no scientific reasoning whatsoever (if the Christians can do it then so can I).

I was looking forward to a long shower but my flatmate had been in there for a lifetime and I knew she’d use up all the hot water (doesn’t she know we’re in a drought?). I don’t know what she does in there but she always emerges looking like she’s been through hell. Then she spends an hour in her room applying fake tan, using several cans of hairspray and asking me strange questions about little bags and strappy things from Sportsgirl. I’ve never seen her wear the same outfit twice.

While I waited for the shower I took some preventative measures, letting off an insect bomb in the lounge room and emptying the rest of the spray into the flatmate’s room. When she emerged (spotty) from the shower she started coughing (pussy) and waving her hand around trying to clear some air.

‘You’re an idiot.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘It was a house spider and they’re completely fucking harmless.’

The roach was so big that my vintage vacuum had trouble sucking it up and I felt it travel up the tube past my hand. I knew the roach didn’t need to die but it was yucky and brown so I think I did the house a favour. As it turned out, the spider was so small I could hardly find its body (even with my glasses on).

I looked out my window into the world and away from the scene of the murders and the bird started singing happily. I think he’d been egging me on.
A marionette, hung uneven, arms surprise-flung: one obtuse and one acute. The air that floats before her face demands full attention: eyebrows crinkle. Newt slime slicks the floor beneath her feet, one rolls toward a stair, the other makes an arc between its heel and calf. Her backpack lolls from arm: gremlin of poor balance. Shark teeth reach out, try to clamp the atmosphere and halt her fall. Magnetic kneecaps fight her centre so she cannot see the leer, a sole onlooker delighting in her plight.

One moment after, all will come undone, but frozen, she becomes an optic pun.
Like Poetry

Jessica Lloyd

Some might think that creation spouts
like incandescent water
from a font that’s full to bursting:
perfect as cut diamonds.

It’s more like vomit
erupting from a poor man’s gut
while he’s still hungry,
burning up the oesophagus
to splatter the greasy street
with lumps of his last repast.

If he is a god
he’ll gather the pieces that are thickest,
still juicy from hurried gulletfuls
and turn them into a new meal.
Street lights through a bathroom window appear like paused fireworks, somehow captured in the rippled pattern of the glass. The high wattage globes reflecting off-white tiled walls break up the effect of orange on black, diminishing it – it almost becomes unnoticed and is no longer magical. A couple sit opposite each other in a bath – an ordinarily romantic setting contrasted by the unflattering illumination. The woman sits squinting; her eyes have not yet adjusted.

‘What did you want to talk about tonight?’

Her elbows point toward the ceiling and gleam with condensation and her breasts become taut, defying gravity as her hands weave through sable tresses.

‘Why aren’t you talking to me?’

There is no response, just a blank stare from the supine figure opposite her. The stare begins to morph – the pupils dilating even though the light remains a harsh, almost fluorescent, refraction from the tiled walls.

‘What’s wrong? Are you upset?’

He gives just an ever-so-slight flicker of recognition. His gaze drifts above her head, to a moth gently trekking across his towel, negotiating the undulations of the fabric until it ascends the summit. It eventually takes flight from the rack and enters the gap between the heat bulbs some two metres above them.

‘Hey. What have I done?’

His eyes traverse her features. Her complexion is yet to acquire the harshness of age; it is unblemished and bereft of pigment, with freckles lightly powdering her nose and cheeks. The pinkish tones of her bottom lip complement her slightly upturned nose.
‘What are you doing?’

His face contorts into a subtle snarl, as if he were somehow perturbed that she had so rudely interrupted his concentration.

‘I don’t know what’s wrong unless you tell me ... Talk to me!’

His stare dissolves as he shifts slightly, causing the inert pool around each of their bodies to swirl. He grunts aimlessly.

‘What?’

Then, with noticeable purpose, he flicks his eyes from her to the towel hanging from the hook behind the door – her towel.

She follows his eyes.

