Tide Issue #1

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Abstract
Welcome to TIDE! TIDE (edit spelt backwards in case you didn't notice) is a collaborative literary 'zine hoping to promote creative writing at the University of Wollongong and in the wider community. It's also a good excuse to have our names in print. The works included showcase the great talent that we have here in the 'gong and at the uni. We are a group of eleven 3rd-year students from the School of Journalism and Creative Writing. Interested in the nitty-gritty of the writing process, we want to make our work tight, concise and fabulous! We hope we've succeeded, read on and judge for yourself! We'd like to thank Tania Daniels at Wollongong Cultural Services, Wollongong City Council, John Scott at the School of Journalism and Creative Writing, University of Wollongong, Marlus Foley at the School of Art and Design, University of Wollongong, the South Coast Writers' Centre, and the Marvellous Shady Cosgrove.

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Editors’ Note

Welcome to TIDE!

TIDE (edit spelt backwards in case you didn’t notice) is a collaborative literary ‘zine hoping to promote creative writing at the University of Wollongong and in the wider community. It’s also a good excuse to have our names in print. The works included showcase the great talent that we have here in the ‘gong and at the uni.

We are a group of eleven 3rd-year students from the School of Journalism and Creative Writing. Interested in the nitty-gritty of the writing process, we want to make our work tight, concise and fabulous! We hope we’ve succeeded, read on and judge for yourself!

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Top to bottom, left to right: Amber Jones, Rebecca Osborne, Elizabeth McDade, Shady Cosgrove, Jessica Green, Cc Yuen-Collingridge, Courtney Goddard, Alana Ayliffe, Charissa Ware, Laura Smith, Andrew Hows and Brigitte Junga

Proxy

Charissa Ware

Charissa writes short fiction; usually someone dies. She has her own business, Imaginical; designing and making beaded jewellery.

It starts off as a whimper, whispering through the monitor on the coffee table. Sleep. I pull a magazine off the littered table; the monitor is knocked onto the wooden floor. Static. I flick through the various pages informing me about motherhood. You’re telling the wrong person.

She takes it to the next stage. Piercing cries echo down the hallway. She’ll calm herself down. I switch on the television. Afternoon soaps don’t hold my attention. She demands it from her bed. They say to leave them in bed. It’s not good to pick them up every time they scream.

The monitor shrills from the floor. She wants to display her authority. I refuse to be at her beck and call. That isn’t what was agreed upon.

The six o’clock news informs me its time for Amy to get home. Any minute now she’ll park her black bottom-of-the-line beemer in the driveway, walk through the front door, kiss me on the cheek and ask about her daughter. My wife’s eyes follow me from the photo-lined wall as I walk down the hall to the nursery.

Bright yellow walls enhance
the sun coming through the window. Drained hands reach into the window. She contentedly gurgles at her father’s touch. Her dirty nappy is thrown into the bin; the foul smell isn’t drowned out by the New clothes make her presentable. I take her to the lounge room to wait. Wait for her mother.

Red stained glass rattles in its timber frame, moving the crimson shadow in the hall onto the baby’s face, announcing that my wife is home. Her heels click across the tiles. Leather briefcase drops to the ground, files spill across the floor.

“Hi Sweetie.”

At first I think she’s talking to me and I wait for her lips to graze my cheek. Instead the load’s lifted from my arms. It gets a whole conversation in a cooing voice. I have yet to be acknowledged.

“When did you feed her last? Have you given her a bath yet? Did you take her for her checkup?”

Amy lists what should be her responsibilities. Scrutinizing. Next she’ll complain about having to work while I get to stay at home. Bitch.

Six weeks after the birth, Amy started to become restless. Boredom hit hard. She gave it another two months. She never expressed it, but motherhood wasn’t the joy she was expecting. When her child was four months old, she began to leave it. One day a week was the deal.

“Just to keep me on my toes.”

I worked from home that one day, every week. Handled it. Hated it. Three months later, the company went under. I arrived home and Amy had to fight hard to hide her elation.

“I’ll return to work. Just until you find another. To keep up with the bills.”

“The doctor was booked out. She ate half an hour ago. And I was waiting to see if you wanted to bathe her. Have some quality mother-daughter time.”

Such strain to filter the sarcasm from my voice. My wife looks at me, hands her daughter over and then flops onto the apricot leather couch. She needs to sit, relax for a while. Tough day at the office.

The water temperature’s meant to be 36 degrees. My hand reaches towards the hot tap, but doesn’t turn it. The bath is already full. Her smooth skin becomes covered in ridges, as one foot is placed into the water. She screams. Amy expresses concern from the lounge. She’s just cold, I maintain.

Red numbers blaze three o’clock in the darkness. Silence. I don’t bother to sleep, just wait for it to start. Amy will then roll over and whisper that she has to get up for work in three hours. I’ll tell her it’s ok, I’ll take care of it, you need your sleep.

Blinds tap the glass. Their out of time rhythm fills the room. Breath tickles the back of my neck. Her daughter cries from next door. Nostrils whistle. I wait for Amy to ask. The mechanics of her sleep don’t change. Minutes pass. I throw the overstuffed doona back and walk into the baby’s room.

Formula’s made up. She throws the bottle to the ground. I search for a clean teat. The baby cupboard’s empty. I open another cupboard door and amongst countless medical items lies a still-packed teat. I try to remove it from the puzzle, but other pieces crash with it to the floor.

I lay the bundle down on the bench and stoop to the floor to pick all the crap up. Bandages, vitamins, Panadol are all placed back. Remaining on the floor is the teat; remaining in my hand is a bottle of antihistamines. I retrieve the thorn bottle. Crush a pill. Shake.

“For God’s sake wake up. Something’s wrong.” My wife sleepily looks up at me. I place her daughter in her arms.

“Look at her. Something’s not right.”

Baby can’t hold her head up, it lolls around.

“What happened?”

Amy’s still not completely awake.

“I was just trying to feed her and she went kinda limp.”

Amy lays her baby on the bed, pulls on jeans and a shirt. She runs down the hall, grabs car keys off the coffee table, I hear the car door slam shut. I follow Amy’s fleeting path down the hall. Baby’s eyes roll back into her head. I get into the car and my wife speeds out of the driveway without giving me a chance to buckle her daughter and in I. Fiddle with the belt. We’re more than halfway there before I get it done up.

Brakes screech as she slows down at a set of traffic lights. The baby starts to convulse. Out of the corner of my eye I can see a tear run down the side of Amy’s face. She should be thinking that this wouldn’t have happened had she been a real mother. Her foot forces down the accelerator.

Nurses and doctors flutter around. After a few initial questions, no one speaks to us for over an hour. My wife paces around the waiting room. Every now and then she sits on a random seat, a game of musical chairs. A doctor enters the room. He tells my partner her daughter has been stabilized. They’re running more tests. Tension pulls at my chest. Fear that the little pill will show up in her blood.

The doctors wake my wife and I in the morning. They blame Amy’s daughter’s condition on a reaction to the new brand of formula. Amy gives me a look. I decided to try the cheaper brand this week. The pill has gone unnoticed. I’ve had more sleep in an uncomfortable hospital waiting room chair than I’ve had in my own bed since she was born.

Four hours later they discharge her with instructions and information about special formulas for babies with allergies. This wouldn’t have happened if she were breastfed like normal.

Amy stays home for the remaining two days of the working week. On Monday I’ll go back, she says. I try and convince her that her daughter needs a mother’s love in sickness.

“She has you.”

My wife smiles as though I’m a good father. A surrogate mother. She sits down at her computer, intending to spend this Sunday morning e-mailing so she doesn’t have to catch up so much tomorrow.

Amy’s daughter looks up at me from my arms. Her face starts to screw up, warning of the cries that always follow that expression. Amy walks over and smooths her daughter’s hair.

“You’re hungry, aren’t you sweetie? Honey, you should feed her.”

Amy sits back down at the computer; mechanically I make the formula up. I can see through the medicine cabinet’s door. See the packet of little white pills. Calm hands pop one
pill and another. I pause for a minute. The tapping of the keyboard echoes into the kitchen. The pills are crushed and placed into the bottle. Shake. They have become part of the formula.

Amy lets me drive to the hospital this time. Her daughter convulses in her arms. The light at the last stop before the hospital is red. Stop. Convulsions cease, she's completely limp. Dead.

Screams drown out the sounds of ambulances passing by. Amy doesn't wait for the car to completely stop outside the ER; she jumps out and runs into the hospital screaming. A calm nurse in a crisp white uniform takes the load from my wife's arms. The nurse looks over Amy's shoulder at me. She knows nothing can be done. In an effort of comfort, she takes the dead into a trauma room. Joined by two doctors, they seem to be trying to revive her as my wife watches.

The monitors are all flatlined. Their shattering beeps explain to Amy her daughter is gone. Dead.

Cigarettes & Things

Joel Naoum

Joel studies prose fiction at Wollongong University. He is currently working on a novel 'Warm Milk'.

Donna is wearing the green thing. She's eating asparagus and speaking nonsensically: something about a war somewhere. Something about how unfair it is on the native people of whatever land this pointless war is in. Something about white men and their egos and their guns and all that testosterone. Dah-ling. Donna is wearing the green thing. It's quite an accomplishment in knitwear, and it was on sale too. At eighty-nine ninety-nine it was a bargain for ten thirty in the morning. And Donna is loving the asparagus. Donna's boyfriend is Mike, a name which sits uncomfortably with me, reminding me faintly of cigar smoke and dens. Of the den in the Brady Bunch.

Mike.

Beth is cooking the pasta thing in her kitchen. Apparently I love the pasta thing, so I keep my mouth shut while Donna talks about the war and her green thing and Beth continues cooking, drinking her one and a half glasses of red wine and quickly getting tipsy. Mike says nothing and does not smoke a cigar.

"You smoke?" I say to Mike, who nods half-heartedly. "You got any?" He shakes his head. "You want to come up the road and grab some?"
Mike nods, then shrugs. What the hell is a shrug anyway? Say that word twenty times fast and you'll start to realise it sounds like something you put down before. *Kills shrugs also.*

Goodbyes are exchanged with the girls and Beth grabs me around the waist, pulling me too close, her face flushed with wine. She whispers a goodbye and there's a promise in it. I shrug out of her arms and head for the door. Behind me, Mike breaks off from a passionate kiss with Donna, whose eyes have momentarily broken away from inspecting the green thing and are filled with a sort of awed urgency, a subdued madness.

The car wallows in a white pool of streetlight along the gutter. It is still warm to the touch, whether from the heat of the day or its recent use, I cannot tell. Mike jumps in, the car pressuring as the door seals. There is a faint pop in my ears. The seats are upholstered in a fine ash grey, and the air-conditioning still hangs in the stale interior like the smell of lettuce.

“Donna, it's very full on. You know?”

“Nod, as if I am confused but being polite. I do know what he means, but I don't want to give him ammunition. Without doubt, Donna will have squeezed and juiced every bit of conversation that passes between me and Mike within ten minutes of their leaving Beth's apartment, and made it into some kind of natural paste that can be used for waxing her legs. I will be flayed alive for ending this relationship. Contributing to the hypocrisy of the patriarchy.

Or something.

Mike continues.

