2010

Tide Edition 7

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Tide Edition 7

Abstract
Literature has great power: in it we see ourselves reflected, and through it we can travel almost anywhere. Like a footprint, the impression of a good story will linger after the story itself has left us. In this edition of Tide, we contemplate desire and loss, confront addiction and sexuality. From the comfortable familiarity of Australian suburbia and rural communities, we travel across exotic landscapes and foreign cities to reach metaphysical planes and question reality. Finally, we return home. To contribute to the Tide legacy is a great privilege. The seventh edition stands as testament to all we have been able to achieve as a group in our past three years together, much of which would have been impossible without the support that surrounds us. With much love and thanks, we welcome you to Tide 2010.

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The cover photograph was taken in 2009 by Lisa Macgeorge, a student at the University of Wollongong. Lisa photographed the piano at the Glen Helen Resort in the West MacDonnell Ranges, in Australia’s Northern Territory. The piano was donated to the owners of the resort in the 1950s, and the Indigenous artwork on the cabinet was painted by an unknown artist.

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Literature has great power: in it we see ourselves reflected, and through it we can travel almost anywhere. Like a footprint, the impression of a good story will linger after the story itself has left us.

In this edition of *Tide*, we contemplate desire and loss, confront addiction and sexuality. From the comfortable familiarity of Australian suburbia and rural communities, we travel across exotic landscapes and foreign cities to reach metaphysical planes and question reality. Finally, we return home.

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frozen is cheaper
arcadia lyons

you shuffle to the shower
too cold for the fan
steam can’t hurt
since the grout’s already eroded

mould the soap scraps into one bar
be frugal with the shampoo samples
suck out dregs of toothpaste
like poison from a snakebite

socks over stockings
headphones for earmuffs
hot water bottle in the waistband

squeeze the juice from teabags
home brand beans on toast
this week’s treat is non-cage eggs

you dream of being so rich
that you don’t need a calculator
and never have to put anything back
Yeah sister, I grew up in Adelaide.
My father did the odd labouring job.
He couldn't read or write and had no trade
but wasn't one to sit around and sob.
There's many ways money can be made,
so he could feed his wife and the rest of us mob.
That's why he took to bare-fist fights
behind the hotel. Saturday nights,
the stadium ran a program of boxing.
Once that was over, the crowd hurried out,
made its way down to the carpark clearing
to get money on before the first bout.
Barefoot, singlet and jeans, he'd be waiting,
deaf to the cruel taunts and angry shouts.
They wanted to see him knocked off his feet.
He copped many blows, never defeat.
I'd walk him home, the eldest kid.
Swollen face, troubled limp; he never spoke,
and any discussion, strictly forbid.
By the corner store, he'd light up a smoke,
pull out his notes and hand me a quid
for the next day's ice cream and Coke,
Not far from the house, he'd break his taboo:
'I love your mother; what else can I do?'
Mum didn’t stalk this one over the internet. She said they met at the beach. He was standing on the table with his shirt off, checking out the surf. Mum reckoned that for a sixty-year-old, he still had a pretty good body. I laughed and said it was lucky he hadn’t seen her body in a bikini, otherwise he might’ve decided not to come over for dinner.

It’s already a quarter past eight. Maybe he’s late because of the rain.

‘Now when he gets here,’ Mum warns, ‘be nice to him. He’s had a cunt of a week.’

‘Mum!’

‘What? He has.’ She cracks the screw off a wine bottle and splashes full two long-stemmed glasses. I take one. The rosemary-rich fragrance of lamb drifts from the oven. Mum left work early so she could have it cooking through the afternoon.

‘So what happened?’ I ask.

Mum looks uncomfortable. She shifts around on the stool and drops her nose into the wine glass. ‘Well I haven’t spoken to him since Thursday,’ she mumbles, ‘but he said he went into a gambling frenzy. Ended up blowing his week’s pension on the pokies.’

‘Jesus, Mum.’ I let my glass land in hard disapproval. ‘A gambler?’

Mum puts her glass down delicately and gives me a look. ‘At least I’ve got a boyfriend.’

We look to the clock on the wall. It’s half past. Outside the rain smacks against the tin.

‘Maybe he’s having trouble finding the place,’ Mum says. ‘It’s a wet night. Christ, what if there’s been an accident?’ She clutches her mobile. ‘Should I call and check?’

‘Nah Mum, you don’t wanna seem desperate. He’s only half an hour late.’

Mum sighs and slides a foot out of her high-heel, arches it. She’s wearing fishnets. They cover the spider work of thin blue veins around her ankles.

‘So what’s he like?’ I ask after a bit. ‘Nothing like George, I hope.’

George was the one who always smelled of small dogs and had a permanent blister on his bottom lip. Mum said he’d managed to edit the blister out of his photo on RSVP. Imagine kissing that! George only lasted a few weeks.

‘Nah, nothin’ like George. Or Kevin. Or Andrew. He’s a bit of a lair and definitely still a looker. Charms all the women. The ones on the checkouts at Woolies fall for him the worst,’ she lets out a low whistle, shakes her freshly packet-dyed hair. ‘And I’m certain that old bitch in the fish shop has had her beady bloody eyes on him for months.’

Great, I think. Mum’s fallen in love with a sixty-year-old womaniser. It’s amazing he can
get it up. I refill Mum's glass and then my own.

We sit at the bench together. We wait for the wet crunch of tyres on gravel.

At nine-thirty Mum goes to the oven and pulls out the roast. She sets it between us and cracks the lid off another bottle. We eat with our fingers.

After dinner, Mum unplugs her laptop. She takes it up into her bedroom and gently closes the door.
i learn you in fragments

vicky validakis

i learn you in fragments.

tea with three sugars, no milk
corona with lime, not lemon
and never bourbon and coke

i learn you in anger / purple stains on my skin
i learn you in kindness / notes left under my pillow

the water in sun and cold
a hatred for house
anything fluoro
and never a festival

i learn you in 3am snores / the crease in your forehead
i learn you inside me / the faraway look after

i learn what you don’t want me to know / i never will.
I want to be your right dimple,
a gentle curl embellishing your smile.

A silent yes me not you kind of profession
to everyone else in the room.

But ours is a secret of dot-to-dot obscurity
and we are rapacious in our bloom.
The northern coastline hides thousands of beaches like it. The approach, in the back of a
Jeep, their knees bouncing, curls through green farmland, circles around fences and dams,
curves up to the cliff edge. The descent is rocky-precipitous. Below is pale-gold sand, edg­
ing soft surf held to the shore by a channel of rocks.

There are four people in the party. Two are a couple. She, a large and imposing woman
with a ruddy face, wears an old army hat, pulls a canvas bag full of fishing tackle from the
Jeep. He, squat beside her, is paler, red-sandy, stocky with round, sturdy calf muscles. He
smiles wryly at his partner's sardonic comments. They are Mads and Ham and are leading
the expedition with dexterity. They are old hands.

The other two don't exactly fit. They are younger and definitely not a couple. Meg seems
half-finished. Her legs are long, skinny and brown; she stretches them in the tremulous
propping of a baby giraffe. Her green eyes are warm, tentative. She wears tiny cut-off jean
shorts and a little yellow singlet top, stretched across an adolescent chest.

Andy is good-looking in a seventies sort of way. Meg is uncertain about his moustache
but likes his long, dark hair with its moments of gold. She catches his easy smile. He has the
ease of an athlete as he heaves the picnic basket from the tray of the Jeep. He jokes about
her outstretched legs as she fights off a cramp. They had shared the tray of the jeep with the
picnic basket. Those legs had bounced against his. They are such new friends that a touch
must be explained, laughed off. So they laugh.

The sun dazzles overhead. Mads floats out a tartan blanket. Ham deals out plates with
the practised hand of a croupier. These two know their food. Meg can see from the gentle
rolling of their waistlines: they love their food. Plates of cheeses; smooth, melting, blue-
veined. Crisp-crusted bread sticks, dips and chips. They reach in with both hands. Wine
gushes into glasses. Andy is a generous barman and serves them all.

Meg, such a half-finished girl, breathes deep. She drains her glass. Mads and Ham
recline, crushed serviettes in baby-big fists. Ham slides his head onto the plump pillow of
Mads's belly.

The four of them doze, the sun high above. Meg and Andy rest their heads on their
crossed arms. Mads and Ham snore and snuffle together until their stomachs ease. Meg
scans the shoreline and finds her gaze on Andy. He looks back. He nods and they tiptoe off
to the surf.

It is a day for laughter. Swim, kick and splash. Mads and Ham, refreshed, follow Meg and
Andy to the water. They wade through the shallows, sagging and comfortable in faded, baggy cossies. The afternoon sun blasts heat again and all four wallow in the breaking waves. Ham, obligingly, does his party trick: a whale breeching and spouting. Mads strands herself and has to be dragged, shuddering with laughter, back into deeper water.

Up on the sand they make jokes and push furrows with salt-scaled feet. Ham pads off to fish. The shadows lengthen. Mads collects the picnic gear and Ham wrestles it back into the Jeep. Meg and Andy stand a little apart, facing the surf. They watch the slow roll of waves in the cooling of day's end. They pass a smile to one another. Mads and Ham high-five behind them, unseen.

It is late winter when the telegram arrives. Meg is on her way: there is a new job waiting for her out west. It is a permanent one and, besides, she has no choice. This is what she signed up for. Andy is away the day the telegram arrives. He has led an entourage of teenage hopefuls to a cross-country run in another town. He arrives late at the pub and sits in a corner away from Meg's noisy orbit. He seems tired; he doesn't look her way.

It becomes a time of farewells. A time of never-quite-saying what was never-quite-felt. Meg suspects the friendship with Mads and Ham (fuelled by beach barbecues, long Jeep drives along deserted, yellow coastline and more bottles of wine) may not last.

On a close-to-last weekend, Andy suggests a bike ride. Meg feels older, resigned, wiser – yes, even regretful. But she accepts his invitation. They wheel out the bikes and follow the winding track, pedalling the way the Jeep had followed a few months before. Standing at the cliff's edge, they look out to sea. She could have been alone.

But down on the beach, they begin to laugh again. They shed their clothes and run into the waves. The water frees them. They bend themselves with it, let themselves become swallowed up in it, bursting through, for hours.

Back on the empty beach they kick up fine sprays of sand, draw each other with outrageous ugliness on the canvas of sand. Hop, skip and jump. Skim stones. Release whatever it was.

The tide is turning. They wander along the sand. Andy splashes ahead through ankle-high water to a rockpool. He turns back to Meg, a disbelieving smile across his face.

'Meg! Look! Here, in the rockpool! Under the ledge ...'

She jogs up to him. In a natural trough in the rock lie a bottle of Champagne and two glasses, cooling in salt water.

'Some people must have had a party down here last night, you think? And left them behind?' suggests Meg.

Andy laughs, and all of a sudden it becomes clear to her. The sweetness of him. It takes her breath away.

'Let's have a toast,' he says. The bottle explodes in foam between them; it rolls over the lips of their glasses. The saltiness of Champagne.
A few days later Meg drives south. West from Sydney, she crosses mountains and finds herself in a flatter, paddock-bound town, half a state away from the beach. In the months that follow she often thinks of Andy. How he had raised his glass to her with a smile that had been there all the time.

Later she gets a letter from him. He quotes the lyrics of a Joni Mitchell song they shared:

*and now I am returning to myself*

*these things that you and I suppressed.*

Which makes it quite clear. She wonders why she feels the sadness. Because during those northern days, she had not been in love, but she had begun to breathe again. It really shouldn’t have mattered, there had been no serious heart bond. No fracturing. But in that Champagne glass, there was light, there was the sharpness of salt. Beyond, a horizon.

Meg reads Andy’s letter many times and often feels a strange twinge of guilt. But there was nothing she had done. That was right. There was nothing she had done.

The country is bound by a new horizon. Dirty dots of sheep on grey, drought-stricken plains, brick-blue skies. Months go by. Two years go by. One day, Meg goes to the letterbox and finds a letter from Mads. Meg remembers the older woman’s rough and reddened face, her ready wit and hospitality. News from that northern town: she opens the envelope with a quickening heart.

And drops the letter. She sinks with it to the hard earth.

Andy is dead. The young man who rode before dawn to a deserted beach, to hide a bottle of Champagne and two glasses. Who rode back again, a naïve and willing woman by his side.

At twenty-seven. No hospital could read him, no hospital could react in time to a sly infection that slipped into his bloodstream. Mads offers the details. A blister padded with contaminated cotton wool? Golden staph? Passed from one country hospital to the city. But there was no lucky charm offered by fitness. No immunity for the good guy.

Meg is stunned by the senselessness of it, the waste. She takes her tears to a friend who, days later, appears with take-away coffee and a slim, pink booklet: the stages of grief. Meg reads the title out loud, but doesn’t hear it. She drives long hours to sit by another rockpool, staring hard at the unresponsive ocean.

She is determined to make some sort of pilgrimage. She drives north, sleeps in the car that night, witnesses a star-filled evening from the cooling curve of the car bonnet.

The next afternoon Meg arrives in the coast town she left two years before. That weekend she finds herself following a curving road up to a cliff top. From there it’s down to a pale golden beach where the low surf is held in by a rock channel.