‘What, you want me to leave?’

His eyes continue shifting from her, then up and to the left almost incessantly.

‘Fine. Have fun.’

She begins to lever herself out, pressing down on either side of the bath with delicate fingers, long despite her petite frame. Before her derrière has emerged from the warmth, however, he grabs her wrists – firmly, but not forcefully, holding her in place.

‘Well, what do you want? If you don’t stop fucking around I’ll get out and go home.’

She reclines, tilting her head to the right expectantly. He knows that look: well, explain yourself. Despite this he does not speak, just stares blankly at her. He can see the exasperation written across her brow. She frowns.

‘Did I say something to upset you earlier?’

He begins to study her more overtly, running his vision down
her face and over the top of her chest, her breasts hidden behind her bunched up legs. Her knees are scarred from many misadventures during childhood – I used to fall down a lot. His stare is making her anxious.

‘What are you looking at? Why are you doing this?’

He glances at her forehead and then resumes his visual passage downward, pausing for some time and peering into the gap between her shins. She twitches and snaps her ankles together. He flashes a marginally sinister glance at her. Her face momentarily loses its density and a tear slips down her left cheek and clings to her chin. He looks into her eyes, focussing more intently on the left – the one he usually looks at when directing his attention toward her. Her pools of aquamarine shimmer: I like your serial-killer eyes.

She shifts more purposefully this time. He does not motion to her in any way, just lets her get up. She dries her neck and back, even though she had not touched the water. She moves the towel down to her legs; she knows he is watching but does not put on any pretence of sensuality.

Neither of them look at each other directly. She does see him reach subtly for the pot containing a rather sickly looking succulent.

With efficient ferocity, he rams the pot onto the top of her head, which is prominent due to her position. The sound is reminiscent of a rain-sodden newspaper colliding with concrete as she crumples silently onto the shagpile bathmat, with just the faintest hue of claret mingling with the faded navy rug.

The moth, having exhausted its strength searching for an escape through the ceiling, gently descends toward the prostrate woman. It catches his attention. He watches its trajectory and lets it fall softly into his grasp. His position allows him to view both moth and girl – both at rest, both beautiful.

He remains draped over the edge of the bath, gazing calmly into her now-quiet eyes, whilst gently fingering the dusty wings of the moth. With the fading blue irises of her eyes funnelling gradually toward the pupils, he hoarsely asks, ‘Do you hate me?’
Quivering at Adolescence
Sarah Kella

Expressive ribbons and wrought iron swirls festoon her arm: a full sleeve yet no declaration of names, only imagery to proclaim neutrality.

Parabolic hip bones and Bank Gothic text; inebriated inky inscriptions bloom amidst flushed veins and pubic stubble.

Nude in bed: torso exposed, calves sheathed in cotton. The curve of her collarbone mimics my finger’s journey.

We are home, not inked but penciled in.
Portraiture
Sarah Kella

A photograph of two blonde girls, sisters from the way they stand so close, patent mary janes toe-to-toeing and bold cheeks pressed together. Tulip-bulb smears like rosacea bloom beneath the smoosh of flesh, lengths of eyelashes mid-swipe where one has looked up at the flash. Blue inferred from the genes, unintentional Aryan breeding captured half-blinking.

Stagnant children in Technicolor are a permanent source of irreparable envy but torn photographs are too easily romanticised. We are over the edge, too slow to forget, losing minute miracles in search of palpable re-memorising.

Palm spread butterflies, plastic Chinese finger-traps and my childhood. Knife-edged between ecstasy and that lasting fear of age.
Ever tried shoving your life into a cheap suitcase at the last moment? It’s no fun, no fun at all.

God save us from marketing people. You are preoccupied with what’s happening in your own world and the phone rings. It’s someone with a Bombay accent. ‘Good morning, is Mr White in?’

‘No, he’s not in,’ you reply.

‘Oh, can you make decisions about this phone number?’ You grow irritated. You’ve already lost the thread of what you were doing.