“You know, it's very hard being with her. She talks a lot about the problem with men, and a lot about the problem with women. But she doesn't listen. It's like being male stops me from having an opinion on the whole gender thing.” I just nod. What the hell is the *whole gender thing*?

I attempt to diffuse the situation.

“So how did you two meet?”

“I dunno, at some party. I don't even remember. It all just kind of happened without my permission. Dragged along into it. How do you know her?”

“Who, Donna?” He nods. “Oh, I don't know. She's a friend of Beth's, and she went out with my sister for a while. I think.” Most of them did, at some point.

“With your sister?” Mike's eyes widen, his features elongating until he looks a little ape-like.

“Oh yeah, my sister. But you know, she's totally over that. It was just a phase. Now she waxes her legs and everything. Totally into shopping and all that.” I briefly consider tearing the car into a telegraph pole, there's a chance I could take out Mike and still live. Maybe I would die too. It could be a blessing in disguise.

“A phase?” He doesn't look too serious. “Only intent.

“Uh-huh. Just a phase.”

“Fuck. Well, that figures, at least.”

Digesting. Slowly. His brow creases. The edges of his mouth turn up. Mike nods distractedly, looking out the window with a blank expression on his face.

“Mm.” I say a smile. Perhaps a nervous giggle. In the film, Charlie would heartily laugh long before he was given permission by the situation. I do not. Mike laughs, and I join in with him at a polite but wary distance, hoping fervently that he will end the conversation before the aforesaid telegraph pole becomes necessary. The laugh peals out into a stuttering mumble, a half nervous, half defeated smile with a soundtrack.

The lights in the petrol station are a beacon of homely welcome out in the darkness of suburbia. Inside, the cannon-fodder attendant fetches my cigarettes and wears a name badge that says “Cedric.” Outside the flickering neon, the dark speaks of parking lots, reinforced steel fencing and gas bottles, and somewhere, the muttering of the six o'clock news.

Back in the car, Mike says, “I heard about your Dad, man. That's really awful. I'm really sorry.” Clearly he's not really sorry. Clearly he's been wanting to say something since the beginning of the car trip but was side-tracked by the fact that his girlfriend was a lesbian.

“Hey, you know. It's not a big deal.” This is the kind of conversation tack that usually gives people a head trip. They expect you to fall apart and start blubbering up perverse little secrets about how they themselves and you were never close, about how you don't want to end up like him. About how you're not the same, not at all, even if your watches are the same and now you can't tell the difference between them. The car rumbles over some gravel, leaps over a children's crossing. My foot has landed on the accelerator heavier than expected.

“Sure it's a big deal. If you want it to be. It can be whatever you want.” Mike's watery-eyed stare slices into the side of my face like a really earnest yet slightly pathetic scalpel. It's like he's on the verge of tears from nervousness.

“Seriously Charlie,” he repeats, and nods, a look of unadulterated pity on his face. His face is all raised eyebrows and pursed lips. Why is it that when somebody dies it gives everybody permission to go all surrogate parent on them? It would be far better if one ever noticed when the father died. Or if it hadn't ever happened at all.

“I just want it to never have happened,” I say, realising my voice is a monotone, my mouth slack and emotionless.

“Sure you do man. Sure you do.” A dump, smug hand slips out Mike's long-sleeved shirt. Sits uncomfortably on my shoulder. Does a kind of patting thing that's obviously supposed to be comforting.

Oh *fuck* off. He's completely got the wrong idea. It's not like I wish it had never happened in that I wish the father hadn't been hit by a bus. I could give a damn that he got hit by a bus. I don't want him back. He was a nothing. A passionless, introverted husk, no kind of man at all really. No kind of person. I just want to stop having these conversations with people who are only...
sympathetic because they’re supposed to be sympathetic. My goddamn hands, which are trembling, reach for the pack of cigarettes.

“Light me one,” I say.

“Sure man, sure. Whatever you say.” Too calmly, too suavely, Mike flicks a pink BIC lighter, pulls on a cigarette and slips it to me. I press the button so the electric window glides open, letting some night in, letting the smoke from the cigarette stream away, upwards and backwards, wheeling and wheeling as if the entire conversation just disappeared. I imagine Mike feels really pleased about how this car trip has progressed. I imagine he feels like a down right nice guy, like a really great friend. Already he sees himself as a lower middle class Dalai Lama type, dispensing dollar-a-pop wisdom to down and out suburbanites and bereaved family members. Mike’s fake black eyes are parasitically wishing for me to break apart like a mouldy meatloaf and start whimpering all over him.

“You know,” I say, “I think you and Donna are going to be really happy together. I mean, I think you guys are meant for each other.”

A Collection

Alana Ayliffe

Alana, 23, has been writing since she was two. She loves dancing, dressing up and drinking beer.

Behind the Bike Shed
In the aerodrome Ned Kelly calls home, where Marilyn, Elvis and Osama play poker by the fire burning bibles and terry-towelling wedding gowns, Your Aunt Flo has missed the boat and charged it your account, adversarial and saw-toothed, peeking through the neighbour’s fence.

Bad Perm
Bad Seed, Bad Perm . . . In her Barbie-Arse battle zone she’s a virginal vigilante with no place to call home, cataloguing catatonic wit, all contagious in it’s ballerina bullshit, infecting arteries full of arseholes, safe in their latex-glove stab wounds where multiple mother-figures congregate and kill, then refill their own putrid and pulsating insatiabilities – but in complete benevolence. But Life’s a Bitch (1) Vaccinate Me. Underground Me from the inside out. Defeat the impossible.

Shows of Trumans and Diaries of Basketball
National flag flapping under the bruised moon where a murky sea of acned clouds clamour for my drive-by shooting attention. Shiver, shake and giggle from nervousness as a lump lodges in her throat. Speedy and Incoherent. Footsteps and running water. Blood flash-flood through her arteries, neurone impulses, and all that jazz, inciting bells to be bolsterous – she’s having cellophane dreams again.
Sunday Arvo in the Suburbs: - Non-Football Season

Barbeques
Aunties
Earrings
Deckchairs
Cellulite
Meat
Chlorine vs. Salt-Water
Goon
Plastic Wine Glasses
Little Chunks of Cheese on a Platter Playing With Burger Rings, and Cheezels We Wear On Our Fingers as Rings.
There Was Table-Dancing and Tea-Towels Grinding into Crotches to a Joe Cocker Overture.
And a Seagull Shat On My Baby Sister’s Nose.

Doin’ It For The Kids, Yeah
Blended significantly on the stupour of a subway step, they’re all waylaid and spurious, a stunning myth in a web of lies.
It’s transient sometimes and she’s trouble foretelling trouble in the foreword to a romance novel you’d like to write. Sky-writing hazy hello’s in an I-love-you tone on the skyline – all cityscape and teen drama, popsicedel and temperament.

This is how I like it and this is how it’s gonna be – Narcissus can go shine my shoes and get me change for a dollar. Or a quarter, nickel and dime.
You’re a stone’s throw from my mother’s house . . .

Summer Storm

Andrew Hows

Andrew has written a number of short science-fiction stories and is currently working on a fantasy novel. He enjoys tinkering with computers, reading, and beating people at Monopoly.

He started running. The thunderclaps and his footfalls wove into a syncopated rhythm. Adam had known when he heard the first crack of thunder that he had little time to make it to shelter before the deluge began. The rain-foretelling stench of ozone was just starting to rise from the ground when he spied the park up ahead.
Three ancient Morton Bay figs grew there, their huge, leafy tops woven together into a single canopy.

As fat drops of rain started to splatter on the road, he clambered up the rough rock retaining-wall of the park. The grass was patchy there, the massive trees absorbed most of the nutrients, but he managed to find a spot near one of the giant boles. No rain penetrated the dense canopy, so he opened up his suitcase and got out the documents he’d been working on. He ran a careful eye over them, making sure they hadn’t come into contact with the water.

As he moved to put them back, a small glossy rectangle of paper slipped out. Curious, he stuffed the papers away and picked it up. It was a Polaroid photo, one of the kind that gradually resolves its image as you shake it dry after you take the shot. His own face was stuck.
in the top right corner, bending down as the woman who formed the focus of the picture threw her arms up around his neck, while his own arms encircled her slight waist. He smiled a wistful half-smile as he turned the photo over, and traced the name screwed there in black ink. Tina.

He smelt the warm fragrance of her hair as she had tossed her head back and ran to fetch their camera. She had smiled, and exchanged a few pleasant words with the passer-by she’d charmed into acting the photographer. She reclaimed the Nikon and whirled, running back to him, arms reaching up behind his back. He loved her like this, spontaneous and exuberant. Genuine. Not posing for the dull lens of a camera. When she filled his world. His arms curled around her, and she squealed with surprise as he lifted her off the ground. He carried her over to the sun-lounge they had set up in the shade of one of the beachside palms. She laughed into his hair as he tenderly laid her down, and settled himself in the soft sand next to her. She leaned over, the sun-warmed scent of her long hair filling his head again. Her hand curled around his, and brought it up to her mouth. In her sweet and lilting voice, she whispered into his palm. “Adam.”

As suddenly as it had come, the storm passed. Adam shrugged off the remembrance of things past. Things gone now, too many years gone. The face he had now was not the face of then. It was greyer, and more heavily lined. But somehow, to those older eyes, the rain-soaked world looked strangely different, as if the storm had scrubbed clean the grime of the familiar.

As he stepped out into this fresh new world, he tucked the small photo into his top pocket. On the street, he glanced back only once at the giant figs whose leafy boughs had sheltered him during the storm. Even from this distance, he could make out the drops of water slowly sliding from waxy white flowers, with the ease of memory from a troubled mind. The sun rose above the clouds like the memory of youth.

Grey Skies

Jessica Green

Jess Green is a third year writing student at UOW. She makes bags, scarves and decorates t-shirts.

Grey, Grey skies, Grey skies that I despise.

The hills pulsed in the afternoons, when everyone was going home from work. Pinks and reds kissed the windscreens as I put my indicator on and turned left. Dust spread out like a thin membrane across my view and I squinted, just a little, in order to see. I saw . . .

The afternoons were the best. I used to drive out to the fingertips of the country. I’d park, get out, walk to the edge, and just stand there with the sea touching my face. Out there, you couldn’t feel anything but wind mixed with salty mist. Almost like tears hitting your cheeks. Almost.

When you stood out there, you could hear nothing but the waves crashing in your ear. Sometimes, you could swear you heard a scream - but you were mistaken, it was just the whistling rocks singing their tune.

That day wasn’t very different to any other day: I’d go out to the highway, drive for ten minutes and turn left. Habit usually drove my car; I was merely there.
for the ride. I’d look out the window, play with the radio, and entertain myself with the glowing sphere bouncing along the horizon. But the dullness began to descend a little earlier that day.


The snap of a twig, the urgency of the heart, look to the left, to the right. A picnic blanket crumpled, soiled along the edge and discarded. One hand on your mouth, tightness across your chest; the breath cast out. The other on your thigh, crawling with eight legs, higher and higher. ‘Incy, wincy spider...’ humming in your ear. You look up, and a roof of clouds has turned you grey.


Evening greeted me with a haggard smile, rotting teeth exposed to the horizon. I have met evening once or twice before. He looked nice enough, clean-shaven and a comb run through his hair, but his smile was a graveyard in which no one wished to be buried. Tombstones stood, decaying in the twilight, one with my name upon it, one with yours.