Meg follows the arc of the beach to the rockpool. It lies empty, its sand rippled and clean.
below clear seawater.

At the water's edge, Meg pulls off her shorts and singlet, and walks into the water. The waves are low and gentle. She swims to the rock boundary of the channel and faces open water.

Meg eases herself onto the rocks. Nothing separates her from the blue horizon. For a while she watches the gulls, swooping and wheeling in the air.

From out of the quiet roll of waves a prayer comes. She says the words and asks for forgiveness, for any hurt done him, for their missed moments.

From out of the low rolling swell a wave rises.

Before she has time to fear it, the wave towers above, then washes over her. In its touch is her answer. He embraces her. For the first time Meg is in his arms.
Brad stared at the muesli ageing on the third shelf of the pantry. He imagined its dried fruit dehydrating even further in the cheap Tupperware equivalent. *Bowl, milk, spoon, washing up,* Brad thought to himself, losing interest after each comma. He resigned himself to what was left of his coffee and a mandarin for breakfast. Plus, he thought chewing on a gobful of bran sticks and pawpaw when the ambos arrived would probably seem tactless.

He drove his thumb surgically into the middle of the mandarin. Its skin hissed citrus and stung the flesh that hugged his nail — the flesh that he picks at without realising and is perpetually raw.

Michelle sat opposite him at the bench, perched on a stool, her legs winding like a vine around it as she tried to keep calm. She busied herself with a fibrous strand from a banana, curling white shapes on the granite countertop. Brad returned to his mug — lukewarm and stained like an old tooth but a safe place to hide from Michelle’s gaze.

‘You fucking distracted me,’ she growled under her breath.

Brad didn’t answer. He wasn’t meant to. The third tip on their fridge-magnet guide to kitchen injury: *DO NOT ANTAGONISE THE VICTIM.*

Michelle went back to breathing deliberately, as if through a straw, but her knees began to bounce in panic, negating the calming effect of her blowing. She was illogical most of the time, especially after getting her finger in the way of an apple corer.

‘Who talks to someone trying to cut an apple, anyway?’ She held out her hand, demanding another tea towel. Her seat creaked under her anxious knees and she sensed herself being unreasonable. She cleared her throat. ‘What was it you were going to say?’

‘Keep cool, alright.’ Brad passed her the most frayed towel he could find and dropped the first into the sink. It squelched on impact and stained the remnants of yesterday’s dishes mischievous pink.

Michelle’s apple lay half-cored on the bench. Each segment was still attached to the next, aiming towards the ceiling and curled stiff like the legs of a dead spider. Blood had seeped into every segment and Brad wondered about irony. He often wondered about God’s sense of humour, imagining an elegantly dressed man with mild manners and old hands huckling to himself about having burdened a haemophiliac with a bad temper.
Haemophiliac
Brunette
Green eyes
Good speller

Should I? Yeah, what the hell.

Bad temper

But then common sense hit him like a bloody tea towel, in the form of Michelle.

‘How is this in any way funny, Bradley?’ her voice had jumped an octave or two since she last spoke. ‘Here they are now.’ She flailed her free arm towards the door and looked straight at Brad. He had decided long ago that he loved Michelle.

Two cavalier ambulance officers scuffed down the pebble-crete driveway, kicking loose stones at the garage door. They didn’t dawdle but they were hardly urgent.

‘I’m just saying,’ one of them announced to the other, his voice echoing through the flyscreen. ‘If his name wasn’t Yves Klein then he probably wouldn’t have named the colour after himself, would he? What if his name was bloody Jack White?’

‘Jacque Blanc Bleu has a ring to it,’ the younger of the two retorted with the best French accent he could muster. ‘A certain je ne sais quoi.’ His head wobbled, but only when he spoke French.

The officers had a father-son dynamic that unnerved Brad. He felt as though he’d just walked onto the set of *All Saints*. They followed Brad into the kitchen, continuing their repartee.

‘All I’m saying is, trust a Frenchman to name a bloody colour after himself.’ The latches and clips on their pants, belts and bags clinked with every stride.

Brad didn’t like the father ambo. Anyone who needs to preface a sentence with ‘I’m just saying’ or ‘all I’m saying is’ never has anything of value to contribute. He spoke through a toothy grin speckled with silver facial hair that lay somewhere between distinguished and dishevelled.

Their demeanour changed when they saw Michelle, clearly displeased with their discourse on French artistry. She applied more pressure on her wound than ever.

Ambo the Younger took control after being prompted by a strong shove in the back from Ambo the Elder. He was nervous. It wasn’t endearing. His shirt was disconcertingly new. The collar still had corners from its days of cardboard-hugging and there were pinches on each shoulder. It wore him like a coat-hanger. ‘Alright ... ma’am.’ He paused to make sure he’d used that word correctly. ‘You’ve done a great job so far. I’m just going to lie you down and ...’

‘Elevate her feet!’ the Elder chimed in while touring the dining room. His shoes squeaked against the tiles. The soles must have been clean.
‘Yep, we’ll elevate your feet to keep the blood where you need it and then we’ll sort you out with some coagulant, okay?’

‘Okay,’ she repeated, glaring holes into his face. Haemophilia turned a non-issue into a ‘call an ambulance and try not to move’ situation. Michelle was always offended when she was treated like a training drill.

‘Your husband stated when he called the switchboard that you’ve run out of your emergency coag medication. Is that right?’

‘No. Well, yes. No ... He’s not my husband.’

Father Ambo put down a picture frame and spun on his heels, which squealed like a car tyre. His trusty sidekick had triggered a conversation that caught his attention. Brad pretended to tidy the kitchen. He moved hurriedly, dropping cutlery into the sink, sliding it down the side so as not to slam it on a plate. He ran the tap and flicked the stream with his forefinger until it turned hot. Fog crept onto the window above the sink that looked onto the courtyard and into the neighbour’s family room. The windowsill was bloated and peeling from the moisture. It needed a fresh coat of paint.

Michelle continued to scramble for words and the ambos continued to pester her for the fun of it until the Elder stood at Michelle’s feet holding her heels in front of his belt, giving her some more elevation. She squirmed and her knees slackened. Michelle wasn’t terribly flexible.

The Younger took her hand to wrap the wound and Brad smiled at her reaction. It wasn’t just him who made her recoil. He found solace in being one of many — as disgusting as that was.

Brad remembered when he first told her he loved her. It was a Tuesday morning and they were both awake, waiting for the alarm to trigger their day. Brad took her hand by the fingers and felt each of them tense like dogs in a storm. ‘Cold hands, warm heart,’ she’d said, avoiding eye contact. Brad was hopeful. He told her and waited for a reply. Michelle’s hands were smoother than his and her knuckles were more profound. He traced each one, waiting.

Michelle’s body took longer than usual to respond to the coagulant. Her face had turned porcelain before she was ushered onto a stretcher and prepared for a precautionary trip to the hospital. The ambos scribbled on clipboards before carrying her out the door.

‘I love you,’ Brad said to her for the second time. She looked at him like there was something wrong with him.
you type the words
'something good'
into Google Images;
just to see
if you’ve ever seen
'something good' before.
and you have.

you see:
children, coffee cups,
a rainbow, a woman’s nipples,
a corpse floating face-down in a river,
like your happiness.
you can’t deny
these things are all very okay

indeed, but suddenly!
a thing catches your eye,
and that thing

is bread.
ordinary bread, not bread
with polymorphic superpowers
(such as the ability to not be bread)
but bread; just bread.

you feel excessive and
materialistic and
you deserve to.
it was there all this time,
waiting for you, waiting
for sandwiches,
and you thought bread?
fuck bread! i want women`s nipples!

but you`ve been lying to yourself; 
lying to bread 
your entire life: you know 
you will look back on your years 
and warmly remember not 
fondling or areola, 
but wholemeal 
and Nutella.
It’s funny, the first thing I ever said to her was je te déteste. We were on a fourth-floor balcony crowded with international students, drinking goon, a half-torn banner draped overhead – No Worries! Welcome to Australia! Back in Europe, the French football team had swindled a victory over Ireland so I, drunk and boisterous, was playing obnoxious Francophile to the group. Somebody pointed her out as ‘the French girl’ and I strode over.

‘I hate you.’ That was my opening line.

‘Pourquoi?’ she said. ‘Why?’

She was sitting by herself, I think, with a cigarette. I explained that it was now the official duty of every Irish national to hate all French.

‘But I don’t care about le soccer,’

‘ Doesn’t make the slightest difference, mademoiselle. This is patriotism, I’m afraid.’

‘Quel dommage,’ she said. ‘What a shame.’

‘Yes. Oui. Quel fucking dommage ...’

We ended up together that night, though I didn’t call her afterwards. It had been too drunken, maybe. Some weeks passed.

I saw her at another party and realised she was beautiful. There was a severity, a melancholy in her lazy movements that moved you at a submerged level, deeper than the aesthetic, or even the sexual. Her big, lost eyes provoked a reaching empathy. How could such a girl ever be unhappy?

She was encircled by a crowd of gawkers. I raised my glass. She nodded, and a slow smile crept across her lips. I understood the look to be loaded with smouldering anger but, in hindsight, it probably contained more indifference than rage.

‘I ate you,’ she said later, at the bar.

‘I know. I’m sorry. I was drunk.’

She made a noise, hmph.

‘But to see you tonight,’ I said. ‘To know I’ve missed my chance. Je me déteste. I hate myself.’

‘Good. Au revoir.’

She went home with some Aussie bloke. A surfer, of course.
I began asking questions. I found out where her group of friends went to get drunk. Two successive Saturday nights I followed them there, but she was absent.

I remembered back to that first night, to the act itself. I strained the drunken memory for details. Her room: dark, cluttered. Black paint-drips on her dresser, paper on the floor. Her body the colour of olive oil, a lily tattoo. Her face blank and severe below me. And something else: her arms, in what I had assumed to be a gesture of intensity, squeezing me. But the more I thought about it, how she clung, how she stared at the ceiling afterwards, her submissiveness itself, the more it all seemed a manifestation of her singular, overriding melancholy.

I would save her, I thought. With me she would be happy ...

A month passed.

That town, that cute, dirty, little town, had an old lighthouse I liked to visit. I was walking by the harbour when I saw two old fishermen talking together with serious faces. I looked where they were looking and there, sitting on a rock at the edge of the water, was my French girl staring out to sea. I considered calling out, but the waves were loud and would have made any conversation inane and stupid. There were forty metres of boulders between us. She looked up as I jumped from one to another. I was slow, cautious, so it took me several minutes. I sat down on the next rock. She was looking out to sea again.

I had been forming a question as I negotiated the rocks. I wanted to ask, 'Why are you sad?' but couldn’t think of a way to phrase it without sounding like a loser. Once there, beside her, I found I couldn’t say anything at all. The waves lapped about us for several minutes.

'Tide’s coming in,' I said at last.

'Yes,' she said. 'I know.'

An A3 pad lay on her rock. She had drawn a charcoal scene: the sky, the sea, the rocks, the dead lighthouse in the distance. It was good, atmospheric.

'Your drawing’s getting wet,' I said.

The spray had gotten it; the corners bled.

She reached over and hurled the pad away like a Frisbee. It spun and flipped pathetically in the wind before hitting the water. Then it floated, face down, and knocked against the rocks.

I was too shocked to talk, to even ask the obvious question, pourquoi? The pad was ten feet away. I considered climbing down to retrieve it, a romantic gesture to tell the grandkids.

'Now I cannot even come ‘ere anymore.'

She started to climb back to dry land.

I watched her. Water washed over my toes.

A wave pushed the pad closer, up against my rock, and now it was within arm’s reach. I bent down and, in the reaching, in the shifting of position, my foot found a piece of seaweed and—
A rock. The cold water rose above me, everything going black...

She came to the hospital. I doubt intentionally. I suppose she was bundled into the ambulance in the rush.

'Silly boy.'

'I saved it, didn't I?'

The drawing pad was on my bedside table. Apparently I'd been holding it when the fishermen pulled me out. I presented it to her. She took it but went quiet.

Maybe it was the guilt, but she agreed to see me again.

I'm not sure I was happy. I can't say it was fun, our time together. We got drunk a lot and had sex and everything but still, it was frustrating. We would talk for hours and at the end of it I'd feel no closer to knowing her than at the start. When I asked about her drawings, she said nothing, just sort of stared into space. I hadn't seen the charcoal seascape since I gave it to her in the hospital. It was not in her flat. But she was an artist! I was going out with a beautiful, French artist! They were allowed to be moody, right? They were allowed to ignore me for hours at a time, to stay in bed all day, to eat fish fingers six times a week, fish fingers with a side of Coco Pops...

But her melancholy was infectious. We'd meet our friends and spend the whole night sitting silently in the corner, aloof, like we knew something they didn't. Sometimes she'd want to be hugged for five, ten, twenty minutes on end. She'd hold me in the kitchen, the middle of the street, wherever, her breath coming sharp, her fingernails digging into my back. It was like she was in a state of perpetual mourning. By and by I said I loved her. She said it back. When she said it _au français_ I almost melted. _Je t'aime_ ...

One night we were supposed to go out for her friend's birthday, but I felt sick and told her to go by herself, to have fun. I spent the night in bed with a sweaty temperature, thinking about her, about how I could crack her shell. That was the first time she slept with someone else while we were together.