‘Look, I’ve got a child in the bath. Can’t talk, sorry. Goodbye.’ You put the phone back on its wall cradle. ‘Bloody hell.’

The bed is strewn with clothes you’re trying to pack. You can’t think straight about what else needs to go in. All you know is you have to get out. You blunder about for a while, shoving more random items into the suitcase. Then you sit down heavily on the bed. All the resolve seems to have gone out of you, like the wind out of a heavyweight boxer who’s been punched in the gut.

Later, you wander the streets of your neighbourhood, passing the other houses. You can see the people who live in them in the late afternoon light, moving about in front of computer monitors and TV screens, black shapes watching Big Brother or whatever other crap is distracting them from their lives. You walk along Rowland Ave: one of those long, winding, heavily-populated streets that connect Coniston and Mangerton. A street full of garages where men work illuminated from behind like cardboard cut-outs surrounded by old bikes, cardboard boxes overflowing with old children’s books and toys, lengths of wire and rubber matting and half-empty cans of paint that will ‘come in useful one day’. Where retired couples who left Sydney twenty-five years ago bring each other Cup-o’-Soups. You are taking a last look, because you don’t intend to be back.
You drive over to the TAFE and wait for her in the open-plan food court. Plastic orange chairs are stacked up next to plain wood-topped tables. A cleaner in blue jeans, blue short-sleeved shirt and peaked cap mops up around the tables. A roof-mounted television faces an area of low uncomfortable lounge chairs, upholstered in cheap yellow plastic.

‘NIB can cut your physio, chiro, and optical bills in half for just $9.95 a week!’ ‘The next programme is recommended for Mature Audiences – Some Violence’ – followed by an old episode of Blue Heelers.

At the left-hand wall, a noisy group of teenagers plays table-tennis in front of a series of noticeboards plastered with ads and flyers. There is a blue vending machine with a red and yellow Smiths logo, and two of the inevitable red ones filled with cans of Coke. Students – Asian, Middle Eastern – munch on chips from brown paper bags. Metal barriers with Lazumba coffee logos separate the food court proper from an elevated stage with a trompe l’oeil painting of a window punched through a wall of brick. Beyond this a lone seagull hovers in a cloudy sky over a cerulean sea and some purple mountain, fringed at sea level by a line of green trees running close along the shore.

You see her coming. She has pulled on a blue suede coat with dangling collar ties and a hood that makes her look like a pixie. Her hair is fastened on one side with a glittery clasp that gives her a girlish look.

As soon as she reaches the table where you sit you are both arguing. You are so used to this you hardly get upset. You hand the keys to the house.

‘I’ve packed my gear. I’m going to Nowra.’
‘That’s a stupid idea.’
‘Come on, you know it doesn’t work any more. I’m not sticking around to be stomped on.’

She stares at you, bewildered. You lean forward to touch the inside of her wrist lightly. Of course, you don’t expect such a gesture to mean anything now. She draws away from your touch. Things are pulling out of shape. You remember the day she
first let the front of her blouse be unbuttoned, closing her eyes slightly in anticipation of your touch. Everything since then has gone wrong. No matter how often you kissed her, how tenderly you held her to you, right hand cradling her head and stroking her soft hair, the death of her own ambition was present.

You stand up. You leave. You don’t look back to see her expression. She is on her own now. She had you and now she doesn’t. Too bad.

A day later you are sitting in a cheap motel in Nowra. The brown carpet is strewn with your clothes. Spend long enough in places like this and your spirit will heave itself inside out, you think. Of course, you’re a bit depressed. It’s only natural. But later you’ll go out and explore some of the coves and little bays that carve the cliff tops open like hunks of sourdough, their rough banks dotted with donkey orchids and hybanthus. These bright blooms will cheer you. You will push your way past bushes obscuring little rough paths and you will come out into your new life.

Leaving town has been the best thing to do, even if you will always dream of the dim light pooled in the hollows of her collar-bones.
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