The clouds had now obscured the amber setting, turning everything ashen in this new light, and I wondered why I stopped in the first place. Safety is always our main concern, and the safety of my car was winning point after point.

The crumpled heap seemed to shiver more and a light sprinkling of rain fell on the roof of the car. Above that, the air was alive with bolts and claps. The whip cracker watching over us.


The whimpers are frozen inside you; ice cubes stroking your hair. Feet are rooted to the spot, the body wills them to move, but they don’t seem to hear. They are listening to a voice: “Sees, that wasn’t so bad?”

Heartbeat at fever pitch, a drum solo in your chest: a rattatatatat. Freedom calls. A swift kick of the bass drum, right into the crotch. Legs running, finding their way, left after right. Twigs scrape, drawing red from your forehead, your arms, your shins. They run fast. They run fast like you.


The heavesness of the sky, as I opened the car door, weighed upon me so thickly that I struggled to breathe. One step forward, two steps back; tentative. I remember it wasn’t cold, still my bones vibrated in their sockets.

“Hello?”
Silence.
“Can you hear me?”
Silence.
“Are you alright?”

A slight quiver. I took three steps forward: apprehension. Slowly, I felt my hand move by itself; it had overcome what my body was still fighting. I reached out to receive a flinch that still shudders through my body. We looked up and still they are there.

Grey. Grey skies. Grey skies that we despise.

---

Walking

Mitchell Jordan

Mitchell Jordan writes poetry, prose and ‘zines and is studying Journalism. He enjoys the beach, reading and observing other people.

His shoes hit the wet road, bounding off factory walls knocking bins, bins, mess that accumulate in gaps he has come to rely on. Somewhere, anywhere, to squeeze into to find some space and breathe but never, ever, close his eyes.

He scurries through the city where coffee is two dollars fifty and water is two and they look at you like you don’t belong.

Repulsed by lights, sounds screamingruntraffichildrenoiseescape...
to where the only noise
is the silent protesting of graffiti
tucked away from watchful security
where the only ones who read it
are the only ones who already know it.

Here, he can feel the air,
cooling his bearded cheeks
feel it inside him, filling him
like water

and his eyes adjust,
from the hyper-real theme park glare
to
darkness
as he walks ahead
to see himself.

---

Best Oriental Smile

Amber Jones

Amber Jones writes short stories, poems and screenplays and is currently working on a horror novel. Her work spans many genres from horror, comedy, realism and biography. She is an avid fan of popular culture, music and literature.

John sits in his father's restaurant, his boredom frowning down his face. Dim red lanterns speckle light onto Formica tabletops and Chinese pop songs whisper through the cheap speaker system. The smells wafting from the kitchen are disturbing his already delicate hangover belly and he can hear his mother and father arguing in their native tongue from the kitchen. He strikes a match to ignite his cigarette and before the fire burns his girlish fingers, he manages to light some incense as well. He puffs away the boredom, but it doesn't really go anywhere. He feels numb inside the cloud of smoke. He wishes he could remember last night. All that remains is a conversation with a girl. He can only assume it was the same girl whose bed he woke up in. He thinks it may have been about Asian guys not being blessed with large cocks. The Saturday night bustle begins and wakes him from his musings. As much as he hates to, he stands up straight, checks his suit for cum stains and cigarette burns and puts on his best oriental smile.

"Welcome. Welcome to Lee's Chinese. Table for two?"
John finishes work at eleven thirty. He doesn’t bother to change. He simply throws on his Led Zeppelin t-shirt and heads down to the pub. Wazza and Locko nod to him, then go back to leering drunkenly at the girls around the pool table. They call him Jono, and he likes it. He starts to tell them about his conquest of the previous evening, he doesn’t mention that he doesn’t remember who she was.

“Yeah man, she was hot but not like those girls,” says Wazza, nodding vaguely to the blondes leaning suggestively over the green felt. Wazza reckons that the way they hold their pool cues are an indication of how they would suck your dick.

Yum Cha Sunday makes his father edgy, and his mother silent. It takes a fair amount of preparation and they spend all morning making pork buns and wrapping vegetables in string. John arrived late.

“You stupid! I say be here before eleven! You no work front today! You in kitchen!”

John hates being in the kitchen. When he works out front, there are times when he has a chance to catch his breath. But not in the kitchen. The kitchen is constant, loud and rushed. The pressure is all consuming. Today, working out the back is John’s punishment. John deep-fries forty-eight spring rolls and thirty-six dim sims. He spoons hot soup into twenty-eight bowls, plops in won tons and sprinkles on onions. And then the fortune cookies. Always the fortune cookies. By the end of the day, his suit is coated in a thin layer of oil, and he feels like it has soaked through into his skin.

After the chaos, John sits down with his parents to eat. They are all exhausted. John figures this is a good time to break some news.

“Dad?”

“What?” The word comes out garbled, as his father is stuffing food into his gaping mouth at the time.

“I’m thinking about going to college. I want to be a writer or something.” The hand stops midway to the mouth.

“No. You work in restaurant.”

“Well, you see, I don’t really want to do this forever.” His father glares.

“You work in kitchen. You make fortune cookies! Always! You want to be writer? Write fortunes!”

Lee’s Chinese is famous for its fortune cookies. They are not plucked from a box and thrown on a saucer, but made from scratch in the family kitchen. John’s grandmother has a reputation for being psychic. She doesn’t speak any English, and John very little Chinese. But despite the language barrier, at some stage she managed to drum into her grandson the secret of her fortune cookies. After he rolled them, his grandmother showed him a list with six different fortunes written on it. He is supposed to pick one to use in each cookie. His romantic image of his mystical grandmother is shattered. Even then, he found the idea of only having six fortunes a little sad. Now he writes his own. Sometimes, when he’s had a bad day, the fortunes are cruel. But on his good days . . . Lee’s Chinese is famous for its fortune cookies.

John is bored. He’s not allowed to hang around his white friends anymore. A few weeks ago, Wazza and Locko had got drunk and thrown up all over the cash register. His father had not been amused. John’s friend Mai works out the front these days. She is eighteen, and a sweet girl. She’s nice enough, but boring. Too eager to please.

Mai comes into the kitchen, covered in sweet and sour pork. John stops peeling lychees and asks what happened. A child is behaving dreadfully, she tells him. The child threw his dinner at her because he didn’t like pink. The mother of the boy is in tears. They’ve just ordered dessert. John sets some fortune cookies on a saucer.

Be nice to your parents. They will be dead soon.

The boy leaves holding mummy’s hand and promising breakfast in bed.

Mai and John go to Newtown on their day off. They sit in the Cooper’s Arm, watching the street. A woman enters and takes the table behind them. Her hair is pale as south coast sand, and she smells like vanilla. White. John cannot take his eyes off her. He can’t hear Mai anymore. The woman is drinking chardonnay. She seems all glamour puss, in her black vinyl dress and tall boots. Her long, manicured nails drum the table. Her face tells John that she doesn’t handle her life and needs a man like John to fuck her brains out. Her face tells John that she meows when you lick her nipples. The woman gulps down her drink and makes a sour face. She pulls a cigarette from her sleek leather handbag and lights it. She takes quick frantic puffs until it collapses, whereupon she grinds it into the floor with her stiletto heel. John is in love. He stands up, pulling at his AC/DC t-shirt, begging it to become respectable.

The woman allows him to buy her a drink and once more, she slugs it down quickly.

“Thanks. I’ve got to go.”

She barely looks at him as she speaks. Her voice suits her perfectly: feminine, and sweet as pink candy. Purring. She is driving him crazy. He wants her to stay but he cannot utter a single word as he watches her shiny vinyl butt strut out the door.

Mai has stopped talking now, and is just looking at him.

The restaurant is slow. John sulks in the kitchen. He is depressed. His life isn’t going anywhere. Mai enters, ecstatic.

“John! That woman is here! That woman you love! From the Cooper’s Arm?”

John can’t believe it. He peeps around the door and sees her there in the restaurant, alone. He doesn’t dare approach her, but he comes up with a plan that might give him one, small chance.

It’s not true what they say about Asian guys’ cocks.

John watches her open the cookie and read the fortune. She looks shocked at first then laughs. She puts the fortune in her handbag. She pays her bill, and walks into the bathroom. John tells his mother that he is extremely ill all of a sudden, and must leave. He runs outside and stands in the street, smoking, trying to look cool. It seems he waits forever. Finally, she leaves the restaurant. He starts walking in her direction.
Pretending to not look where he is going, 
John runs into the woman. He raises his 
right hand slightly in order to come into 
contact with her breast. It is only for the 
briefest moment, but it’s enough to make 
John’s pants tighten with anticipation. 
She’s annoyed. 

“Watch where you’re going.” 
Then, miracles of miracles she 
seems to recognize him. He desperately 
hopes she is thinking about the fortune. 

“You again? Are you following me?” 
“I could ask the same. Are you 
following me?” 
“I am most certainly not following 
you.” 

“Come for a drink with me, you 
owe me one.” 
“Was that an order?” 
“Yeah, I guess it was.” 
“I don’t take orders. I give them. 
Now, listen you, I’m not going to fuck 
you, if that’s what you think. I know all 
about Asian guys and their—” She stops, 
and her eyes narrow. “I don’t usually 
like cocks in my food, but that was very 
cute.” 

John is in love.

They take a booth in a chic 
Darlinghurst bar. The faint shadowy 
lighting catches every fragment of 
smoke from her mouth, and he breathes 
it in. It’s a bar, not a pub. John feels 
altogether out of place, but the woman 
doesn’t seem to care. 

“What’s your name?” 
“Lula.” 
He has nothing to say. He struggles 
with every thought, trying to remember 
what conversation is. What he really 
wants to do is to skip this part and go 
straight back to her place. 

“So, um, what do you do?” 

“Do you really care what I do?” 
“Um, I . . .” 

“Sorry, but you don’t. It’s all just 
idle conversation. It’s fucking boring so 
let’s not bother. Ok?” 

John is turned on by her rudeness. 
She is fantastic. Her sophisticated 
indifference has given him fresh hope. 
He raises his eyebrow at her. 

“What do you want to do then, 
Lula?” 

“Well sweetheart, I bought you 
the drink I owed you, so now I’m just 
going to go and get on with my life.” She 
stands up and finishes her drink. 

“But wait, I just . . . I need to . . .” 

“Sorry honey, you’re just not my 
type. I don’t mean to be awful, but next 
time you see me, don’t talk to me, ok?” 

And she’s gone. And John feels 
like he’s going to die. He walks back to 
Surry Hills. It is raining and he feels like 
it’s raining especially for him. If the night 
was clear it would not be the same. He is 
Heathcliff, she is Catherine. It’s raining in 
my heart. Yadda yadda yadda. Mai greets 
him at the door with an excited grin. 

“What happened?” 

“She hates me. She hates me. 
Everyone hates me.” 

“Oh no, that’s not true. Come on, 
let’s get drunk.” 

Mai drags John to her apartment. 
On the way, they buy a case of beer 
and a bottle of vodka. Her flat is painted 
white and the glare from the 100-watt 
globe makes him squint. She lights some 
candies and flicks off the light. They sit 
on the white shag rug and organise their 
alcohol in a kitsch pink esky. Her parents 
bought it for her as a housewarming gift. 
She loves it. It has a smiling cat on it.