I wasn't angry, exactly; I was more confused than anything. I asked her why and she stared into space, exuded the same silence as when I asked about her art. Until, at last:

'Sometimes I need someone. You were sick.'

I don't think she even apologised. It wasn't a fight because she didn't fight back, didn't try to defend herself, didn't even listen. She waited until I was finished and then made it clear she wanted to stay the night with me. I was too obsessed to turn her away. She was as melancholy, as oblivious, as ever. We went on as before.

I tried to justify it with sophistication, with twenty-first century philosophy, genetic theory. Monogamy was old-fashioned, love was free, our relationship was 'open,' our commitment...
I should get a mistress, I told myself. I should get a whore.

She moved in with me. Her landlord was putting up the rent and she was spending most nights at my place anyway. She would spend at least an hour a day in a locked room — be it the bathroom or bedroom. I didn’t know what she was doing. I assumed she was drawing but could never find the evidence. She would disappear for hours, for a full day, without saying where she’d gone. One time, on a friend’s rooftop, I found her standing at the edge. I was sure she was thinking of jumping and pulled her back inside.

I went away for a weekend, to a conference in Melbourne. When I got back on Monday morning there was a guy in the kitchen, in his underwear, eating cereal. Coco Pops.

I put my coat on its hook and sat down opposite him, this guy, this stranger in my kitchen.

‘Who the hell are you?’

‘I’m Bob, and you—’

‘Bob. Get the fuck out, Bob.’

‘Hey, what the hell—? Hey!’

I’m not a violent person. So as I stood and lifted my chair above my head, my thoughts assumed a shocked running commentary: Whoa! What are you doing? Are you—? You’re not serious! I swung at him but he dived out of the way and scurried out down the corridor.

‘Dude! You’re fucking crazy!’

As I went to the bedroom, the running commentary continued. Jesus, you just tried to hit that guy with a chair! I never thought you were capab—wait. Are you ...? Are you going to strangle her?

There she was: naked, asleep, her brow creased with dream-worry, her thin little neck ... I watched her a while. When she woke I didn’t mention Bob, and neither did she. We had pancakes.

It seems pathetic, but I couldn’t stay angry at her. I felt like it — anger, I mean — would be insensitive, unsympathetic. I decided she had a problem. Not like, a sex-addiction, but something.

I needed something to blame. I brought her to a student counsellor in a pokey little office above the Unicentre, got an immediate appointment because I said she was ‘high-risk.’

And suddenly I was optimistic. I left the office thinking, Fine! If this is what it takes ... This will cure her. She will be happy at last and she will thank me and love me. Because I will have saved her. When nobody else cared, there I was: slow and Irish and devoted. She will be cured.

Then we would be happy, I thought. My lovely French (artist) girlfriend and I.

I’m trying to tell it like it’s funny. But — no. It doesn’t work.

I’d come home and she’d be in bed and there’d be this smell in the room, this staleness, this hospital-sick stench. I’d open the window and kneel beside her. She’d be staring at the wall. Sometimes she’d grab my arm, dig in her fingernails, drawing blood ... She wouldn’t
look at my face, wouldn’t move her eyes from whatever compelling middle-distance they were focused on.

‘Fuck me,’ she’d say.

So I would.

I found her stash. The drawings. Looked through them quickly, to see if there were any of me. Of course not. They were all the same dreadful charcoal scene, the same ominous sea, the same jagged rocks, the same dead lighthouse.

Then, towards the end, on a fourth-floor balcony clouded with the smoke of noisy international students, we took some psychedelics. Yeah, I know. How could I let someone that unstable take hallucinogenic drugs? Well, I don’t know either. I was young and drunk. Is that enough? Maybe I thought they’d help in some way. Help us interact on the same level, the same plane or ... I don’t know.

She disappeared. I returned from the bathroom and she was gone. I asked around, of course. I asked her friends, everyone, even the Aussie surfer she’d been with that time. I checked all the bedrooms, the bathroom, the bath, the closets, moving slowly like in a dream, everything – the walls – curving away from me, like looking through the wrong end of binoculars, and all the time that running commentary going: *Why are you looking behind the curtains? You know where she is. No, man, not under the bed either. Sooner or later you’re gonna have to go there; downstairs, outside, to the pavement four storeys beneath that balcony. Only she could jump without anyone seeing. Only she could fall without a scream.*

I found her at the harbour. She was sitting on a rock, possibly the same rock as before, about forty metres out. I could just make her out through the darkness and the spray. The wind and the waves snuffed out my shouts.

I climbed over to her. Extra slow, extra cautious, the chemicals in my system a buffer between my mind and body, my limbs on strings, gravity pulling at twice its normal force. She laughed. I’d never heard her laugh. How sad is that? That was the first, the very first time. It was an ugly sort of laugh.

I held her for a while, the black world spinning around us, everything more immediate, more real than reality. I thought she might be asleep. But then, just before dawn.

‘We are going to die,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I know.’

‘Forever.’

The water crept up, freezing licks on our toes and she clung to me, whispered:

‘Oh—*pourquoi*?’

That was when I knew I couldn’t save her. That there was nothing, nothing I could ever do.
That night Blake smelled like coffee. He gave one to me, wrapped in styrofoam and steaming.

I risked an arm out from the blanket.

‘Were you asleep?’

I shook my head. ‘Reading.’

It smells better than it tastes, coffee, but I couldn’t resist the warmth. So dark and thick, it soaked into my breath.

He undressed, awkward and jerky like a child. He brushed his teeth in his undies and socks, dancing on his toes. The tiles in the bathroom were always cold. His body hunched over, curling forward at the edges like a fallen leaf, and for an instant he looked so small, so vulnerable, I got that desire again to hold him in my hands, cradle him, save him.

It was already past midnight when he got into bed. My warmth bled into him.

‘Parasite,’ I squealed as his hands roamed, still icy and stained with coffee powder. They left smudges on my skin like bruises. But soon we were warm again. Even in the places where our skin didn’t touch.

He lay on my chest, words trembling from his skin to mine. They gathered in the cradle of my collarbone, a safe distance from my heart. Because words, like skin, can be easily broken.

He told me about the militia, about their trophies. How they tied them around their necks on a string. About the first time he saw them, dark and wrinkled like the dried fruit you can buy in packets at Woolies. I didn’t understand.

‘Ears,’ he whispered into mine.

Then he was asleep, betrayed by the steady rhythm of his breath, and I lay in the dark with coffee pulsing through my blood, syncopating with the beat of my heart.

I woke during the night, muscles sore and tight. Shoulders hunched high, protecting my ears.

In the morning his clothes lay crumpled on the floor. His side of the mattress was cold. I caught my face in the mirror. It was crumpled too. Red road maps etched into my cheeks from the folds of restless sheets. The maps grew like temporary tattoos down my sides. I thought of his tattoo. The name of a woman scrawled across his wrist. And I lay there for a long while, refusing to believe he had gone.
I picked Sharon up from the hospital that afternoon. She knew straight away. Just the two of us again.

Sharon lived two streets over from me, but it was quicker to walk through the dunes. Her house squatted indecently between the inlet and the bay, a fibro shack that had spat out extra bits and pieces over the years. White paint peeled off the walls in flakes like skin after sunburn. Plastic tables and chairs were the only things that grew out of the garden. The toilet was still out in the backyard. Mum always said it was unhygienic, but it wasn’t. Sharon’s house was cluttered but clean, like her.

Some days when I was a kid and her husband was still around, we walked down to the jetty to watch the boats come in. I loved the smell – fish guts and petrol. It came home with us on our clothes, in our skin. We weren’t there the day her husband sliced his fingers off. The knife slipped while he was gutting a fish. Only the index finger was left. It always looked like he was pointing at something after that.

He left a few weeks later with the nurse he met in hospital. I went to Sharon’s a lot more often then. I don’t think Mum even noticed, or perhaps she didn’t really mind. Her practice had moved to the city by then and she spent more and more time away. It wasn’t long before I needed Sharon as much as she needed me.

That afternoon when I brought her home my clothes were still scattered through her house, bras hanging from doorknobs, the makeshift bed adrift on the living room floor. I was too raw to care. Or maybe I wanted her to see, to know that he had loved me too. She saw it all and said nothing, just slept for three days straight. That was five months ago. We’re still waiting.

Now she sits propped up against the frame of the bed, body enveloped in mismatched floral sheets. The TV is on so we don’t have to talk. She squints hard to see, neck hooked forward like a vulture. I watch her instead.

You can tell that she was beautiful once. But the beauty has blurred, softened around the edges, like paint bleeding out in a watercolour.

When I was young she would spend hours showing me her photo albums. The pictures were mainly of her, young and smiling, at the beach or out on the boat in a wide sunhat and swimmers that stretched halfway down her thighs. Back then her skin was smooth; the wrinkles on her forehead were only pencilled in.

There were a few shots of her husband, but she rushed past those. In the glimpses I saw he looked so serious, eyes hidden beneath the shadow of a frown. I remember he smelled like cigarettes, and on the nights when he was home for tea the silver in his beard glistened in the harsh kitchen light like the scales on a fish. He never spoke to me, but looked through me sometimes, as if he wished I wasn’t there.

There were no photos of Blake. You couldn’t capture someone like him in a frame.
But after a while, in the liquid heat of long afternoons, I would grow bored with the low chuckle of her voice and fall asleep breathing in the musty scent of the books in her lap. Other times, with the tactlessness of youth, I couldn’t believe that the photos were of her. She’d snap them shut and send me home early to wait on the porch for Mum. She’s always been proud, even now, when her piss drips into a bag.

I thought about not telling Blake, just pretending that I’d called. But I’d never been any good at lying, especially not to Sharon. The number was taped to the fridge in thick black permanent marker. She started coughing again, sharp staccato bursts, like a dog’s bark. I dialled.

Over the phone his voice itched like new skin growing over a scab.
‘Shaz?’
So she had called him.
‘Nah, it’s me.’ I waited.
‘Who?’ The line broke. ‘Hello?’
My finger caressed the button, still too gutless.
‘Listen, I can’t hear ya.’ He tried again. ‘The line’s shithouse.’
‘It’s Tracey,’ I yelled. I wondered if she could hear from the bedroom.
‘Oh, hey—’
He didn’t say my name.
‘Where’s Sharon? Is everything okay?’
I hated crying but I cracked at the soft concern in his voice, even if it was for Sharon, not me.
‘Tracey, what’s going on?’
‘She’s sick again.’ The syllables strangled one another.
‘I know, she called a couple of weeks ago,’ he sounded almost bored. ‘listen,’ I could hear noises in the background. Laughter – a woman’s. ‘Has something else happened?’
‘They sent her home again.’ I managed, clearer this time.
He lowered his voice like he was trying to stop others from hearing. ‘So how bad are we talking?’
‘Jesus, Blake, what do you want me to say?’
‘Alright, sorry, just calm down.’
I tried. ‘She wants to know if you can come home.’ I should have said ‘back,’ not ‘home’.
This place wasn’t his. It was hers. Mine.
‘Put her on the phone.’
‘She’s asleep.’
‘Put her on the phone.’
He sounded more tired than angry. I peered into her room. She wasn’t asleep. She had
her arm outstretched, waiting. I almost wanted her to die then. I left while she was still on the phone.

That night I felt her in my room, his woman, the one tattooed into his skin. I could almost make her out her tiny frame leaning in the doorway, watching. It surprised me to find her here, where he’d never been. But she was something we shared now. Something else he’d given me. Then she was in bed beside me, so fragile but warm. I swear I could feel her hair on my skin, and the smell of her, like spice. Together we waited. That’s when I knew he wasn’t coming back.

I couldn’t go to Sharon’s in the morning. I wasn’t ready to see the look on her face. To hear the things he’d told her and not me. I went down to the jetty instead. The surf curled around the bay, licking the rock wall with tongues of spray. It already felt empty without her. The whole place was quiet, the boats long gone for the day. But the smell remained and I sucked it in deep, enough to take back to her.

For a while it all seemed like a false alarm. The colour came back in her cheeks and her skin lost that cellophane sheen. Sometimes she’d even be up before I arrived. But I preferred it when she wasn’t. She looked younger when she slept, with strings of spit reaching south towards her chin. Instead of waking her I’d crawl in beside her, careful, slow, and let her hold me again in her soft, wrinkled skin.

A tiny part of me wondered what she’d do when I went back to university. The winter break was almost over and I only had one semester left. But another part wondered how far we could look ahead, one month – maybe two. I knew I couldn’t leave her now, when she needed me most, when I had her all to myself.

When there was nothing left to give I gave memories, and watched the canyons across her brow shallow out as she remembered.

I began with afternoons at the bay washed away in warm puddles left like presents by the outgoing tide. She was big then; a bum crack of back fat ran all the way up her spine. But the men still watched the roll of her hips as she dragged me back up the dunes at dusk. She would let us dawdle past the silhouettes of fisherman dotted along the jetty like pegs on a line and I could tell that’s what she was remembering now, as the same sly smile tugged at the corner of her lips. And for a few moments at least, while her body grew stale and the skin on her hips hung loose, I had reminded her what it felt like to have that power over a man.