Mai watches John down beer after beer. 
She sips her vodka tonic, and lets silence 
settle between them. When John is 
sufficiently drunk, Mai moves. She looks 
up at him, tries to be sexy. He didn’t see 
it coming, but now that he thinks about 
it, it’s perfect. To hell with blondes.

John Lee sits in his father’s 
restaurant. The dim red lanterns that line 
the walls speckle light onto the Formica 
tabletops, and Chinese pop songs 
whisper through the cheap speaker 
system. He strikes a match to light his 
cigarette, and lets the fire burn his girlish 
fingers. He deserves the pain. He’s a 
bastard. He puffs away the hopelessness, 
but it doesn’t really go anywhere. He 
wishes he could remember last night. 
All that remains is a vague memory of 
fucking Mai. The Saturday night bustle 
begins and wakes him from his musing. 
As much as he hates to, he stands up 
straight, checks his suit for cum stains 
and cigarette burns, and puts on his best 
oriental smile.

“Welcome. Welcome to Lee’s 
Chinese. Table for two?”
A Collection

Emily Finlay

Emily Finlay is a third year writing student at the University of Wollongong. She enjoys reading, writing, eating, hot baths, drinking, people, motorbikes, swimming, long walks, sometimes smoking, playing cards, making coffees, cleaning, sex, fire-twirling, gorgonzola and pistachio nuts... but don't we all?

Ethics in the kitchen
I'm living off pasta to get over you – you can tell. A big jar next to the stove. Just penne and butter. The French way.

Spent two thirds of my rent last week being Pandora. Can-opening wounds from my last squeeze blended with love

that will not come. This tastes of camping – cheap cask red and carbohydrates to compensate for that CD I bought

which I didn't want but hoped would make me feel better. Now I think: can cook for myself, don't need you,

while a tiny creature watches, chuckles, then remains silent on the curtain rail. You see, I have this theory that if

she never opened that box I could believe that noodles can be a substitute for all things, a leveler of desire (al dente).

As it is, I maneuver wheat onto my tongue in order to keep away from the phone; as if, calling you, I might unfasten a hinge.

Husk Of Time
How to make it immediate? The curve of the red wall, the undeniable tilt of the shutters. Your hand curled against the mahogany of the table.

I want to keep this moment: graspable, proximate, uninfluenced.

How to record the precise angle, the curve of your lips, imprinting the glass, taking in chai?

The waiter's black apron, littered with cappuccino dust.

A camera couldn't do it. I don't want an 'aspect' but the entire moment, vivid, fleshed, livable over again. Your sandal rubbing my shin.

Shatter your glass and let it reverberate, maybe we can pierce through this husk of time.

Breath-Scented Amnesia
This girl lies under you. Hips raised. Sweat welding, calves heavy, round against the cloth that sheaths your knees. Before: she raised her skirt, revealed her garter, and a thin white joint—serpentine between her thighs—laughed fast at your constraint. Didn't understand, it seemed, the long joy of courtship—unusual for a girl. But this one: hair cropped tight, uneven, like a boy's, her readiness to sit on top, to reminisce perhaps; watching her silhouette dance thicker than her, along white-washed brick—blurred, misshapen, yet strangely accurate—seems accustomed to all those tricks invented to please men; offers you: breath scented amnesia—again.
**Scrubbing The Bathroom**

This morning, scrubbing the bathroom, I found myself in tears. Bleach down my cheeks, thinking how I used to take your towel from where it hung in a corner, once a week, to wash; cleaned hairs from the sink after you shaved. Intimacy trawling in soapsuds. At times you knotted your fingers in freshly pressed sheets, hid empty liquor bottles in cushion covers; I channelled scum from the toilet seat, as though expunging your words – making things fresh again. Alone I crave your untidiness, carry you around with me in a bucket. When I smear shelves with sugar soap I think of you. As I pound the carpets in the cool air dust streams, vanishes and my soles dig into coal lumps of bitumen.

**Pat**

Pat is a soft man with a wide smile. The kind that can get anyone to do anything for him.

Does he use it? I think so.

A man who women will follow on their way out of a bar on a cold night.

They love him because he is shy.

He has a fascination for the symmetrical and once believed his bedroom to be a perfect cube.

This information astounded him.

Every Sunday morning Pat crosses the street to visit an old woman named Vera.

Her bedroom is a perfect hexagon.

**Toby**

I was on the beach today, although it will mean nothing to you. Out there the sun was like an imprint left by moments when the wind was silent and the spray had stopped rising, sprinkling the backs of my thighs with its autumnal sting. Instantaneously this evaporated. I felt heat welling from the backs of my knees, heard your voice crumbing across the small of my bottom:

“You’re mad.”

“I am,” this smiled through the red haze of lids. I knew it was your voice.

“And you?”

“I just came here to walk Toby.”

Children, launching in and out of surf, belly pressed against hard sand, elbows, skin raised, indented, aflame.

Milky, hazy sky, with its thick underlay of purple.

Later I fed you artichokes—only now do I notice how tender this seemed.
The Thief
She watched me, as I sat, sipped my coffee
scribbling notes.
The Darlington sky
gaudy, fringed with
flying ants.
I was thinking of a woman
who told me she had seven varieties
of bird in her inner city
yard. The egg
in my club sandwich was thick,
cooked
this morning; now
pliable,
like I have been at times.

She sensed this from across the road
or round the corner,
willing me to ease my grip
on an afternoon of
Christmas shopping.

Secrets

Daniel Stewart

Try waking up to construction noise at seven in the morning six days a week, listening to Black Flag and the Germs, and reading Euro-trash philosophy and you might end up like Dan.

What is most damaging to us is the façade of calm we present over our tormented, anxious lives. Secrets are important, but they also serve to deny the commonality of horror, which defines our existences. Jacob discovered this when Sarah confided in him that she had poisoned the family dog when she was six.

Over time, Sarah realised that her intentions behind this murder were to distract her feuding parents from their selfish arguments. She wanted to bring them down to a concrete reality where pets die and where six-year-old girls need to exert their limited control over their lives, by relishing the attention and the adoration of their parents.

“But,” Sarah was quick to state, “reason is always laughable when discussing the homicide of a young girl.” Jacob was fascinated by this crime and suggested that she was attempting to understand death by invoking it. Sarah considered this and, as though it was too difficult, shrugged it off. It was a futile attempt to re-centre the universe around her; the dog was the persecuted Galileo, suffering from the harsh truth of an indifferent universe. The parents divorced soon.
after, for Sarah there was another dog and, for a while, more adoration that became an embarrassment when she began puberty. A parent’s love is, to a teenager, perverse and humiliating.

Jacob considered this. Could he hate her for poisoning a dog when she was a child? He had to link the six-year-old to the twenty-two-year-old. He eventually concluded that this aberration was universal.

"I used to think constantly about murdering my mother," he announced, and then:

"I would sit on the end of my bed with a hammer in my hand picturing splitting her forehead open, watching her head cave in. I used to stand over her bed as she slept, knife in hand, seeing her stomach split open, her throat stabbed, her eyes removed. I'd be in class dreading going home to her because, when she talked to me, she'd invariably tell me she loved me. I wanted her to die in the most bloody, most gruesome manner."

Sarah stared at him intently, and offered nothing. She was evidently disgusted and Jacob had successfully ruined any chance of her confiding in him further. She believed he did not need a friend to talk to - he needed someone to guide him. She saw his future as doomed. She could barely conceal it, and smiled weakly, excused herself, then ran out of the house, sobbing.

Much like how a character in a movie would stare at the camera, Jacob sat, staring at the spot where she had been.

The truth of their terrible secret was simple - Sarah never had a dog, but always wanted one, and Jacob’s mother died when he was three years old.

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Waiting For Afternoon Tea

Laura Smith

Laura Smith is twenty-one and from Wagga Wagga. She is addicted to her sewing machine and loves to ski. She also requests that people not call Wagga Wagga Wagga.

Sandra had heard the shot from outside, so she was prepared for a bit of a sight when she went in. What she wasn’t prepared for was stumbling in on the cleaning process; the efficient gestures, the smell of cleaning fluids, their pale bustling movements through the room, the patch of white foam on the head of the old florid armchair. There was a hole in the panelling behind it, and a drying uniformed web of mince beetling its way down the wall.

She wasn’t prepared for the way his stippled thumb folded in on itself, or the non-reaction of his eyes when they went to move him. A finger slipped into an eyeball that would liquefy soon enough. It was a shock to the system, like being struck unexpectedly. Someone was trying to save her the vision of his truth. His unclean magenta.

She had expected them to do it and leave, but really they should have had more time. She had promised to stay out for the full working day and only came home with the vague, diminished feeling that perhaps she could do something to stop it, though the finances were settled and over.

Now Sandra put down her shopping
bags (one of everything, not two), in the usual place - under the hallway table - and was glad that they hadn't done it in the kitchen. No matter how close the Wildberry Sorbet was to becoming mush, she would always go in to greet him before putting the groceries away. Finding yourself suddenly alone was best delayed until after the tomatoes were in the fridge. They might be dropped in your initial shock on the way to the kitchen; might roll red into hidden corners.

She had always kissed him with free hands; he liked her moment of being glad to see him, and they hadn't minded re-frozen desserts. There was one patch worn under the little mahogany table, the rest fairly new and untrdden.

This time she walked into the lounge-room, brisk as usual. She hadn't forgotten that it was happening. All those other times - going past the doors to the bedrooms, diningroom on the right - all those other brisk trots down the carpet had dealt with death as much as this one. Until you were in the room you never knew.

This time, when she got there, she wasn't sure what to do. Realising that her ritual was broken, that she wouldn't kiss that cadaver, touch the corpse, she stood unacknowledged in a room silent with trite respect, or numb efficiency, and watched as one added foam to the trail left by the motion of rolling him onto the stretcher.

There was the usual smell now, from the final sagging of his muscles. She wondered whether he enjoyed having control over the moment. For once. At last. Whether he felt reckless, or terrified. She would bet on terrified, but one could never tell.

Nextdoor switched on a radio, and more foam was added to an old stain (they clearly loved their job, as he had) as the stretcher was folded to fit into one of the two industrial vacuum cleaners in the room.

They had said that they would dispose of it properly, but she liked to think that they wanted the corpse for soap. He would have liked it that way. Towards the end the humiliation of dried shit on his cheeks (turn the other one) had been too much for him. He had spent most of his time in the specially fitted shower; a pink shape through the glass. She read, her crisp books slackening with the damp, until he called. To end transformed into something clean, something that would leave other things clean, rather than smearing them with another bodily fluid, would have made him happy. She suspected that was why he had chosen them, rather than another organisation. They had reassured her that things would be done "properly", and now, when their job was almost done, they asked no questions, and neither did she.

Rising to her toes to avoid all the little islets, and the one who was dabbing at the carpet, she went and counted the lipsticks in the bathroom. She arranged them into different rows. Oldest to newest. Most to least. Lightest to deepest. She hadn't worn them for some time because they made him nervous. Lipstick meant sex, which meant that she was leaving him, that she regretted the new creases between her eyebrows and the time-drift of the moles on the back of her hand. In the end he decided to go before she could. The vacuum started up and she realised that she had been listening to the muffled sounds of music through the wall.