When it came to men she taught me everything she knew. I thought back to the whispered conversations on the payphone at college, dissecting every word, every detail. We’d never had secrets. We still couldn’t talk about Blake. Though eventually I let myself remember, pretending I was doing it for Sharon’s sake.

He arrived when I was in year five. He was in the army. I was ten. That summer still tastes
of lemonade. Sharon made it all the time, bittersweet with flakes of mint that got stuck in your teeth. That first afternoon she made me take a glass out to him on the veranda and introduce myself. He sculled it all at once and I watched his Adam’s apple bounce with each gulp. Back then he was untouched by Timor, uncut by machete-grin scars. But there was still a darkness in him, a shadow of the jungle. I walked away with snakes crawling under my skin, trying to pulse their way out of the tips of my fingers, unable then to understand what it was I wanted.

Sometimes he’d come with us on our walks down to the bay. He never wore shoes, just pounded his feet on the hot tar until the skin grew thick and grey. I tried to copy him one afternoon, but trod in glass that Sharon dug out of my heel with a needle.

I didn’t realise she was watching me as I remembered. Her eyes had lost none of their intensity; if anything they grew clearer the more her body failed her. I managed to hold it for a while, letting her enjoy the reddening of my cheeks.

“You can’t change them, you know.’

She was talking about Blake, but I could hear the undertone of bitterness she felt towards her own husband.

‘I know.’

She closed her eyes. I took my chance and got up to leave.

‘There’ll always be someone who wants less than you.’

I hadn’t made it to the door.

‘And men like him will give as little as they can.’ She propped herself up on her elbows to see me better. I watched the patterns crawl across the quilt in her lap.

‘You should feel lucky, you know.’

Her hands were shifting in her lap.

‘Why’s that?’

Her lips looked cracked and sore, but I still couldn’t look at her eyes.

‘He wouldn’t have gone if he didn’t like you.’

My final lesson hit me between the shoulder blades as I left.

After he’d gone, I didn’t cry until the bruises he’d left with his lips had disappeared, until the shallow graves his fingernails had carved into my skin had closed over and buried their secrets inside. After that, there was nothing left to prove he’d known me, that he’d been here at all. I wondered what kind of scars Sharon would leave me with after she’d gone too.
my story will be cut short
amy galea

These are the strange things, the beautiful things that exist now and will exist after, long after we leave this place. These are the secrets, this is the weeping. My heart is weak. These past weeks have been full, in memory. I want to talk to you, to tell you this. I want to tell the truth, to bring you this truth on a platter till full; eat up, my children. This is hard reality, difficult stories to tell but they must be told and I must tell them.

Our wooden kingdom, our home of framed photographs weaving walls of cream and blue, is what has kept us together these years. Smiles on hard-licked wood nailed into the wall. Nails not to break.

He asked me one day if I loved him.

I might have smiled, kissed his nose and sunk back into the metalwork of the train line. His arm bumped against the window in time with the movement of the carriage as it swallowed track after track. He was not your father.

He took me to his brother’s house in Armidale. He took me through rooms piled with books and beds of steel that squeaked and mattresses shaped and reshaped with love groans. He made me pasta sauce thick with olives and browned mushrooms and spices. They were long days, late risings and crackled auburn leaves on the sidewalk alongside webs weaved by busy spiders on the branches by his window. Paint peeled off windowpanes. He helped me relax.

We met in the third year of our majors: he studied art and sang in a band. I told him my dreams, some hope of a light in darkness. It gave him joy, hearing these stories, speaking in smoky whispers over morning coffee.

He spoke his own stories, of secrets he promised to keep as a child which lay rotting his stomach. Of manipulation. Of his mother who was silent when beaten, of his stepfather who smelled of beer.

Blame-shifting was not truth and he took full responsibility for the sinking feeling in his stomach each time memory flooded back. It took him five months to leave his brother’s house after it had happened. There was probably nothing he could have done, he arrived too late, he didn’t see it happen, he said he didn’t see the whole thing happen. But he did. Nine stabs to her heart.

Sometimes he woke in hot sweats from dreams of faded blue eyes, eyes which pleaded with him to take on his stepfather, and he would call out to me. What was he to have done?
He should have taken the knife, taken the knife off him, taken control. Not just watched. Not stood still.

I tried to whisper things of comfort, of beauty, of temporary relief. We cannot help how we react in those situations, I would try to explain. But often he would close his eyes and silence any mention of his story.

He told me he would not marry me. He told me that if it was not true, if this were all not true, then he supposed we could be together and he would be happy to move onto the next phase of something else and so on. But he could not marry me.

For it was.

The door swung back and forth three times the night my sister passed. I was eight and bit hard on the slip of my pillow as they wheeled her cold body out of our room. The light from the corridor fell upon half her face as she passed my bed. I whispered goodbye but didn’t mean it. That night I dreamed that she was still alive and when I woke I believed it to be true.

Some time before, we would tell stories to each other under my bed. She told me the story of the little girl caught in a bubble. She was caught in a bubble and couldn’t get out. She would float above the houses and trees and mountains and ocean. She would sing a song of praise for all she saw; I can still hear her voice:

\[
\begin{align*}
O \ &\text{mountains of sound,} \\
\ &\text{My world I see,} \\
\ &\text{Humbled in awe,} \\
\ &\text{In glorious glee!}
\end{align*}
\]

She would tap her finger on the side of the bubble in the direction she wanted to go and she would fly and fly until one day she saw a little boy in a tree house. This boy was playing a harmonica, moving his head from side to side. She watched him swing his legs over the branch that he sat on. She saw how he closed his eyes when he played the music that floated up to her.

The little girl felt sad. She was caught in this bubble and could not escape. She wanted to be out, to be free. The little girl cried and one tear dropped from her cheek onto the base of her bubble. Another tear dropped, and another, until her bubble was so full of tears that it floated down to the boy in the tree house. When the little boy saw the little girl in the bubble he waved, harmonica in hand. The little girl was in awe of being so close to the ground. She waved back at the little boy and her bubble burst! She fell across the branch that the little boy was on. He grabbed hold of her arm to make sure she didn’t slip.

The little girl stayed with the little boy in the tree house. He taught her what it meant to live outside the bubble, to run and jump, to spin around again and again until they became so dizzy they fell to their knees, laughing with glee.
The little girl became used to the view from the tree house, but every so often, my sister said, she missed her bubble and the view from up high.

Some mornings I would wake and feel the same pillow beneath my head and see the frame of her body beneath her sheets in our small bedroom. I would see her body moving with each breath, chest up and down, up and down.

These stories are like my own; they were bought at a price. Life is falling away from me. Cancer of the bowel and my days are numbered. My chief sadness is that I will not see you grow into life. I will not see you struggle and break through, conquer conventions and leave or cleave to love.

I won’t see you.

These are no longer mere stories just as you and I are no longer children. Sadness brings forth older years but lasting words speak through sorrow. My story will be cut short and I know not how to say goodbye.
Sunlight and the sound of traffic assault me. I'm tired, my head hurts, and jam donuts from the 7-Eleven aren't helping my mood like usual. But none of that seems important. They're just distractions.

I find myself focusing on the ground. Under my feet, under the rotting wooden bench, are more cigarette butts than I could ever count. They're nothing new. Every bus stop, pub and family reunion yields enough of the things to drive a tobacco executive to premature ejaculation. But here, with the hospital looming tall behind me, they feel different. They feel like history.

Just a few centimetres from my left shoe is one that's practically whole, grey ash flaking off the burnt tip. It's been squashed flat, flakes of tobacco gently poking out the end. Why would someone squash out a barely-smoked cigarette? Did they have to leave? Was it a phone call? A text message?

I can imagine a man sitting where I am now. Older, skinny like a rake, not shaving or eating well, just sitting outside with his cigarettes and his worries. What news had he received? He'd had the time to put out the cigarette, but not enough to finish it. Or maybe it was a woman. Somehow I have a tougher time imagining a woman in the situation.

A line of the butts stretches from underneath the bench to a tree root protruding from the earth nearby. A neat, straight, unbroken line. It's so perfect, but the thought of someone taking the time to arrange such a formation is just bizarre.

The image comes to me: a mind, broken cleanly in two like a twig on the ground. It's a possibility. The hospital is still there, lurking behind me. Do they even have mental patients in places like this? The stereotype is there but the facts elude me.

I can see this mystery cigarette-arranger, just as I can see the paranoid heel crushing one into the dirt. The arranger doesn't have a gender but they have piercing brown eyes that flick back and forth along the ground while their fingers pick up the butts, move them, align them one at a time.

A vibration hits me, rattling the discs of my spine. It's my phone, sounding a dutiful alert. I stand and reach for it, unable to take my eyes from the tapestry beneath my shoes. It's calling for me to leave a mark of my own, but I can't. I don't smoke.
a place to silently grieve
madelaine dickie

With fingertips
stinking
of Windex and urine
I parked parallel to
two south-facing cars.

A burnt butter smear
above the steelworks;
and had I stepped out
the southerly
would have scuppered the pink
paint from my nails—
though probably not the smell.

After a bit
I snuck a look at the bloke
to my right; a developer, perhaps
with ruffled, red-suited eyes
staring ahead.
I copied him. Then
banged my palms flat and silent on the wheel.

It felt good, though a bloated
spud
on a spit-string
plugged my throat
so it hurt to swallow
so if I sobbed I’d choke and
all of us wrecked
against a lighthouse:
shrill white in exclamation.
After a bit, I knew I could lie with grace.

So I drove home.
You greeted me:
Sprecken! How was your day?
and I reached out with my teeth
keeping my body back, hands ataxia stiff
at my sides. Nosed your beard instead;
roo and salt and soap.

Better. Better now. But don’t touch me, Love, not yet.
(Gotta wash off fish scales of shit and skin and sweat,
infected catheter, week old cat food)

How was work? you insist.

I fold in your arms and remember
I am composite
of many things:
Audley river greens, firelighters, cypress and a chalk
drawing
outside the Brewery—just last night!

The boiled spud in my throat softens.
At last, it softens.
the backyard grass is sick
and the hills hoists are skeletons,
dinosaur bones on display

telephone poles grow up,
their lines spread out
branches for birds to perch upon

policemen wait
beside a mute brick wall
they talk about the cricket scores
outside a child is crying
karina brabham

under a bruised sky
the playground waits, crouching
and only darkness comes
to gather it up in its arms.

we hurry to our filled-up spaces,
lock the doors,
shun the shadows with electric light
and push back the silence
with tv static.

and yet ...
Andy. Hopeful for a date.
8am: Arrgh. Wake up outside a supermarket. 8:30am: Remember why I was asleep in front of supermarket — early queue for 60% off sale. 9:00am: Buy snow joggers covered with Rainbow Brites for some chick’s kid in order to score a date. They cost $195 even with 60% off. Hope she likes KFC. 1pm: Chilling in my domestic space. 7pm: Miss favourite porno because I can’t find remote. Phone, keys and leather jacket also MIA. Realise the goal of all inanimate objects is to resist man and ultimately defeat him. 10pm: Bored. Sleep.

Brianna. Mother of a chef.
7am: Wake up to sound of fire alarm. Child has passed out and forgotten about his midnight pasta-cooking session. 8am: Bath child. Pack lunch. Take to school. Realise I shouldn’t have yelled so much. 9am: Use music to cope with traffic. Arrive at work. 12pm: Fall in muddy pond during a photo shoot. Ass up, best jeans torn, camera ruined. 7pm: Arrive at dinner with the girls. Drop nachos on new jeans. 10pm: Happy moment before sleep, curled up in bed next to child.

Sarah. Proud pube owner.
10am: Wake up. Takes 3.67 seconds to remember how depressed I am. 11am: Stare at the cup of tea I will not drink. Sigh. Contemplate how break-ups make it impossible to 1) get anything done and 2) be an interesting person. 2pm: Treat myself to a KFC lunch. Enjoying the fattiness until I find a pube in my chip box. 7pm: Go to meet girls for dinner in the park. It rains. Rain on picnic night is like finding a pube in your chip box. Only sadder because more people affected. 9pm: Get home. Cry. Fall asleep thinking of ex.
Selina. Aquarius.
6am: Wake up on floor. Next to bed. 7am: Shower in cold water (not by choice). Must remember to pay bills. 7:30am: End a three and a half year relationship. With Starbucks. Cannot deal with shit coffee any longer. 1pm: Feed my Gremlin. Confront extensive list of things I have to do before the end of the week. 2pm: Find I have more fun not doing any of these things. 6pm: Make an ex piñata for my heartbroken best friend. There will be no mercy. 10pm: Fall asleep watching Wedding Crashers.

Kim. Chandelier collector.
5am: Oh, shit. It’s my wedding day! Spill red nail polish on dress. Early Armageddon. 7am: Bridesmaids remove red stain with hairspray. Arrive at church. Glad to see groom is at the altar. 10am: Get married. We both cry like old Italian men. 1:30pm: Get to the reception. Someone has added a grotesque chandelier to the gift registry. 6pm: Wedding crashers. Get my mother-in-law to deal with them. An effective course of action. 1am: Fall into bed. Too exhausted for sex. Hopefully not an indication of what’s to come – no pun intended.

Jason. Wedding Crasher.
10am: Holy shit, I’m still asleep! Getupgetupgetup. 11am: Intensity of hangover from last night’s wedding reveals itself. Arrive at work. 1pm: Is it breakfast time yet? 4pm: Still at work. Can’t believe it’s about fifty years till I can retire. 8pm: New girlfriend confesses that she’s taking me to see Justin Timberlake concert. Think it may be early Armageddon till I see Jennifer Hawkins. I feel light and funny for the rest of the night. 11pm: Fast asleep, dreaming of retirement with Jennifer Hawkins and a video camera.
My brother was in the front garden, digging up Mum’s bulbs and rubbing the twigs he’d gaffa-taped to his forehead against the fence. Mum managed to update me on the neighbourhood gossip while eyeballing him out the window. We drank tea and didn’t mention Brendan and his new hobby, even when he started to choke on a hydrangea. Mum sighed and broke her Scotch Fingers aggressively.

The biggest news since I’d been away was that the next-door-neighbour’s girl had blossomed. Younger than me and Brendan, she’d always been a distant figure. We’d hear her learning the recorder or crying in the backyard after falling off her scooter.

Later on, we shuffled over to give our congratulations and were ushered into the sunroom by Mrs Roby. We were treated to the sight of young Jessica, a hothouse flower reclining in the afternoon light, petals a soft pastel and her gently smiling face absolutely radiant.

Our family’s saving grace was my younger sister, Lisa, who a few years ago had made the transition from solemn, unsmiling pre-pubescence to puberty. Her room was dark and musty, dominated by the enormous cocoon she’d spun herself into. She was perfect for diverting attention from her brothers. Despite the fact that I’d been at uni for two years, I still hadn’t become anything worth mentioning, a situation that got more awkward the longer it drew itself out. And Brendan was pretending to eat tender roots from our garden.

‘We think she might come out a vet,’ confided my mother, and people would nod their heads enthusiastically.

Later that night my father migrated home for dinner; a single bird separating himself from the flock of working parents that dominated the skyline around 6pm. He sat with loosened tie, drinking an awkward beer with me, asking if Brendan had talked to me since I’d gotten back. When I shook my head, he fluffed his feathers irritably, explaining that Brendan had been very defensive when asked what he was thinking of doing when he finished high school.

‘In fact, he was downright dismissive when Dad mentioned an internship at his company,’ added Mum from the kitchen.

‘I mean, it’s all water off my back,’ shrugged Dad, ‘but it’s a hard life if you don’t have a plan. Something to work towards.’

I focused on my light beer, because I knew they’d both be looking at me.

It turns out that all the kids in the neighbourhood, who Brendan used to spend the summer holidays with, had gone through some changes of their own. They had always
seemed pack-like, roaring through suburban streets on bikes, prowling the beach in fluoro board shorts with sun-bleached hair. But with the end of their school life in sight, they became more stationary and watchful, more wary. They started moving through the shaded tracks and finding empty clearings to ring at dusk. You could find them while walking home drunk at 2am, standing motionless on street corners, eyes reflecting the moon.

It wasn’t as if the herd was unfriendly to Brendan – they just didn’t know how to relate anymore. They only spoke, in careful, considered tones, about which paths they would follow to find the most succulent bulbs and where they would go over the winter to give birth to fawns.

And when Brendan tried to speak to the pale, red does, a massive stag named Jed would jump between them, his enormous antlers spreading and legs quivering.

As we sat on the deck drinking gin and tonics, the herd ghosted past, silhouetted by the orange sun setting over the gentle waters of the bay. Brendan looked up from snuffling around in our garden hedge, sidling closer to them expectantly – but as one, they spooked and bounded away further down the beach. Jed was the last to leap away, trembling and casting a long-antlered shadow over Brendan, protecting the herd.

‘Nice rack, Jed,’ quacked my father, throwing his beer bottle at the disappearing deer. Mum slapped his arm, but she still smiled.

The next day, my sister emerged from her cocoon. It wasn’t as dramatic as we’d anticipated after the long, six-year wait. All of a sudden there was a strong, old book smell and she strode into the lounge room on wobbly new legs. After a few hugs and awkward congratulations, she was off. You see, she’d come out a lawyer, smart pinstripe blazer and briefcase included. Already she longed to haunt the marbled corridors of the court, forgetting about the tattered silk that littered her childhood room.

Dad flew out of the sunset, exhausted from another hard week at work. Friday nights meant he could drink whiskey while Mum fell asleep watching a British murder mystery. Hopefully he’d be able to take the boat out tomorrow morning, but only if the damned grass didn’t need mowing. Slowing his swoop, he took in the ragged fringes of grass lining the fences and the persistent yellow weeds. He saw the welcoming light of his kitchen and the familiar shape of his wife moving around inside. He saw his son with sticks taped to his face on the lawn. He saw me, with an even larger and more impressive array of fake antlers, and we were jousting with them to see who would win the right to lead the herd.
On Jocelyn’s tenth birthday, Mr Nolan hung his wife’s pink dressing gown on the washing line next door. Jocelyn was waiting at the window for her friends to arrive while her mother pierced oranges with lollipop sticks so they looked like strange, festive hedgehogs. A patch of mist on the window expanded and contracted as she breathed in and out.

Now Mr Nolan was playing tug-o-war with his dog, Cleo, a small, yapping creature with bad breath and tatty fur. The sash from the dressing gown had snaked out of the belt holes and into the dirt where Cleo had been snuffling about. Both of them gritted their teeth as they pulled, lips curling upwards. Mr Nolan grunted; Cleo growled. With a final sharp tug, Mr Nolan won, fibres tearing on the dog’s teeth. He finished pegging up the dressing gown, threading the saliva-drenched belt back into place. Jocelyn was still watching from the window as the doorbell rang.

Jocelyn’s mother was ‘too damn tired to cook’ after the party so the family had birthday cake for dinner. Jocelyn was still wearing her red velvet party dress, and sat with her legs dangling through the rails of the front balcony. She picked off the flower-shaped pattern made by Smarties on the icing, admiring the colourful indentations they left. Mr Nolan walked outside with Cleo under his arm, placing her on the grass just in front of Jocelyn’s house. Cleo squatted as Mr Nolan looked up at the balcony.

‘Oh, it’s you, kid,’ he said. ‘What’s your name again?’

‘Jocelyn,’ she replied.

‘Did you hear about Ol’ Blue Eyes, Jocelyn?’

Jocelyn shook her head.

‘You know, Frank Sinatra? “Come Fly With Me?” “Strangers in the Night?”’

Jocelyn shook her head again. ‘I can ask my mum if she knows who he is?’

Mr Nolan took a step closer to Jocelyn’s fence, slipping a little on the grass.

‘Nah, don’t worry about it. Anyway, he’s dead. Died of a heart attack. I’ll tell you what; the world lost a great man today. Music’s not what it fucking used to be, you know that?’

Jocelyn shrugged and looked at her feet. Her palms began to sweat.

Cleo had finished and was wiping her paws on the grass. Something on the communal strip in front of the house caught Mr Nolan’s attention and he walked towards it, squatting on the ground to get a closer look before picking it up between two fingers.
'You know what this is, kid?' he said, waving something at Jocelyn.
Jocelyn squinted. 'I dunno.'
'It's a condom. Some dirty bastards have been screwing on my front lawn! Y'know what a condom is?'
Jocelyn blushed a little. It was something she wasn't supposed to know about; only adults were allowed to talk about it when they thought the kids weren't listening. It definitely wasn't something she should be talking about with Mr Nolan.
'I have to go inside now,' she said, pulling her legs up from over the balcony.
Mr Nolan picked Cleo up and winked at Jocelyn. 'You come say hello some time, you hear?'
She nodded and carried her plate of discarded birthday cake into the kitchen.

Inside it was cool and dark and little sequin stars from the party had arranged themselves into constellations on the tiles. The television was playing a news program and Jocelyn could hear her father typing on his computer in the next room. Her mother sat in the living room with her feet on the coffee table, fanning herself absentmindedly with a magazine. Jocelyn went and sat on the floor next to the lounge, closing her eyes and resting her head against her mother's leg. Her hair felt stretched and tight from being in plaits all day.

'What's Mr Nolan's wife like?' Jocelyn asked.
'Mr Nolan? The guy that lives next door?'
Jocelyn nodded.
'Why do you want to know about his wife?'
'He talked to me outside before when he let his dog out. He's weird.'
'He's not weird, honey, he's just an old man walking his dog.' Jocelyn's mother turned the page of the magazine and looked at it briefly before continuing to fan herself.
'His dog's ugly. What's his wife like?'
Her mother sighed a long, heavy sigh.
'I can't really remember much about her. She was younger than he is. I used to see him walking her to the bus stop, even though it was just on the other side of the road. I'm sure I saw her last week. Might've been the week before.' She yawned. 'Anyway, why have you taken such an interest in Mr Nolan all of a sudden?'
Jocelyn shrugged. 'I'm just interested. I'm kind of investigating him.'
Her mother frisbeed the magazine onto the coffee table and closed her eyes. 'Well, I don't know what you think you're going to find out, but you make sure you stay out of his way, alright? Don't go asking anyone but me or your father any questions. It isn't fair to pry into someone's private life.'
Jocelyn nodded. 'I know that. Besides, I don't want to ruin my investigation.' She got up from the floor and turned to go back to the kitchen.
'Hey Mum?'
Her mother murmured acknowledgement.

‘Do you know someone called old-blue-eyes?’

‘Yeah, Frank Sinatra. He’s a singer.’

‘Well, he died today. I just thought you might like to know that.’ Jocelyn went to the kitchen and peered through the window at the pink dressing gown that was still visible on the washing line.

It rained the next morning. Everything looked green and fresh, and steam rose from the road in wisps like small ghosts. Her father grumbled quietly, pretending he was upset that he wouldn’t be able to mow the wet grass, but he soon forgot to pretend and went to his study to play computer games. Her mother had a migraine so everyone had to be very quiet. Jocelyn played inside with her birthday presents until Mum yelled at her from up the hallway to go and play quietly somewhere, and the only place Jocelyn thought it would be alright to play not-so-quietly was outside. When she crept past her parents’ bedroom door, Jocelyn saw her mother lying in bed with an arm covering her face, groaning to herself. A television soap played softly in the background.

Outside, the cat that lived across the road was sitting in the storm water drain. It hissed when she walked past. Rain was still falling softly and she caught a raindrop on her tongue and wondered how she could coax the cat out. She glanced around for inspiration, and saw Mr Nolan’s house sitting quietly, its front door hidden in gloom. Mr Nolan’s house was much more interesting than a stupid cat.

She walked nonchalantly past the house, trying to see into its dark windows, but the curtains were closed. When she reached the end of the street, she turned around and walked back, slowing down again as she passed it. There were no lights on inside although most of
the other houses in the street were cheerfully lit up in the rain. Jocelyn shivered and walked back to her own house, sitting on the wet moss that covered the stairs; later she would notice it had stained the seat of her jeans green. Cars moved slowly past her house, or else came too quickly around the corner so their tyres skidded. Mr Nolan's house sat silent and still, like it was watching her too.

When Jocelyn's nose began to water, she opened the side gate and made her way to the back door, where she sat down to tug her almost-too-small gumboots off. Water had somehow seeped through the rubber soles and the elastic in her damp socks left lined patterns on her feet.

She was rubbing the swollen skin on her heels when she smelled smoke. It wasn't a smell like when bread got stuck in the toaster or even of wood on a campfire but the thick, black smoke of things burning that shouldn't be. A growing pillar of the smoke was drifting up from Mr Nolan's backyard. Walking barefoot to the fence, Jocelyn stood on her toes to peer over. Mr Nolan was pulling women's clothes out of a large plastic bag – an old lacy petticoat, a blouse with pearl buttons – and feeding them to the hungry flames. The smoke made her eyes water and her chest feel tight. From inside Mr Nolan's house, Jocelyn could hear a man with an old fashioned, deep voice singing on a record. The pink dressing gown still hung forlornly on the washing line, its belt trailing in the mud. Mr Nolan reached for it, then stopped and turned away from the fire. His eyes were red and shining. Jocelyn ducked down, feeling strange all of a sudden. The fence was rough against her back and her chest felt even tighter. She tiptoed back inside.

That night, while she looked at a part of the wall the moon had framed with light, she wondered what it would be like inside Mr Nolan's house, still lived in yet so empty.
I sit here in the shade of my kitchen and a breeze comes through the window buoyant with news of season’s change. It’s not my favourite time of year. The flowering gums have finished showing off, taking their cue from the retreating flannel flowers below, and even the everlasting daisies don’t seem to last as long.

I sip my tea: lemon verbena fresh from the garden. Seems the only things still flowering are the oleanders dividing my front lawn from next door’s. I hate them but the neighbours refuse to pull them out and I am not brave enough to protest. I had no idea what they were called when I was young, those evergreen flowery bushes that seemed to be everywhere. The one planted by the footpath in the cul-de-sac when I was young had white flowers that always looked dirty. I remember having Sister Thecla as a teacher, so I must have been around nine. I smile when my daughter reminds me it was only in the dark ages that nuns were teachers.

We lived in one of those old houses with fireplaces and chandeliers, but an outside toilet.