She turned on the shower and opened the medicine cabinet.

There was an old copy of Women's Weekly on the shelf, so she took it down and resented the closed doors of the last few days, and the closed expression of his last few weeks. Sandra tried to imagine what the Reader to Reader Panel would say, so that by the time they were loading one of the vacuum cleaners into the van she wasn't sure whether it was his vacuum or not. Perhaps they wouldn't use him to clean up his own remnants. He would have enjoyed the irony of it. She wondered whether they would move on to the hall and the bedrooms, or just do the lounge. That part of the contract hadn't been explained. Not to her.

When she realised that her fingernail was digging into the whites of Kurt Cobain's eyes she put the magazine down and went outside to check the mail, half of it now defunct. She paused a moment beside their van (Marc's Carpet Cleaning, Special Services Inclusive) to look at her house, before moving to take the shopping from the hall and put the tomatoes away.

They told her not to walk on the carpet for a few days and left her with her high chair and his watch. Then she stopped the kitchen clock and waited for afternoon tea.
The Four Ages Of Human Perfection

Courtney Goddard

Courtney lives in Cronulla and enjoys long walks on the beach at night, and bubble baths. She already has a boyfriend, so please do not apply.

One

The four ages of
"Human Perfection"

A golden, eternal springtime.
The necessity of labour (with a silver lining).
Bronze earth
wronged by the irons of war.

Swept away
from the side of God's earth
by a voracious hand,
dipping
into the embankment of forms;
mini-dolties,
with the sweet breath of
a divine being.
The tribe,
controlled in the vice-like

grip of a
sated Titan.

Arcadia: Fragrant peace.

Two

Idyllic, volatile
downunderland shrouded in
flammable grandeur.

tree
grass
reed.

I catch a passive ember,
suspended in the parched air.
The orange sheet of dusk,
pin-pricked by floating ash.

I am in Arcadia

in a moment of scented peace.

Three

A saviour!
Or so he thought.

Prometheus,
A Titan descending.

Radiant messenger
floating in a sunbeam.
With your foresight
you brought

fire
concealed in a reed.
Four
Concealed matches
In baggy, ripped
shorts.

Pyro-pubescence.
Juvenile idiocy.

Dad? DAD?!
Heading down the creek
with Micheal. Be back for
tea.

Destruction, in a
bundle of red-
tipped sticks.
Devastation at the
hands of
naivety.

Shit! Shit! Quick
fill your hat! No, that
won’t do it!
Quick!
Let’s get
outta here!

Five
... and you shall stay
in irons, secured to
that rock
for all of eternity!
And every morn a bird
will prey, and every eve
you shall be replenished!

A saviour,
a criminal.

The wrath of Zeus
delivered upon a Titan.

Prometheus,
bringer of God’s
power.

Bearer of flame,
Carrier of calamity,
Concealed secret.

Stupid Prometheus!

It wasn’t meant
for them.
Six
Worst drought in Australia,
well... in living memory.
They always say that.
Charred animals.
Remains of the old Hotel.
The carcass of Tom's car.

Mummy says I can't go swimming in
the pool this afternoon, but Jenny is
coming over and it is so hot! We'll just
paddle around the floating bits of ash.

I watched it sweep around the sides
of the mountain like a closing coat. The
headlights of the car did not make a dent
in the smoke as ash floated down like
doona feathers to rest on my windscreen.

Mummy, I saw the boys down the
Road playing with matches.
Mummy, I saw them lighting the reeds
Down near the creek.
Mummy, what's that smell?
Mummy?

That day I saw the glory of God.
That day I saw how
small I am.

Father

Rebecca Osborne
Rebecca has lived in both Australia and New Zealand. She enjoys travelling,
reading and learning sign language. She dances, and plays soccer, though
seldom at the same time.

With horns blaring amidst flashes of
yellow cabs, the city bustles along
oblivious under the dim and gloomy
skyscraper sky. If even one of the
cablies or passers-by were to look up at
the apartment building looming above,
they might catch a glimpse of an old man
decked out in waistcoat, collared shirt
and pants, staring out the window. He
has been standing there, motionless, for
a full ten minutes.

A pigeon lands on the building
ledge in front of the old man, breaking
his trance. He is startled, but smiles,
watching it peck away at the bricks. The
bird looks up and coos, imploring him
with its eyes. The old man shrugs sadly
to the pigeon, which pecks away a little
while longer before flying off.

He still stands there, rubbing his
white whiskers thoughtfully with his
fingertips and staring out at the sky
where more birds have taken wing,
restlessly.

A hand is slipped lightly through
his arm, "Alfred, are you coming down
for dinner? It's all ready. Oh, and I
bought you some more tobacco for your
pipe."

Alfred smiles again, "Yes Rose, I'm
coming.”

As the breeze whispers through the park a young man sits; his dark suit is properly pressed, the tie a little crooked, his jacket buttoned up. A hat rests on the ground beside him while his brown hair, combed neatly that morning, is now ruffled slightly. The trees surrounding him provide adequate shade.
He sits and writes:

September

Dear Father,

I could pass the time here always. The air is crisp, but with my coat on it is quite perfect. All the differing leaves crackle beneath me like a cushion, my back pressed against the trunk of this big oak. Anyone who reads this might deem my mind to be rather unsound, but I believe that you can smell the fall; the dying up of leaves as the wind whips them up and away. Breathe deep, and let it sink into your body. Can you smell it, Father, from where you are?

This tree must know hundreds of thousands of secrets... How many folk have sat in this very spot, leaning against this old trunk and cried, whispered, talked and pleaded?

I know I have, I sit here everyday.

I watch the nannies dart about as the young ones frolic in the sweet-smelling grass. I watch them with a smile, for their innocence is an unceasing wonder.

"Do you know the world is a big place?" I wish to warn them softly, "As big as the building across from this park, with its many floors and windows... Even bigger! The world is growing quicker than you are, little ones." It is growing quicker than myself too.

The city is becoming more sophisticated as the days progress; moving pictures, a bridge between Brooklyn and Manhattan... So many people now have telephones; you cannot imagine how quick it is all taking place.

I saw another motorcar today, just before I started writing you. It suggested a rather unlikely sort of chap - smooth and sleek, yet bumping down the avenue. Perhaps one day I shall own one, though at the moment I do not have nearly enough money. For the time being then, it will remain in my dreams.

I have a lot of dreams. I cannot seem to stop my mind wandering to a place in which I can choose who I am, what I do, and who the lovely lady is that I have married. We will meet after church. We will be having tea together and she will smile knowingly at me from under the brim of her hat... Her hat, a complicated one, decorated carefully with flowers deep in colour and broad-brimmed to protect her delicate features from the sun. She will be wearing a fur stole draped across perfect shoulders and I shall smoke my cigarette. She will smooth her hands over her gown - a deep crimson flowering gown - and rest them in her lap like a proper lady does. In my dream I dance the perfect Charleston, and my hands would not grow damp as they seem to whenever I dance for real. She will smell like the roses that bloom in this very park in the spring. In fact, she will come here with me to smell them; her parasol gently twisting through her hands at a slight angle from her slender frame.

I closed my eyes just then, turned my face against the cool breeze, and dreamed of the lady slipping her delicate hand through the nook of my elbow, resting it lightly on my tailored suit. I will share with her our park, just as you shared it with me. I have not yet shown it to anyone. I am waiting for someone special.

You are not around to see the building, Father - the one they started before you left us. It has been named the Fuller Building and it is the largest in our city. I earn my keep there - only as the mail boy, but I am told all the lads start out in this position and only then become higher in status. Did you start as a mail boy? I do not suppose it matters.

The building is rather grand; along the outside there are faces and flowers carved into the brickwork. It is small at one end - only as long as a person lying down - but large at the other. I counted all the floors, twenty-two! Perhaps it will even collapse one day because it is so tall! I like the building only because I can spend my lunch hour here... For no other reason.

I will never forget the pigeon, Father. Perhaps that is why I still sit by this tree in the park while the other fellows are off running about, learning about being a man in the world. If I turn my head now, just slightly to the right, I can see the park benches. Every time I see them I always look to the one where you found that poor pigeon with the broken wing. I wanted to cry, but you told me about strength and growing up. I do not know what magical things you knew, Father, but I was so happy when the bird healed and learned to fly again. What I remember, what I remember most vividly is your hands; so big and roughened, yet so gentle handling the bird. Back then I compared them to my own hands and did not believe that I would one day be a man like you... Look, Father, my hands are getting bigger now, but I am not sure that I want them to. You are not here to see them grow, but you are watching me from above, I know that. You are watching me grow up, despite my longing to remain a young boy, to remain in the park.

My lunch hour is finished, Father, so I must go.
Your loving son,
Alfred.

Alfred nods slightly to no one particular before stepping back from the window. He studies his hands, noting the big, calloused and roughened palms.

The old man tucks the letter into his breast pocket and sits back to smoke a pipe with his wife beside him, his hand taking hers. He stares off into the distance, silent yet not even hearing his wife as she lightly chides him for keeping the letter he wrote all those years ago.
Swallow

Elizabeth McDade

Elizabeth is twenty years old and is from Wauchepa in NSW. Her objective so far is to finish her Creative Arts degree, after which she trusts that life will bring something (hopefully other than the dole) her way. But as is the common expression, she’ll cross that bridge when she comes to it.

The shock hadn’t set in yet. It would sometime soon, I guessed. I stood still, staring at the chequered lino, expecting shock to hit with a bang. Maybe I’d get dizzy and faint, or perhaps explode into convulsions. Either way, I was ready for it. However, as prepared as I had been, still nothing happened.

This residence was usually animated. I had studied the couple’s home frequently from behind their large front hedge; but now the house is in a permanent slumber.

They were an odd couple. He, the most pompous man I had ever had the pleasure of spying on. She, a snotty wife, complete with the whole “tuck in your shirt before you go out in public” speech. The whole ordeal even drove me up the wall.

The shadow of a regular businessman walked back and forth between the two front windows every night, a large attitude coinciding with a large drinking problem... Okay, maybe not a problem, but a hobby. The scene occurred from five till whenever the proportion of liquor in his body was larger than that of his blood. This time he spitefully announced his objection to his wife’s dainty spoon collection, before dozing in his leather recliner. What was amazing was the way he constantly made love to that bottle of scotch. I did not feel one smidgen of sympathy for these people... until tonight. Right now, all I wanted was for her to move.

With quiet steps I shuffled into the kitchen. I didn’t dare turn on the light because of what I might see. All I had to guide me was the dim light shining in through the window from the street lamp. Floral curtains, ones I thought only my grandmother could own, were pulled aside. The sink below contained dishes stacked with unhealthy precision. Steam had risen from them, sticking to the windowpane.

My mind screamed at me to do something. From the outside, this situation looked fairly open and shut. Call an ambulance. Call Triple O. Call the Police. Instead I called my boyfriend.

“Yello...”

“Jake, Jake, it’s me.”

A brief pause followed.

“You get it?”

I looked down at the object on the floor.

“Jake, I’m in trouble.”

“But did you get it?”

“Did you hear what I said? I’m in serious trouble Jake.”

“What kind of trouble?”

I swallowed.

“I killed someone.”

No answer. He was still there, the buzzing on the line preventing absolute silence. I could imagine him wiping his hand over his unshaven face, sitting up in bed with our white sheets wrapped around his body. He would be naked. He always slept naked.