‘Oh, you live in the chenille house,’ Cherie said to me early on. We were riding bikes, circling the dead-end.

‘Mum says it’s weird to see a bedspread hanging in the windows.’

I had never thought about those red, thread-bare curtains until then. Standing outside that night, I could see what Cherie and her mother saw. Once vivid and lively, the curtains’ stripes of tufted cotton were now war-weary, ashamed. They hung, desperate to remain useful, permanently closed.

‘Must be cold in there without the sun coming in,’ Cherie had said.

It was a Saturday when it happened. I heard them on the doorstep, Dad telling Cherie we were busy and I couldn’t go outside. I wonder if I felt disappointed or angry. I wouldn’t have dared let it show. That day Cherie was distracted on her way home. A little dog, new to the street, had its leg cocked under the oleander bush. There were lots of different versions of what happened next, but this I know: the dog’s owner came out, a friendly, smiley man, and somehow coaxed Cherie inside. ‘Help me feed the dog,’ he said.

It was hours later when Cherie’s family turned up, hysterical, on our doorstep.
We can’t find her, she isn’t home, she hasn’t been home in hours, she said she was going to the chenille house, why isn’t she here, surely somebody has seen her, where the hell is she? We didn’t have a telephone. Someone else called the police. They door-knocked the cul-de-sac and ended up breaking into the dog owner’s house when they heard something. Cherie was in the shower, water still running, blood and glass bottles everywhere. The man was caught trying to flee, but only when he was hit by a car.

It’s difficult remembering the time afterwards because it felt like time was spongy. Cherie was in hospital for a long time. I do remember the day she came home from hospital, though. Our dead-end street was crowded: her family, friends, teachers, people from the newspaper and television, all with flowers, food and, in the case of the media, cameras. I watched this scene with envy.

Mum took me to see Cherie a few days later with jacks and a box of Derwent Aquarelle watercolour pencils. Such strange things, in retrospect. I walked beside Mum into Cherie’s lounge room, which had a mirror that covered one entire wall. And there, before the mirror, I remember myself convulsing, screaming on the floor, ‘Why should she get these? She’s got heaps already! I’ve always wanted them and all I get is stupid Trixie Belden books!’ Screaming. The pencils flew at her, tin case clanging on the wooden floor. Screaming, ‘It’s not fair, it’s not fair!’ Screaming, I saw my hair being dragged home. Back behind those ugly red curtains.

I had to apologise. Again in her lounge room, this time awkward and sullen. ‘So what happened to you?’

‘It was a ladybug,’ Cherie said. ‘I saw an orange one on the leaf and didn’t want the dog to scare it away.’

We never spoke again.

It’s hard to remember what I was like at that age. I think of my daughter at nine, every emotion alive on her face. As it absolutely should be, I have learned.

It feels like the chenille, really. I look back on myself, raging at home and school until I couldn’t anymore. I can articulate now what happened. To both Cherie and I, just on different sides of the curtain. I can give voice to it, hear it in my head. I have been told, ‘It makes sense, you were young.’ Oh yes, I was young. But it will never feel like sense.

We moved many times after the cul-de-sac. It isn’t very often lately that I have thought about it. Over the years councils worked out that oleanders are actually one of the most poisonous trees and really shouldn’t be planted haphazardly in suburbia. I wonder if my neighbours know this. I do much prefer the jacarandas and bottlebrushes.

So much has happened since then. Thankfully. I often wonder what became of Cherie, and I still fantasise about meeting her again. Perhaps we would be initially reserved, unsure if we know each other. Cherie would recognise me first and be curiously gentle. She would invite me over. I imagine I would take some food and books and homemade lemon verbena tea.
She would welcome me, happy and strong, proud of her family and what she has achieved. We would sit and chat, companionably reminding one another of the hours we spent bike-riding in the street, looping the end in a figure eight. I would leave her home relieved, and with her assurances that we would catch up again. She would return the visit and, yes, I can picture her sitting here with me now, in the forgiving light of the kitchen.
Richard Nixon tells Mumma he has missed the part where this is his problem. He holds a pellet gun to Hazel's face and puts pellets through her eyes and snout. Hazel yelps and runs to the back of the yard. Richard Nixon shoots again at Hazel and misses, he yells at Mumma that she even looks at Trevor Fuckface sideways and Richard Nixon hears about it, he'll be putting pellets through her own damn face. Mumma just cries. Richard Nixon is driving away and waving his pellet gun in the air. Hazel bleeds and screams in the corner of the yard. Mumma goes inside and comes back out with a tea towel and a rubber mallet and walks towards Hazel. Hazel digs her face into the corner of the fence and screams. Mumma cries and reaches to hold Hazel still. Mumma says to me to stay away and go inside, but I don't want to because Hazel is my dog. I walk back toward the house then stop and turn around. Mumma turns to me and yells to get inside but I don't move. Mumma's face is flushed from tears and she says baby baby get inside. Hazel screams. I run towards Hazel and scream. Hazel bleeds and pushes the side of her body against the fence and rubs her face in the dirt. When I get close Mumma grabs me and throws me to the ground, she yells stupid bitch and turns to grab Hazel. Mumma says you want to see this do you and wraps the tea towel around Hazel's bleeding face. Mumma looks at God and swings the mallet down, I bury my body and face into the bottom of the fence and scream into the dirt.
the picker led
his cracked cart over to a sunny patch
with grimy fingers he peeled back petals and
rubbed off pollen

which floated
horizontal lit up by midday light – chaff sparks
photosynthesis, whispers mountain fresh exhausts
he picked between

plant grids
delicate green contraptions, scaled arm hairs, he
bent over to snap the stems and fluids caked on
his hands

grass murmurs
on foothills sunlight died on his back now – sunlight
blows from glass bulbs across the bar submerging
faces, windows,

supporting beams
while he watches colours and fuzz on a screen held out
by a metal arm – women dance lit up by neon light eyesight
on his green hands
At sunset we stand in Piazza San Marco and stare up at St Mark’s Basilica. We’re too late to enter; the gates are barred although it’s only been closed six minutes.

‘Oh well,’ Natalie says, clutching her camera and shrugging; we half expected we’d fail to sneak in right at closing. ‘At least there’s enough light left for a decent picture.’

She paces backwards, trying to fit as much as possible into the photo, and pigeons scatter across the pavement at her feet. Unlike the pigeons at home, these birds are plump and glossy and deformity-free; I wonder fleetingly who takes such good care of them.

There’s a souvenir wagon selling cheap clothing stamped with Italia and I Love Venice a few metres behind me. The iron streetlamps form puddles of light across the pavement. The wide, open space of the Piazza is a shock after an afternoon spent in the damp city maze. Venice falls quiet as the grand old buildings lining the Piazza surrender to night. Last is the Basilica, the Church of Gold, its many gilded domes and rooftop mosaics slipping into shadow.

Natalie’s halfway down the Piazza, outside the Procuratie Nuove, a giant palace connected to the Biblioteca Marciana, which our guide told us Napoleon lived in after he conquered Venice. Like everywhere in this city, the walls are weathered stone, though the windows facing the Piazza are larger, grander, than those of the buildings in surrounding lanes. One of the most famous cafés in the world is tucked behind the Procuratie’s ground floor column-lined walkway. Coming from Australia, with our comparatively young cities, it seems fantastical that Goethe, Casanova, Proust and Dickens have all ordered espresso just a few paces away from where I’m standing.

‘We forgot to see the Doge’s Palace too,’ Natalie tells me when I reach her. She motions between Caffé Florian and her camera; we squeeze together and she holds the lens as far from our faces as she can.

‘Four hours is nowhere near enough time to see everything,’ she says with a sigh after the camera flashes. ‘It’s getting too dark to even get a decent shot now.’

She examines the digital screen and winces. Our faces are illuminated brilliant white by the flash, but the famous backdrop is lost in darkness.

‘We found the Rialto,’ I remind her. ‘And, we didn’t get lost.’

I don’t regret that we spent our time wandering the jumble of narrow, cobbled streets cross-hatched by miniature stone-carved bridges and cloudy-blue canals. If anything, seeing the ‘real’ Venice instead of simply visiting the usual tourist haunts has made me even
more determined to return one day and see the rest.

'At least we got some unique photos, I suppose,' Natalie says, eyeing the gathering pigeons. 'Do you know, Leon told me they put something in the bird seed they sell to tourists that constipates those poor things, so they don’t shit everywhere?'

As we wait for our guide beneath the archways of the Palazzo, I watch an elderly woman trying to sell roses to couples walking towards the Grand Canal.

'Per il tuo amante,' the old woman insists. 'For your lover.'

But they all shake their heads, already looking past her to the technicolour night markets sprawled along the waterfront.

Natalie looks bored. She’s flicking through the pictures she’s already taken on her camera, lips pursed, reliving the entire day. Foto turista, as our guide would say with a roll of her eyes.

'What time do you think it is at home?' Natalie asks softly, and I know she wants to call him.

'You know Leon: any time is a good time. I’ll be back in a moment,' I tell her, standing up. 'Don’t let them leave without me.'

I make my way across the Piazetta, the small part of the Piazza that spreads between the ornate Palazzo Ducale and the imposing Biblioteca Marciana, in front of the Grand Canal. The last remaining pigeons are huddled together against the chill beside one of the pillars of Venice’s patrons. Lights dance across the canal from the distant islands and somewhere far away a bell tolls. It is almost winter, and I imagine morning mist rolling across the water.

'I have never seen Venezia so cold,' a middle-aged Venetian had told me in fluent but thickly-accented English as I bought a heart-shaped glass pendant in her bottega. 'Perhaps,' she added with hope as she handed me my change, 'it will snow.'

I turn, drinking in the Piazza before it all falls into complete darkness. A camera flash illuminates the crimson banners outside the Biblioteca, the modern gallery advertisement stark against the elegant carved stone columns. In still life Piazza San Marco will lack context, become Just Another Pretty Place I Visited in some tourist’s travel slideshow, without any trace of the historical footsteps I can almost hear echoing around me. The banner flapping in the evening breeze will always be frozen, an action half-performed, all movement forgotten. The culture, the history, the vitality of the Piazza will be lost in each retelling – but secretly I don’t mind because this magic will remain vivid in my memory.

Below, on the boardwalk, local men in hand-knitted beanies and quilted jackets are beginning to unfold flood ramps, a precaution against early morning tides. The air is static and clouds cluster overhead. I may be seeing things, but out in the distance a small white flake seems to flutter towards the murky dusk-stained water. I imagine the pavement of the Piazza blanketed with snow, and wonder what will happen to the pigeons.
I'll wait here. Wait till I dies if I has to.

James hunkered down between the exposed roots of the old tree, curling up with the leaf litter wind-swirlled into its base, the top leaves crisp like a clean sheet covering a mattress of warm decomposing leaves below. From beneath, the tree looked like a great hand rising from the earth, a cupped hand with its fingers curled towards the ground, James sheltering in its palm, waiting for someone who would never come.

From the tree, James could see his father's farm in the canyon below. A ridge of scrub and trees sheltered the buildings from the westerlies that ravaged the valley floor like frenzied horses, climbing the sheer wall at the canyon's head. James's tree stood on that ridge with patient understanding, turning its back on the wind's tenacity and making concessions by curving its trunk until its branches caressed the ground. From the valley, the tree looked less like a hand and more like a woman, bent over, sifting through the grass to gather up her precious leaves, wrenched from her arms like dead children.

Pappy had brought them to that valley six years earlier when James was only four, with promises of their own land and a better life; they were thrown against the bastions of cochineal stone and coarse shrub until finally retreating under that recess in the mountainous valley shoulder. Pappy had built the farmhouse singlehandedly: three bare rooms and an outhouse. Momma had dreamed of making it a home, but she was always working the land or with child. The rust-torrid earth resisted crops but Pappy had supported the family by farming sugar beets, which he sold in Manitou. The sky seemed nearer.

Ain' never goin' back.

James didn't know what had frightened him most: another stranger coming to take what little they had left, or what Pappy would have done to him if he hadn't stopped it this time. He'd stopped it.

'He don't know no better,' Momma used to say about Pappy. 'All he knows is beatin'.' Her voice still echoed in the tiny spaces between the hairs on his skin, and he could still make up the intricacies of her face in his head: the places where her bones went in and out, where her cheeks curved and where her fragile neck tapered. Momma had read to him from the same book every night, the only book she owned: Poe's Tamerlane. She'd read him to sleep, then put her eyes so close to his that she could flick his eyelashes with hers.

I see your eyes, Momma, green like the river reeds, an' still hear you readin' me sleepy: 'Nor would I dare attempt to trace, the breathing beauty of a face.'
Momma had been teaching James how to read and write from the book. That page was as far as they had gotten, and James couldn’t remember the next line. He chastised himself for not listening more closely.

Memory ... somethin’ bout memory ...

When Pappy was out of sight, James couldn’t make up his face in his head – even though he saw it every day – couldn’t think where the bones stuck out and where they didn’t, couldn’t even remember if he had a beard some days.

‘Just you an’ me now,’ Pappy had said. ‘Gotta make sure nothin’ like that ever happens again. You betta be a man next time.’

James reached into his pocket and pulled out a photograph. Memories crawled from the celluloid into his head. From the tree, he could just make out the town at the far end of the canyon where the photograph had been taken.

_Took us all day to get to Manitou and back. Momma sold her brooch, just for this picture. Pappy was real mad, ‘Waste a time an’ money,’ he said, and we was more scared of him than that picture box machine. Ain’t none of us smilin’ but Momma loved it jus’ the same. She’d pretend we lived in the nice house in the picture, standing there barefoot in our Sunday best, Momma, Pappy, Rosa, Alice, Bertha an’ me. Ain’t real though: jus’ some canvas paintin’ the man made us stand in front of. Ain’t no paint’d walls in the farmhouse, no flowers roun’ the doors, no fire in the sittin’ room._

The photograph blurred in James’s eyes, his cheeks swelled and his pale eyebrows pinked with memories: his Momma’s eyes wet and bloated in their sockets, her hands and feet tied, huddled in the corner of the sitting room. Her mouth wide, spitting and screaming words that James could neither hear nor remember now. Bertha, his baby sister, lying still and pressed into the wooden floorboards, blood running from her ears and mouth. He could still see the grubby hands of the man holding Alice by the hair, her face red and distended, fighting to break free. In his other hand, he held Rosa, had her pinned down over the table. He couldn’t make up the man’s face in his head, even though he saw it every night in his sleep. He couldn’t hear any sounds; those sounds that were absent by day woke him at night, but by the time he opened his eyes they were gone again.

James jostled into the dead leaves, as if to bury himself in them. He held tight to the photograph; it was all that remained, except Pappy. No other strangers had come to the farm. Not until that morning.

Pappy had been tending the vegetable plots at the front of the farmhouse since sun up. He was caught unawares when the stranger came. He lifted off his hat, holding it up to shade his eyes from the sun, and studied the face of the approaching man. He fixed his hat securely back on his head, thrust his shovel in the red earth, and stood territorially behind it as the man drew near. He looked back at the house. His gun was inside.

James froze on the porch and as his Pappy looked back at him, he heard his words as if they had been spoken out loud, coiling in his mind like a prairie rattlesnake.
You betta be a man next time.

James ran into the house and dragged a chair across the sitting room to the wall where his Pappy's shotgun was balanced on two nails. He lifted the gun down, stumbling with its weight, and then sat down on the chair. Resting the gun across his knees, he broke it open and saw the brass of the loaded shells.

The stranger was too busy talking to Pappy to notice James standing in the darkened doorway.

Betta be a man this time.

The gun was so heavy James could barely lift it, but he aimed above the stranger's head, thinking one shot would be enough to scare the man away. The gun's weight pulled down on his trembling muscles as he pulled the trigger. He blew the man's face clean off.

James dug the grave in the yard while his Pappy looked on. 'Why'd he come?' asked James. 'Food,' Pappy replied. 'Water.'

He finished digging the grave, but wouldn't help Pappy with the body and ran from his father when he tried to make him.

His bones were stiff from being curled up at the base of the tree for so long. Wiping his eyes, he clambered to his feet and ran his fingers over the bark of the tree. The day his mother died, he'd carved her reading into the trunk:

Nor would I dare attempt to trace
The breathing beauty of a face

James ran his hand farther down the trunk. Underneath his clumsy scratchings, a new hand, a skilled hand, had carved the words he couldn't remember:

Which even to my impassion'd mind
Leaves not its memory behind

'Pashioned,' James struggled to read the words, but then remembered his mother's voice. 'Impassioned,' he said again.

Someone knows Momma's readin'. Could be they'll teach me the rest. Could be they knew Momma. Could be their eyes is green like the river reeds. Could be they'll have a face I can make up in my head when they're outta sight; see where their bones stick out and where they don't. Gotta wait for 'em to come back. Wait till I dies if I has to.

Back at the farm, Frank rolled the faceless corpse into the grave and sat down on the pile of jug earth. The stranger's knapsack was lying by the graveside and he reached across for it.
There wasn't much inside, an empty canteen, matches and a book. He couldn't read the words on the cover. He'd always left reading to Momma. But he knew the shapes the letters made, knew them by heart: *Poe's Tamerlane*. Frank dropped the rucksack in the earth and, clutching the book to his chest, walked slowly back into the house. He laid the book on a table by the bed, next to a matching copy, worn and gathering dust.
the story i would have told, had
i met you yesterday

gilly grundy

Had we met at the station yesterday, Emmanuel, I would have asked you to dinner. Had we passed your muraled walls, my questions would have reared with dreams signed ‘I want’ on the dotted line: I want, I want, I, I.

I swallow it whole, my stomach churns a sad growl: a small want, a small growl.

Had we walked arm-in-arm like a moving blockade on the pavement, the zeal in your eyes would have pressed new questions on me. I would have told you things are different here as I step over the bagman asleep on the concrete. You would have shot me a smile for my bright coin on his upturned cap. Down-payment for my quiet night’s sleep.

I swallow it whole, my stomach churns a sad growl: a small coin, a small growl.

Had we marched the backstreets from the station where the household linen airs like protest banners, I would have told you things are different here as I mark my vote on the ballot paper: a gesture of hands bound behind my back.

I swallow it whole, my stomach churns a sad growl: a small vote, a small growl.

Had you sat at my table, I would have told you I eat well, but I don’t speak while my mouth is full: fish eggs and lobster tails in my townhouse kitchen steamed with the daily grind.

I swallow it whole, my stomach churns a sad growl: a small grind, a small growl.

Had I met you yesterday, Emmanuel, I would have asked if I keep company with your dreams, if our lives are just geography’s joke. Had our faces met on the surface of the ocean that divides us, had we stared between the ripples and the wrinkles, I wonder – would I have seen me in your eyes? Would you have seen you in mine? Would I have caught a glint of your life, knowing that today at high noon ...

Would you have caught a hint of mine – knowing I let the small things slide?
Seven thousand dead in a place whose name I couldn’t pronounce.

I shook a tube of sugar, tore it open and poured the grains into my coffee. A small mound formed on the foam, then disappeared as I stirred. I took a gulp and placed the cup down on the paper.

‘Did you wanna get another coffee?’ joked a passing waitress. ‘Make it a round dozen?’

‘Nah thanks, I’m fine.’ I smiled. ‘Think I’m awake enough now.’

‘Yeah, you looked pretty dead when you came in,’ she laughed, nodding to my fork-scraped plate. ‘Jees, polished that off pretty quick, didn’t you?’

As we spoke, a young couple took a seat in the corner of the courtyard, the woman facing me. Her companion was speaking too loudly, his accent an oily slick over his words. The blather worked itself under everyone else’s conversations, filled up the gaps. At first the customers shared looks within their own circles, surprised or irritated, then with strangers at other tables.

‘I’d better...’ the waitress apologised, nodding in the couple’s direction.

‘Yeah, go ahead.’

She sucked in a breath, then headed to the table with her notepad in both hands.

‘Hello, how are you today? Are you good?’ the waitress asked. I couldn’t hear the man’s response. ‘Yeah? Oh, that’s good! What can I get for you? Yep ... yep ... sorry, what was that one again? Yep ... sure ... yep,’ the waitress went on, her ponytail bobbing in enthusiasm. ‘Alright, I’ll be out with that as soon as possible, okay? Okay.’ She closed her notepad and went inside, giving me a wink as she passed.

I watched a pair of sparrows skitter around at the couple’s feet, stopping to prise crumbs from cracks in the cement. One examined its reflection in the metal leg of a chair with agitation, then attacked. Above them, the man wandered back into the story he had been shouting about before. Those nearest him turned around and laid their eyes down on his black hair and brown neck, perhaps hoping he would turn around so they could show their displeasure. When he didn’t they returned to their friends and their food, shaking their heads.

I let a mouthful of coffee rinse over my tongue, studying the woman, whose eyes never left her companion. She had the same skin and hair as the man, although she was much...
fainter. She worried the back of her neck with her hands and pursed her lips. Under the table her foot began to slap the ground and she kept opening her mouth as if to interrupt him. I wondered what he was so excited about, what was making her so uncomfortable. I immersed myself in his speech and soon it soaked into my skin. Just as the feet, waist, chest, and finally the head become accustomed to the cold water of a pool when you get in, so I began to understand the unfamiliar eddies of his speech.

'... ate well,' I caught. '... food never lasted ... with him at the table ...'
The woman began to speak but the man kept on.

'... his murals were hungry ...'
She opened her mouth again, then shut it tight.

'... that night, his twenty-third birthday ...'
She pressed her mouth with her knuckles, as though she would bite them.

'... his eyes ... drooping ... heavy ...'
His anecdotes were drowning her.

'... he was so much like me ... ay, Emmanuel—'
His shoulders began to shudder. He could have been crying or he could have been laughing; I’m not sure. Nobody but the woman was staring now.

A sparrow flitted onto their table and hopped over to the glass that held the tubes of sugar. It pulled one out like a worm from the earth and pinned it to the table with a foot, stabbing and biting it.

I remained at the café long after the couple had eaten their meals and left. Eventually I looked down at my paper. Encircled in a dried-up coffee wreath was the article I had passed over earlier: seven thousand dead in a place whose name I couldn’t pronounce.
What I would have told you
(had I met you yesterday)
was something I traced, wading in the noontide
of light, the hard glow of cement & pollution,
my palm pulled behind me along the bricks,
fingers spread, the net behind a boat.

You squashed it with your wide-bristle brush,
curdled it onto blank brick faces:
  keening blues
  that you imbued
  with desperation,
  a nation of dreams
  cast like a line out to us all.

I imagine the dry whitening
of your elbwoskin,
your kneecaps like the heads of bald men,
sweat briny on your collarbones
& shining like fishing line.

Your sullen appetite bloomed maroon
with your feet bare
on the rust-scabbed stepladder.
You hauled the mural out of yourself.
It swelled, heavy in your hands.
Now, a fishhook curves its tooth into my palm.
I wonder
how many others you have caught, but
it is your own story
tossed across the wall like a net
that I return to you:
I don’t even think you realised
it was there.
The preceding three pieces were written in response to the poem 'The Story I Would Have Told You Had I Met You Yesterday' by Filipino poet Lina-Sagaral Reyes (Handurawan: Antolohiya ng mga Tulang Tumanggap ng CCP Literature Grants 1988-1989, Manila, 1990). They were part of Dr Merlinda Bobis's seminar paper, "'The Story I Would Have Told You': Reading/Writing With and Against the Grain", presented in Zaragoza, Spain [2009].

Emmanuel Gutierrez (1963-1986) was a Filipino student activist, painter, community organiser and city partisan. He was killed by government soldiers together with three friends on 24 September 1986 at high noon. He was twenty-three.
I was younger. The evening river
rolled with corpses and candles;
dark as liver

and fished by the long, bangled
wrists of women. There were no stars,
only the paper-framed spangle

of lanterns. The class
was Vinyasa; hidden in a hairball
of thin black alleys, along pissed-on paths,
past tall
rows of sequined saris,
bottles of oil –
gold poison. Remember the pashwari
scent of sweet naan.
Then a final alley, a broken step, the yogi,

waiting. He rested a calm
hand on his pie-coloured belly,
made a soft demand

that I should lay against the incense-smelly
wood. I was alone. He’d said
(with a bobble) that I was really

inflexible, that there was a nest of dead
nerves in my lower back, like leaves,
and so instead
of being in a group I would heave
into camel, into cat,
I would crush my teeth
against the wide, flat
pain, unwitnessed. After,
I would listen to the blind tap
of a child upstairs, the invidious laughter
of women. ‘You need more help.’
Up in the rafters,

the swinging scalps
of monkeys. ‘Perhaps a massage?’
A thin belt
of light beneath the door.
I closed my eyes
as his hands toured
the thick, shy
shore of my back. For a bit.
Then slipped between my thighs
to the twin peals of lemon bone
between my cunt and anus and it hurt
and I groaned.

His fingers fell.
‘Your problem, is you’re too fat.’
Go to hell.

Not that.
Just too young.
Too naïve to snap back

Or know better.
I walked home by the river
still carrying the shadows of his fingers.
In the blue, pre-dawn light the hills of the Gobi rose from the rocky dust like the great muscled backs of animals. Clouds grew and lifted from the valleys, thick as steam from sleeping bodies. It seemed to Nergui as he stood in the shivering dry that the absence of the sun was not natural; as though the mythical Erkei-Mergen had sent another cursed arrow from the faceless dark of prehistory. The young man imagined the wounded sun tumbling from the sky with the same graceless cartwheel as the snow leopard sniped from the grey cliff.

The sun in his shallow trench beyond the horizon spilled heavy scarlet clouds over the south-eastern border, and Nergui turned back to the truck. In the steely light his father Chuulun appeared smaller and more fragile, as if he lived on nothing but steppe grass and thistles with his burr-ridden sheep. His thick woollen deel was the same tired blue as the fraying prayer flags strung above the cab, but his yellow silk sash still boldly reflected the ominous dawn light.

‘Nergui.’ Even his voice sounded thin, as if the plain’s frost had nipped away the warmth. ‘Everything is hidden? Check it again.’

His son obediently ducked under the tarpaulin. Eyes wide against the dusty dark, he felt around blindly for the slightly raised corner of the secret compartment.