“Jake? What do I do?”

“I dunno.” He answered tightly.

What was he thinking? The buzzing resumed between us before a large crash echoed down the line. I knew that was the end of my beautiful glass lamp which sat on our bedside table. Its crystal prisms shattering tenfold, the gold base left with an imprint of paisley wallpaper.

“Shit, Kate! Whadya go and do that for?”

An anxious feeling arose, mixing with the bitter taste of my crime. My stomach churned and I wanted to throw up. It was creeping up my throat, my muscles clenching, getting ready for the old heave-ho. Swallow. I leaned against the wall where the phone was, wrapping my fingers with the cord.

“I’m sorry Jake.” I murmured, closing my eyes.

“How’d ya kill him?”

The question took me by surprise.

“Her.”

Slumping down against the wall, I crouched. It was all I could do to steady myself.

“Holy shit, Kate. You killed his wife?”

“I wasn’t supposed to kill anybody,” I reminded him from where I curled up on the cold lino.

How did I end up here? When Jake had first asked for my help, I needed to say yes. I needed to become one those people I wished to be, and this was my chance. The tough, female heroine in the movies. Sultry and seductive; a female George Clooney, going Oceans 11 style. Not once did I see George Clooney in the fetal position.

“Is she really dead?” he asked.

I nodded into the phone, wiping away the tears with the back of my free hand. My eyes stung, so I rubbed them
more and out of it came a blurred mess.

"I think so."

"Did you check her pulse?"

I shook my head. "Uh uh."

"Well, why don't you check it?" he said, frustrated.

I didn't want to touch her corpse. No longer was it a person, it was now only a body. Amazing, I thought, how in one split second the definition can change. Life to lifeless. How long did it take for a body to get stiff? Didn't they bloat up? Insides would fade away, skin to bone.

I bent down slowly, phone still clutched to my ear, and stopped. Her arm lay out beside her on the black and white chequered lino. Just asleep. Only asleep. I calmed myself. Stretching towards her, I realised I had to roll up her sleeve. Why was everything so difficult? I was scared that she might suddenly jump up and strangle me. How strange, when I wished her so much to be alive.

I pushed up her sleeve. A gold watch was clasped around her wrist. Dark blue face with gold numbers, 7:25.

I touched near the purple veins on her wrist.

"Nothin'."

"You sure?"

"I can tell if someone's dead, Jake!"

"Shut up! Someone will hear you!" he hissed.

"No! You shut up!"

Jake took a deep breath. His calm infuriated me.

"How'd ya do it?"

My eyes moved from the pool of blood that surrounded her body to her clothes, which soaked the liquid in like a sponge. Her nicely pressed outfit was now a waste of effort as she sprawled awkwardly in front of me. Skin pale, as if untouched by sunlight. She was beautiful and it made me cry. Her short, auburn hair fell back onto the floor. She looked at peace, with no sign of pain. Only when I looked at the knife sticking from her chest did I see hurt.

Uncooked Chicken. That's what it feels like when you stab someone. Like you're cutting through a piece of chicken in preparation for a stir-fry. Not impenetrable, but hard.

My gaze fixed on the knife. I couldn't shift my focus. Still I was amazed by her painless expression. I was pain free, yet my tears fell. A manifestation of toxic emotions mixed within me.

"Kate?" I had forgotten about the phone.

Jake's voice echoed. Bad reception.

"Kate. Just make sure you haven't left any prints and get outta there." So practical.

I bit my lip. The real crying was about to start; not just tears, but the uncontrollable baby crying I hadn't done since I was five years old. I could feel that overwhelming wave catching up with me. Crushing me from the inside out.

"Jake? Please help me?"

Silence hurt. I didn't want to listen to the crackling phone line, or his tar infested breathing. I wanted him to say 'It'll be ok. You have nothing to worry about,' and hold me until it all went away.

"I can't." he finally replied.

"Please?"

"Kate. Just fix it." Dial tone.

Fix it? With what? A bandaid? Crazy Glue? I placed the phone on the floor and looked at her. It must have hurt. I knick myself shaving and I burst into tears; she had a knife embedded in her chest, and she shed not one.

I leaned over her body, taking in her white, silk blouse - probably bought from Grace Brothers. Fix it. The knife was the kind I had seen advertised in daytime infomercials. Steak knives with special non slip handles.

To pull it out, I had one hand against her shoulder while I tugged on the handle. There was a soft noise as her insides fell back into place. Chicken. I put the knife down beside me. Pulling at the edges to straighten her blouse, I tried to patch the rip made by the knife. Hands placed over the tear, I concealed the wound, hoping that when I removed my fingers, all would be healed.

My body hurt as I picked up the phone. Bloody hands. Ringing.

"Hello, Emergency."

I swallowed. "Take my pain away."

"Please, Help me?"
Fragment #2

Dan Menges

Daniel Menges came to Australia on a rocket ship from that mythical land called America. He has lived in various states, towns, and city limits, and now only misses all-night diners and NYC subway rides. He writes about dust, sex, unspeakable foreign tongues and flying.

Eye pocket, iris:
tunnel, train wheel and landing.
Before dawn we rise, falling
like cards through the day.

Keyhole tunnel:
we wake, we move through,
we return.
The things we’ve seen.
The things we see, but
never touch.

Remember those stories my blind
fingers told,
tracing the history of my suffering
onto your body?
Remember wheel, clay tower, water:
how you wake and
how you turn
to sleep.

Gracie May & the Virgin Mary

Peta Waltz

Peta loves adaptions, making films, Sophia Coppola and Mae West. She is interested in the art of script writing and would one day like to complete a script of her own. Hopefully in the not too distant future . . .

Gracie May is not a Catholic, but she talks to the Virgin Mary. She met her one hot afternoon on the beach at Coogee. She had known it was the Mother of Jesus because she was wearing a long blue dress and a scarf and, even though it was very hot, she wasn’t at all perspiring. The Virgin Mary never perspires, instead she chooses to weep. Gracie May remembers the day she first met the Virgin Mary; it was earlier that afternoon when she had seen a boy hanging from the overpass. Walking home from her first shift at the hospital, she thought she was seeing a vision of an angel as it hovered in the air, silhouetted by the late sun. As she approached, she realised that it was twisting slightly and that a rope was holding it in place. When she was closer still, she saw with interest that the hanging body was a young man and that an envelope was pinned to his shirt. Without stopping, she crossed herself, kissed her rosary beads, and walked under the overpass.

Gracie May does not necessarily believe in Catholicism, however she has always been intrigued by its followers; by their passion and devotion, by their
props and by their commitment to self-sacrifice. She still remembers when she was in primary school and, every Wednesday, a small group of students went to the library for Catholic scripture. In her classroom, surrounded by the other ordinary Anglicans, Gracie May wondered what the Catholics were doing. She specifically remembers the day when the Holy Communion photos were being passed around the playground. When she saw the pictures of the girls, all dressed in white like little brides of God in Heaven, she couldn’t wait for school to be over.

Just as she did every afternoon, Gracie May ran from the school gates to her front door without stopping. She went inside, waited until she could quiet her breathing and then, with flushed cheeks and a racing heart, she turned the brass handle of the bedroom door and tiptoed across the carpet. She kissed her mother—forehead, chin, left cheek, right cheek—and knelt beside her bed. Every day she waited there for as long as it took for her mother to open her eyes. Sometimes her skinny legs would cramp, sometimes they would begin to shake, sometimes, if her mother was in a particularly deep sleep, the last rays of sun would fade and it would grow cold. But, no matter what, Gracie May knelt beside the bed and watched the face she loved. That afternoon, when she finally caught sight of the faded blue eyes, she grasped her mother’s hand and spoke words she had been rehearsing all day:

“Mama, can I please have a communion?”

Her mother Christina actually sat up. Her eyes began to sparkle, she smiled and suddenly gave her daughter a hug that, while bony and suffocating, is still one of Gracie May’s fondest memories. By the time her father arrived home from work, Christina was out of bed and, much to his surprise, sitting in the sun at the kitchen table. She wore her sapphire silk dressing gown and was sipping a cup of tea; she couldn’t have looked more heavenly if she tried.

Although she is not Catholic, Gracie May has a collection of Catholic paraphernalia that takes up every surface of her one room apartment. Every time she sees a statue of the Virgin Mary she feels compelled to purchase it. Every time she sees an engraving or garishly coloured print her hands itch to hold it. On weekends she haunts markets and garage sales, antique stores and church fetes. When she finds what she is looking for her pulse quickens, her face flushes and she begins to sweat. Only after the transaction is completed, and she has a new piece to add to her collection, do these symptoms leave her.

The first figurine that she ever owned is kept wrapped in cotton wool in an old margarine container under her bed. On the day that she asked her mother for communion, the day that Christina sat at the kitchen table for the first time in three years, Gracie May was also given a tiny Virgin Mary. Small enough to disappear inside the eight-year-old’s fist, the figurine wore a blue dress and even though her face was almost worn away, her mournful eyes could just be distinguished. It had taken her mother all afternoon to go through the old suitcases and cardboard boxes in the attic, but Christina had searched with a renewed vigor.

“I want you to have this,” she said when she finally came down the stairs. The knuckles of her hand which clutched the banister were white, her face was pale and glistened with the sweat of pain and exertion. Christina took a deep breath and held out the tiny figure triumphantly.

“She will look after you.” Gracie May took the Virgin Mary from her mother’s hand, it felt warm and damp. She looked up, smiling, but her mother had begun to shake.

“Gracie darling, make me some tea?”

Gracie May has never been a Catholic, but she enjoys the company of the Virgin Mary. The day she saw the hanging boy, the Virgin Mary came to comfort her. She did not tell the Virgin that the sight of death hadn’t in the least distressed her, because she once swore that she would never find the body of a departed soul anything to be afraid of. She didn’t tell the Virgin Mary this because, although she was not disturbed, she hadn’t felt anything equal to the Virgin’s gentle presence for a very long time.

Because the Virgin Mary seldom visits, Gracie May continues to collect. At last count she owned one-hundred and fifty-three Virgin Mary figurines, including a five-foot tall mannequin that was part of an old shopping centre nativity scene. Of an afternoon, or after work, Gracie May likes to make herself a cup of tea and sit, drinking in the midst of her Virgin Mary’s. If the tea is hot enough and the sunlight is just right, she feels almost as though she is sitting with The Mother. The hot drink courses through her, warming her from within, the light caressing her skin, warming her from without.

On the afternoon that eight-year-old Gracie May prepared tea for her mother she felt a similar sensation. She sat opposite her and watched her take a tentative sip of tea, not touching her own. She waited patiently for her mother to look up and share another smile, but Christina’s eyes were on the Virgin Mary figurine which she was fingering. Sunshine streamed through the window behind her and Gracie May had to squint to distinguish her mother through the halo of light. She studied her turned-down face: the white skin, the lips redder than ripe cherries, and thought her to be the most beautiful woman in the world.

“You know your father has always been a skeptic.” It seemed that Christina began talking out of nowhere, but Gracie May had been waiting an eternity to hear her mother’s voice.

“When we found out we were going to have a baby, he said he wanted to grow up in a home free from religious influences and be allowed to make up its own mind when it was old enough.” Christina clutched the figurine tightly.

“I had always been a Catholic and my religion was so special to me . . . But you were even more precious.”

Gracie May stared at her mother’s face. She thought she saw a tear slide down her cheek, but it could have been a trick of the light. Christina reached across the table for Gracie May’s hand and for the second time pressed the figurine with the mournful eyes into it.

“I’m so glad you made up your mind.” She wrapped her hands around her daughter’s. Mother, holding daughter, holding Mother.

Gracie May is not a Catholic, but
her late mother was. Two days after she was filled with joy because her only child wanted to embrace the religion she loved so much herself, Christina died.

Sometimes, at the end of her shift, Gracie May likes to tiptoe into room 24A and look down at the bed that her mother may have died in. Regardless of who now occupies that bed, she quietly stands by the window and pretends that her mother lies before her and that she had a chance to see her one last time. She remembers the time she tiptoed into her mother’s room and found her father sitting with his head in his hands. He looked up and called her to him and spoke words that she didn’t want to hear. He held her for a long time and his embrace should have been warm, but the sun had drained from the room and, to Gracie May, everything felt cold and dark.

Two weeks after she had been given her first Virgin Mary figurine, Gracie May passed a garage sale on her way home from school. She was dawdling and stopped to look in the cardboard boxes filled with once loved and loathed items alike. It was in the deepest, most confused box that she found herself a treasure. She knew it was a treasure because her heart began to beat faster and her cheeks immediately flushed. She clutched the faded print of a motherly Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus so tightly that her hands began to ache. She carried it home with her like a guilty secret and hid it under her bed.

"It’s not really swinging, unless you can see over the top." One girl grins to the other, rocking back and forth in the kids playground. A view over the bar shows the city at a distance, a photograph except for the smoke always flowing from the chimney stacks, making the orange sky only ever half-filled with stars. The taller of the two girls jumps off, mid-swing, and settles uncomfortably into the infant-sized elephant seat-on-springs. She’s the one who spoke first, and now puffs out smoke instead of talking.

"What would you do if I fell?"
"Put out my cigarette long enough to catch you."

Here the word ‘fell’ can be read in many ways. The girl still swinging won’t fall into the always slightly-damp sand below, but she will fall from the smoker perched on the elephant. Of course, they both fell for each other... But this is an overuse of the word, a slight digression.

The shorter girl writes about her mop of short hair in a poem, she brushes it out of her eyes and face to turn around, to sit up, to look out, and wish things could have been different. Her fingers played with the hair of the
OTHER GIRL - less of a mop and more of a mess - only a few months before this wish, in their shared room next to the playground. The poem is on a tape, one of four poems on one of three tapes, and they are all now regularly jostled around in the bottom of a plastic shopping bag that smells slightly of cigarette smoke. They've been sitting in this bag in the taller girl's car for the last few months, listened to only two-times each, and for now they've been forgotten.

The radio holds onto the reception as long as possible, but the same bend in the same road means it's gone for twenty minutes of the two-hour drive. At first it's maybe just the weather, or the half-sized aerial on the late eighties station wagon. Then the road becomes familiar and when the gumms thicken on the border of tar and dirt she holds the cigarette precariously out of the corner of her mouth, drives with one hand and searches through a plastic shopping bag with the other. Her eyes are always on the road, even when, inadvertently, the car is suddenly twenty k's above the speed limit and the new growth on the gums turns the highway into a tunnel of bright green. At the next bend there's an exit, and a semi-trailer slows down to turn. The view of green is shut out while the station wagon veers towards the inside lane, overtakes, and then she's driving straight again, two hands on the wheel with one clutching at "Tape 1, narrated in whole by your girlfriend." A pillar of ash breaks and falls onto her jeans, the glow burning half a hole before she swats it away, spitting the cigarette out of the window. Still in the dead spot between radio stations, and wishing to avoid another chance at a SPEEDING TICKET, she pushes the tape into the cassette player.

"This is really weird, I'm talking into a microphone, and making a tape that you're gonna get and listen to and it's kinda weird. It's Monday the sixteenth of October and I'm sitting here instead of showering or washing my clothes. I'm thinking about making you a tape, and I'm thinking like, I don't know what sorta stuff to put on it. I was thinking of telling you about where we're at each time I record, but that could get a little boring 'cause it's all gonna be like 'This week, we're at a mango farm.' And then, 'Now, we're picking bananas.' And I'm gonna tell you about all that stuff when I get back anyway, so yeah. But, so far there has been a stereo somewhere at all the places we've stayed, so maybe I could put some music on here. And Michelle, for some reason, brought a great deal of her cds with her, on a fruit picking holiday, yeah . . . Yes, I am talking about you!"

"You'd go crazy if it wasn't for my cds!"

"That's Michelle, if you couldn't figure it out. Anyway, so maybe, maybe I will do that, maybe I'll put some of her stuff on here, or some old favourites that you might be like 'Oh God no I hate this music, why's this on here?' and blah blah, but, when I listen to it, it makes me think of, uh, you.

"Anyway, also, because maybe you'll keep this tape forever and ever, I failed to mention that it's the sixteenth of October, two thousand and two. And, you're a first year, and I'm a second year, and we've been together for almost six months, and right now I'm travelling around Queensland working at various fruit farms. And I miss you a lot. And, I've been thinking, even though you can't come, perhaps a good way to make things easier would be to make tapes, yay! Make tapes back and forth! And I promise I would never ever, ever, unless you were really really cute, I'd maybe play a little bit to Michelle. But I promise I would never publicly broadcast any tape, if you ever made one of you talking, for me to keep forever. So yeah, could be a fun idea. Anyway, gonna go now. Talk to you soon. On the tape. In a little bit. Okay. Bye!"

Oddy enough it's the girl in the car, driving to the city four days a week, who's the country bumpkin. She refuses to use the term 'fruit farm' and was thinking about making a point of that on her tapes, which are only half done and still uncut. "It's an orchard, chicke, so don't be going up to any cowboys to brag about your fruit farming days. And for god's sake, don't buy an akubra or I'll be forced to dump you on the spot."

Six months ago they met in a city pub trying to be a country pub - albeit filled with pokies and cocktails. There was a young chick band playing, or trying to play, with bad acoustics and a broken amp. One girl knew the drummer and the other knew the bass player, so they met mid-set, each trying to chat-up their respective rhythm section musicians, and ended up splitting a cab home. The rest, of course, is soon to be history.

Michelle's voice mumbles in the background for the rest of the first tape, then the lack of her becomes more apparent, noted by everybody involved. It's not that she's no longer there, it's only her voice, sliding in between SENTENCES, THAT'S MISSING. Then, even more grateful for the somewhat scratchy reception, there is girl driving snaps off the cassette player in the middle of a song, with bad acoustics and a great bass-line that used to remind the other of her, and swings round another bend.

Night, of course, makes everything seem different. In almost complete darkness they both forget where they are driving and one girl misses her exit. The other shorter girl walks back and forth between two fields for fifteen minutes, then stops, pushing her hair out of her eyes and deciding she is lost, surrounded by not-quite-ripe bananas.

"If you're ever lost, remember you gotta stay where you are. Someone else will come and find you."

Country bumpkin know-how, but, lighting up another cigarette, she is still driving. The reception is clear when it's not meant to be and late eighties headlights show that she doesn't recognise the gums.

The night the two girls split a cab their driver got the street names mixed up and they found themselves looking at the city from the wrong direction; chimney stacks still puffing away yet the photo was in reverse. Back then the mop of hair was shorter than it is now, but the taller of the two still had an urge to reach across and brush it out of the other's eyes while they glanced at each other, trying to decide whether they were in trouble. It only took a second, each girl watching the other, before telling the driver he was in the wrong suburb, their street was on the North side of the city, and soon they were home.

The girl driving hits the radio off
AND CURSES INTO the steering wheel. 
Through a crooked rear-view mirror she 
waives white dust turn red in the brake 
lights as the station wagon swings off 
tar and onto the side of the highway. 
The tape, still sitting half ejected in 
the stereo, falls. First gear slides into 
neutral, and the handbrake is jerked on. 
She sits, the car humming and waiting, 
staring at the tape between her feet. 
And above the noise of the engine are 
crickets, barely breaking through. 

Michelle does make one last 
appearance in the tapes. In the very last 
tape, three-quarters of the way through 
side B. It’s unexpected, there’s nothing 
but the voice of the shorter girl relating 
where they’re at and what they’re 
picking, then a laugh, and Michelle’s 
voice saying they have to go, that 
they’re late. And they go. The last time 
the girl listens to this, driving or not, is 
somewhere in-between her exit and her 
address, sometime after pulling a late 
eighties station wagon in a wide u-turn 
across a double lane highway, adding 
half an hour to a usually two-hour drive.

For The Poet

Ben Frater

Ben Frater published a selection of poetry called Bughouse Meat in 2003. He 
is interested in visionary poetics and his influences are Milton, Blake, Artaud 
and Ginsberg. His main duty is to poeticise the psycho-frenetic vernacular.

*Poeta nascitur, non fit,* 
*poeta nascitur, non fit,*  
*poeta nascitur, non fit.*

For the poet who cooked his heart green in a black dish. 
For the poet roasting his mind in an excavation of the senses. 
For the poet boiling his eyes in another’s broth or soup of light;  
a cold light with its own battalion of scars. 
For the poet whose fond memory of the lion forces him to bound across  
active and desolate-dead sun war-fields with an earthly salubrious flower  
leaking from the lips of his gun. 
For the poet who slept under the foliage of black lace, in an orange 
skylight. 
For the poet who went to the psychiatrist in an attempt to stop the insane 
shriil shrilek of Khlebnikov’s nymphs and his own GOD DAMNED green eyed 
Minotaur  
from entering the sleep-house, and returned with a box full of thought 
tranquilizers that would make him an equal of the cabbage. 
For the poet who loaned his mind to the architects of dying cradles, 
rocking in the bough and grace of its own disease  
and awe-filled symmetry of artificial nightmares. 
For the poet who submerged and submitted himself to the spiteful smite 
and glee of a sub-aqueous kingdom, a Marinier Emperor 
and reclaimed the soul in the shape of octopus or squid. 
For the poet adopting a veil of smoke, successfully hiding his own fires, 
unleashing a flock of rabid unicorns to stampede  
even those minds which have readily accepted the winged mule, 
Pegasus.
Rachel Baker

Rachel earned her birth certificate in 1984. She spends her time trying to be a nerd, talking about the wonders of animation, and eating.

Natalie shifted uncomfortably in the surgery waiting room, leaning away from the man seemingly intent on coughing his lungs into her lap. She crossed her legs, uncrossed them – the plastic chair was too hard for either pose to be comfortable. She sighed heavily.

I wonder if this is where she was twenty years ago, Natalie wondered. Crowded and bothered; hoping she wasn’t going to catch something from the bums around her . . . She rarely let herself consider that woman outside her dreams; now, in her desperation to be distracted, she couldn’t keep the questions from her mind.

A baby wailed, the cry so piercing Natalie thought it might break the child in half (or if it didn’t, she would). The room was almost overflowing with the sick and the destitute. She wrinkled her nose. She didn’t belong in a place like this; her adoptive parents had all the money in the world. Maternal ties which ought to be null and void.

If only she had been bold enough to charge this trip to the health fund. She could have been somewhere clean.

But she wanted the evidence, any evidence, of that night to be as remote as possible. Besides him, she was the only one who knew what had happened. It was a secret – and when she’d been left lying exposed in the bushes, weeping and furious, she’d known that was the way she wanted it to stay. This visit was just in case, just in case the police became abnormally smart. To prove to them, and to herself, how harsh he had been, how much he deserved . . .

She frowned absently, reached across an elderly smoker, and picked up a glossy magazine. Glancing at the cover headlines, she rolled her eyes, licked her thumb and began leafing through the pages; surely even someone of her calibre deserved mindless entertainment occasionally. Finally coming to an article that wasn’t about breast implants, she read the headline: ‘Doctor On Death Row.’ And in smaller print, ‘Does the doctor who killed nineteen of her patients deserve life?’ It was followed by a picture.

She carefully placed the magazine on the floor, face down. She’d seen those familiar eyes before.

She turned to other thoughts, remembering his deceptive ocean smell, its contradictory pleasantness making her all the more wounded; the sea on a cold windy day.

Our house always had the blinds drawn. The kitchen was dim when they came knocking at twilight. Calling for her. “Police. Open up doctor, it’s the police.”

“Just a moment . . .”

The doctor walked to the laundry, and came back with a gun. Even at three, I knew what a gun was.

“I’m sorry Natty. But you’re the only way out.”

Then my mother, my angel, put the gun to my head and yelled what she would do.

At this point I always wake up; at the end of my memory of her.

I wasn’t scared, just confused. Why was she saying she was sorry? I could tell she wasn’t sorry at all.

Natalie had approached the front desk saying that she was a relative of the prisoner.

“Lisa Lloyd has relatives?” the chubby receptionist snorted. “You sure took your time getting here.”

Natalie said nothing, signing her name on the dotted lines. She stayed equally silent as she was searched and escorted to a chair, a chair with a view. She looked through a thick transparent barrier to a small room with nothing more than a chair, a bench and a door. She crossed her arms and waited for the doctor.

Perhaps she’s not coming – then, through the glass, the door swung open.

Natalie gazed at the woman, Lisa, her mother. Her figure was soft and stocky, her gentle curves not at all flattered by the penal-orange suit. Thin blonde hair twisted around a fleshy face with deep-set eyes. Deep, forever-grey eyes. Natalie felt infinitely superior; her slim body and long hair outclassing her mother in all but one area – Lisa’s impeccable nails. They shone as if the sun lived within them.

This is where I came from. And maybe it’s where I’m going . . . Natalie began to feel something she’d never felt towards her mother before. It could almost be called pity. Or panic.

“You’re too tall,” Lisa said, sounding somewhat mystified. “As tall as
me. Why grow that high?"
    "I didn't choose to," she responded, "it's just genes."
    "I study politics and law."
    "Ah." The conversation stumbled along. "What about a boyfriend?"
    Natalie was becoming increasingly nervous. "No boyfriend."
    "Why not? You're quite pretty." Lisa leaned forward in her chair, to whisper. "You're not... lesbian, are you?"
    "No," she said shortly. "There's just no one in particular, that's all."
    "Oh, sorry."
    "That's okay," Natalie shrugged, even though she knew it wasn't. There was another silence.
    "I should be surprised," Lisa murmured sadly. "Surprised that you're here, but I'm not." She folded her hands in her lap, stealing herself. "You came to ask me a question, didn't you?"
    "Uh, no..." Natalie fiddled with her necklace, confused. "I don't think so," she said, suddenly unsure. After all this time, I had to come.
    "I'm pretty sure you did." Lisa reached out to stroke the glass with her fingertips, as if touching Natalie's hair. "One thing you want to know, above everything else."
    Natalie sat and thought, but not for a great deal of time. The question, that 3am whisper, came quickly.
    "Why?" she asked softly. "Why do I do it?"
    "My poor Natty," Lisa crooned. "I wish I'd killed you when I had the chance. It would have been so much kinder and braver of me to break the chain. But that moment slipped by..."
    Natalie stiffened. "You acted like you had the answer."
    "There are two answers." Lisa tipped her head to the side, her face serious. "There's the one my mother told me, who heard it from her mother, who heard it from her mother, who heard it... do you understand?"
    "We're not the first..."
    "What did they say?"
    Lisa sighed a little. "That there's no answer, no reason. That there's no choice. We're just performing off a script, over and over. Cursed, destined, possessed. Fight all you like, the urge will catch you in the end."
    Natalie kept her face blank.
    "Fate."
    Lisa leaned towards the glass, her voice earnest.
    "But I'm a doctor; I don't believe in fate. There's only science. It's DNA, Natty. Some women are predisposed to breast cancer. You and I are predisposed to murder. The gene switched around the wrong way - or maybe the right way."
    Natalie shrugged slightly, being careful to keep her poker face. She didn't understand. This mother in front of her had nothing in common with the mother in her dreams, or that woman she had practiced ignoring for so many years. The bright prison lights, allowing no shadow, provided no protection. Lisa's every infirmity and failing was before Natalie to look upon. A history written with scars and lines. Fear, resignation, bitterness, anger, and a yearning to have the guilt taken away. Bare reality in technicolour.
    She was too scared. She was too scared to do anything else.
    There was a link between them. Naming it as destiny or DNA didn't change its nature. It simply was. It breathed on them alike. No matter how much glass or space separated mother and daughter, that connection would remain intact. It had always been there, through all her attempts to break it, and now for the first time she felt it clearly.
    She is what's waiting for me.
    Natalie swallowed the lump in her throat, and refused to believe any of it. She wasn't giving in like that. Maybe a cord joins us, but I'm in control of my own life. So let's just be strangers. Lisa withdrew her hands to her lap, calm. Sun-beam nails clicked against the table, in the silence of the room.

At night, the park's bushes and trees created pools of black shadow, visually impenetrable. It was from one of these fortresses that he had first sprung, and where he now lay still, his head in her lap as she cried over him. This wasn't the neat execution she had planned. The plan had fallen apart the instant she'd seen her quarry, when that hot-cold fury had returned. Now the ocean scent had gone, and the stench of blood was terribly intoxicating. It lay over them, binding them together. Her body calling out insistently; reproduce, reproduce, reproduce and subdue the earth. Natalie covered her ears.
    She was always so clean, but I'm messy... So messy, this time...
Sometimes Work is Not So Boring

Brigitte Junga

Brigitte likes cats, correct change and comparing the specials in the Woolworths and Coles weekly catalogues. These are her motivations as a writer.

Telephones are ringing incessantly and people are talking. Low tones, both male and female, form a maze of voices which flood the room like a swarm of bees. Ray hears it but the longer he listens, the more the buzz fades. The buzz is replaced by the ringing. The ringing of telephones that he’s heard all day.

Deep breath, deep breath, thinks Ray. A nice steady in-through-the-nose-out-through-the-mouth kind of breathing. His chair squeaks and his papers drop as he shuffles them. A large sigh from Ray. Forty three, Christ, still an hour left... Fuck, and I still need to return the videos. Maybe I could just take another long bathroom break. They’re going to notice though, if I start taking them all the time. Geez, I should have finished school and then I wouldn’t have a crap job and then I wouldn’t have to resort to hiding in the toilets to make the time go by. Nice work Ray... The telephones continue humming and Ray considers crying because he thinks it just might be his ticket out of here. He’s aware of the phones and the voices, but he just can’t keep his mind on the job at hand — What’s this? The phone’s ringing? Maybe this is your chance, Ray.

Ring.
Ray sits up tall in his swivel chair as he snaps out of his daydream.
Ring.
He leans forward, making a slight click as he picks up the phone.

“Hello?” Ray answers in a very sheepish voice, unprofessional for a work-related call.

“Hey Raymond, WOOF! Is that you?”

“Sure it is, who’s this?”

That’s strange, thinks Ray, I always thought this was an out-bound call centre. Loud panting crackles through the phone:

“It’s Barkley!” He seems almost insulted that Ray hasn’t recognised his voice.

“Excuse me, Barkley? Barkley who?”

Ray stops slouching and sits up tall in his chair.

“Come on! It’s me! Old buddy, ol’ pal, it’s Barkley!”

He waits patiently for a response from Ray.

“Like my... uh, my... old pet dog? Barkley?” I can’t believe I just said that.

“Yay! Oh course! Took ya a while, eh?” Barkley’s happy now.

“Ya, I guess.”

“Geez, what’s the matter? I thought you’d be happy I called?”

There’s a pause as Ray considers this.

“Nah, I am, it’s just... you’ve been dead for, like, fifteen years... that’s all.”

“I know, I know, but I’m calling now, and that’s the point, right?”

“Um... sure?”
Ray can’t figure out where this is going. He sits tight at his desk and winks at Sherry - the floor manager - as she walks by, eyeing him.

“Geez, I’m just so bored here, Ray. Roxy’s out on a walk, and the kids are getting picked up for obedience school in a minute — Hey, kids, keep it down, eh? I’m on the phone!” Barkley’s voice sounds muffled as if he’s covered the receiver with his paw.

Ray’s pretty sure this is his pet dog Barkley. He looks around the vast room of the TelCom building as he listens to barking and the scuffling of paws on the other end of the phone.

“Sorry about that. Kids, eh? I got ‘em this new rawhide bone-thing and they’re just goin’ nuts. Haven’t stopped playing with it since I tore it out of the package. But holy cow! Things have changed since I was a pup! You remember that? You’d just hafta give me one of ‘em dirty old tennis balls and I’d be thrilled, but nah, kids today, they’ve gotta have their frisbees, their Super-Kongs, their Denta Bones. These things add up! I mean, me and Roxy, we make an honest living. I make sure there’s food under the table and those pups have never gone hungry, not even once. But there’s more pressure these days, ya know?”

“Listen, Barkley, I’m at work. You called me at work. Is there anything you need to tell me, cuz I really should go,”
Ray interrupts the old dog. He sighs. He feels a bit bad, but come on, man, what am I supposed to do? I’m at WORK here.

This is funny coming from Ray, considering that five minutes ago he was contemplating crying to his boss so he
could end his shift early.

“Oh,” the old boy’s gone all quiet.

“Nah, I just called to chat, you
know how it is . . .”

You know, he’s actually offended
that Ray doesn’t even seem to care after
all these years of separation.

Ray notices that Barkley’s got
something in his mouth, affecting his
speech.

“What are you doing Barkley?”

“Just chewin’ a shoe — I know it’s
bad! — I’m trying to cut down, it’s just
hard when there’s no one around and I’m
all by myself and . . . and . . .”

“Okay, well, do you think we could
do this some other time?”

Ray is sharp. Barkley is silent.

“I’m just, pretty busy, you know?”

Stacey from accounting walks by.

Ray passes her a yellow post-it note:

* dinner tonight? call me. *

“Ya, ya, I get it. Well, how’s about
tomorrow? You busy then?” Barkley
bargins.

“No, sure, that’d be great. I’m off
at five-thirty.”

“Alright, so I’ll call ya five-fifty-five,
is that good? Does that give you
enough time to —”

“That’ll be fine, Barkley.”

“Okay. So I’ll talk to ya then.”

“Good bye Barkley.”

“See ya, Ray. WOOF!”

That’s that. There’s a loud click as
Ray hangs up the phone.

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