‘The boxes haven’t slid,’ he called. ‘It’s fine.’

But the musky smell was rising from that unholy wedge of space beneath his hands, and the sound of the wind against the canvas was the same as fur parting from muscle. Nergui drew back quickly from the stale wood and wiped his hands nervously on his tunic. Emerging from the back of the truck, he was momentarily blinded by the sun lancing violently over the low hills. It had risen while he was checking the cargo. Chuulun was leaning on the cab door, smoking a cigarette with a Russian shapka pulled over his ears. There was a strange melancholy in his broad face, as if he were an outcast in sight of home but unable to go further. The black eyes reflected the hard dawn light with such a haunting vividness that Nergui found himself reaching to console his father. Instead he laid a hand brusquely on Chuulun’s shoulder and forced a smile.

‘This 48,000 yuan is going to save us from an endless winter, Father.’

The old man nodded vaguely.

‘It was a blessing,’ Nergui assured him, climbing into the driver’s seat. ‘I’ll drive us into Alxa League.’
He saw his father glance nervously behind them as he joined him in the cab. The road unravelled before them, directionless and indiscernible from the grey earth. Nergui found himself driving carefully over the pot-holed and boulder-strewn road, the truck's suspension rattling like bones against wood.

'It might save us this winter.' Chuulun's eyes were closed against the harsh eastern light and he sank back into the bouncing passenger's seat. 'But it takes twelve cats to make a coat, Nergui.'

Once out of the hills, the land fell away into exhausted fields and overgrazed pastures balding to bone-white sand. Deep shadows followed the rutted earth in strange tessellations, black as blood filling cracks in stone. Sheep speckled the pastures; though swollen with November wool, their exposed legs were bruised and bony. The animals raised their yellow eyes to the road as the truck clattered past, and though he could see their throats swelling with sound, Nergui could not hear them braying. Alxa League was a place of fatigue, he thought to himself. The sand of the Gobi was reclaiming it slowly, filling the bones of all who lived there and making them heavy, sapping their life-strength.

'Not much left here,' said Chuulun without opening his eyes.

Nergui shivered as he leaned forward in his seat. The empty landscape seemed to resonate with a mournful, pining call. Here, even, irrigated fields became choked with salt, the earth petrified by a ruthless taxidermy. Where natural vegetation had been removed for fruit trees, only bare hills remained, scattered with hollow sticks.

The border check was nothing but a dusty handful of officers strung out across the road in a weary line. Slowing the truck to a rattling stop, Nergui counted the last of his money into the hands of the first disinterested Chinese to sidle over to the window. The uniformed man folded the money and gripping the cab door, lifted himself onto the step level with Chuulun and Nergui. He was a young man with features set hard and belligerent under his green standard-issue cap. Light pulsed along the deadly black of the rifle barrel slung casually across his back.

Nergui's mouth was dry. The fear was unfamiliar to him, unforeseen, undeciphered. He could not comprehend its source; it pursued him from some timeless, nameless place. To Nergui every moment ached back towards the sudden encounter in the gully. The event hounded him, dominated him with its strange magnetism. The soldier's mineral-hard glare transported him to the grey ravine where the snow leopard had appeared, cloud-bright among the scree. He saw the full, glowing fur spark around the nimble body, the great feathered paws, the blue markings on her back like the fingerprints of gods. The cat had paused on the cliffside, her round, pale face in momentary shadow as her eyes followed them, followed Chuulun as he reached for his gun.

'Going to Hohhot?' snapped the officer.

'Yes sir, buying ewes.' Nergui perceived his own voice, distant and hollow as if spoken by a mask, an empty puppet.

The young officer frowned and his leather glove creaked against the metal door frame.

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'Buying ewes? At this time of year?' he growled, peering past the old man at Nergui. 'We lost many to wolves, sir,' Nergui answered truthfully.

Wolves had been hungering down from the hills unusually often for the autumn months, leaving sheep hunched in ravaged mounds between the grass tufts. Nergui had chased them away with flares; the image of their starkly illuminated bodies wheeling away like smoke into the dark visited him sometimes when he lay down to sleep.

The officer nodded dismissively and dropped back onto the tarmac. Bribe paid, the father and son felt no relief, only their fierce dependence on the silk-wrapped bundle travelling with them along the blinding strip of road. By the afternoon they would be in Hohhot and the pelt and bones would be exchanged for the agreed sum and loaded onto the K89 to Beijing.

As he drove, Nergui pictured the train pulling away in a cloud of winking mica dust, streaking across the empty steppe towards the proud and vicious reflections of the city. The pelt would be bought by a balding businessman with soft hands, and he would place it somewhere in his house where it might strike guests as mystical and heroic. Unconsciously, he might position the pelt on a shelf or cleft that gets morning sun. The bones would be scattered across China, tiny dying talismans exchanging hands on the street.

Father and son remained silent as the highway unravelled before them, heated by the sun looming in the southeast. A small group of camels lifted their heads from the saltbush, great chalky manes ruffling in the directionless wind. The long fleece-capped necks swayed eerily above the scrub, pale as spirits. Every wordless black-eyed face was turned towards them, strangely mask-like in the grim light. Suddenly Chuulun leaned forward in his seat.
‘There! There, did you see it?’

There was an explosive crack and the two men were jolted forward in their seats as the truck swerved and limped to a stop. Nergui sat rigid and ashen-faced, his knuckles white on the wheel. After a long moment he opened the cab door.

‘We blew a tyre,’ he said wearily.

Chuulun joined him at the front of the truck.

‘Did you see it?’ he asked without looking at his son. ‘Something ran onto the road.’

The camels had scattered. Their sable faces bobbed mirage-like in the distance.

‘I didn’t see anything.’

‘It was white, a calf or a dog maybe. Ran straight in front of us.’

‘There’s no blood.’ Nergui knelt and peered doubtfully under the truck. ‘No body. You must be seeing things, old man. I’ll get the spare tyre.’

Chuulun shook his head slowly, but said nothing.

Nergui walked reluctantly to the back of the truck and untied the canvas cover. Immediately a bitter wind rose from the north and set the loose corners snapping wildly. Once again he found himself in the haunted, musky hollow, choking in the particle-heavy air. Crouching to unfasten the tyre, the young man’s knees came to rest on the creaking panel of the secret compartment. A terrible weariness descended on him and he let his body sink slowly to the floor until his forehead came to rest on the wood.

For a brief moment Nergui had the sensation of someone gently taking his head in their hands. Now there were only a few empty inches of dead wood between the young man at prayer and the luminous skin. The future opened cavernously before him, gully-black and unavoidable, and, hovering beyond his comprehension, the white shape flickered restlessly. He had seen the figure dart out onto the road, but to him it had seemed to take the shape of a child in a white deel, the traditional peaked hat silhouetted like animal ears against the bright road.
Across an endless field of white, broken by a single blue ribbon of life in an empty wasteland, the car made dull thuds as it bounced over bumps in the road. I shuddered with each bump, mentally preparing myself for what was to come.

I make the same trip twice a month: two hours down the River Amur to the country and then another two hours back. My mother had said she needed space from my father and I doubt he took her literally until she was gone from Khabarovsk. We were already in the middle of nowhere, a Russian city planted beside the Chinese border. But apparently that wasn’t enough for my mother; and she always said what she meant.

The dark waters of the river were ominous against the bright snow. I could almost see Fuyuan on the other side. A tiny Chinese village ten years ago, it was now a growing metropolis. Russians and tourists alike had quickly discovered the discounts across the border and the cash flow had permanently changed the little town. Now it was nearly as commercialised as any capitalist nation, with indoor shopping malls and factory outlets ready and able to outfit any hedonist to his heart's content. Fuyuan was a leech on Khabarovsk’s back, slowly
sucking the life out of my home city. Inevitably, one day there will be nothing left to give.

A larger-than-average bump jolted my elbow off the windowsill and I fought the urge to say ‘Chyort voz’mi’.

I was close to my destination. I didn’t mind my mother’s ‘ranch,’ as she called them, but the cowboy annoyed me. A hotshot import, he always grinned foolishly and gifted me with his newest piece of junk. Peace offerings, my mother called it, but it was useless trash and I found it condescending that he was convinced I could be bought: a typical American attitude.

My father glanced at me from the rearview mirror, his dark eyes cheerful though I could see the hurt that dogged the trip to my mother’s place. Although he would never admit it, she had broken his heart. He had worked night and day to put food on the table in our tiny two-bedroom house and in the end it wasn’t enough for her. She simply left for greener – or in this case whiter – pastures. For that I had never forgiven her.

The brakes screeched slightly as the car skidded to a stop. My father’s eyes were fixed to the road, downcast even. He avoided looking at my destination. I quickly jumped out and said farewell, then waited as he threw the car into reverse and backed up along the snow-covered slope. Looking at this place hurt him too much. I rounded my shoulders and began to make my way along the last bit of the hill to my mother’s house.

‘Welcome back to Fuyuan,’ I thought to myself as I knocked on the door.
I never learned the difference
between the euro and the pound
it seems that currency only buys happiness
in a world full of dollars
and here I am at the finishing line
the checkout
wheeling a trolley full of America
fumbling a pocket full of pesos
he stands, arms folded
and says things like
I could take him
and
you’re so beautiful
with that cheeky you’re-all-mine smile

next thing
it’s a frosty windowed morning
one eye open
I watch the black lines on his back
fold in and out
trace them with a finger
waiting for the ink to ooze
down and stain the sheets like passion
instead he rolls over and says

you still here?
Mrs Heather was a woman who bore a sense of entitlement, one which had been impressed upon her from birth by her mother.

‘As a woman,’ she had instructed her daughter, ‘there are certain things you are entitled to. Attention, foremost, though only if you grow to be pretty.’

Upset at the prospect of growing to be plain, she was comforted by her mother, who assured her that since both she and her husband were handsome, so too she would be, and this advice came true.

Mrs Heather (or Miss Dunn, as she was then known) grew to be striking indeed, her appearance bewitching the young gentlemen of her home town. When the number of invitations from eligible men for the upcoming dance reached a dozen, her mother was overjoyed.

‘You see?’ she crowed. ‘Just as I said!’

As time passed and Miss Dunn came of age to be married, her mother pressed upon her the entitlement of comfort from a rich husband. She worked tirelessly to find a man suitable of the privilege, though each one was met with dissatisfaction by the young lady.

‘Too tall,’ she said of one.

‘Such a bore!’ she claimed of another.

Her mother became weary of her daughter’s behaviour.

‘If you find fault with all of them, you’ll never find a husband. With every man you reject, fewer and fewer rich men remain. Reject too many more, and you’ll have no option but to marry a poorer man, and then your life will be less comfortable than it might have been with a millionaire.’

Finally consenting, Miss Dunn elected that she would accept the proposal of the next man to be interviewed who, though not entirely handsome, seemed kind enough and was certainly rich.

In the first year of their marriage, Miss Dunn (now Mrs Heather) treated her husband with considerable disdain, constantly demanding to be taken out to concerts in new gowns and frequently belittling him in front of friends.

‘How do you find your wife?’ Mr Heather asked one of his friends over cards.

‘Ravenous,’ came the reply, ‘And yours?’
’Tiring,’ Mr Heather stated, letting his shoulders sag.

’Ah,’ the friend gave a wink, ’Fortunate for you!’

’It’s not at all what you think,’ Mr Heather protested. ’She tires me in public, not in our bedchamber. All she wants to do is spend my money and frown upon me at the opera. I’m at my wits’ end!’

’Don’t worry about it,’ the friend said. ’Women like that eventually realise their error and make amends. She’s simply adjusting to her new life. You’ll see.’

The wretched Mr Heather did not see, however, as his wife continued to treat him appallingly, going so far as to blame him when, in the fifth year of their marriage, she lost the hair on her head to a rare disease.

’You must have given it to me!’ she accused him, wrapping scarves around her head to cover her baldness.

’How could I?’ he pleaded. ’I still have my hair!’

’Very good, show off! Rub it in that my hair is gone! What a horrible man you are!’

’Darling, what do you want me to do? The doctors said it can’t be helped.’

’The doctors can go to blazes! So too can you, unless you go to town at once and buy me a wig to wear tonight! I shall not be seen at the opera house without hair!’

So instructed, Mr Heather made his way to town to visit a wigmaker, requesting the finest wig for his wife. The wigmaker, an elderly man wearing a tight apron and half-moon glasses, showed Mr Heather one made of Japanese hair which he had woven together himself.

’Did you truly?’ Mr Heather was fascinated by the procedure.

’Why, certainly,’ the wigmaker said, ’I make all of these wigs myself. Some take weeks, though my customers expect nothing but the best.’

’Where do you get the hair?’

’Various places,’ the wigmaker said. ’Mostly overseas, though sometimes from villages around the town.’

’I don’t often see people going about bald,’ Mr Heather pointed out.

’You wouldn’t,’ the wigmaker said. ’By the time the hair comes to my shop, they’ve sealed the caskets.’

Mr Heather presented the Japanese-hair wig to his wife, who was wary of the colour.

’My hair was blonde before,’ she pointed out. ’What will people think when they see me with black hair?’

’They won’t think a thing,’ he replied. ’Everyone knows you lost your hair. People don’t care.’

’I do!’ she shouted at him, ordering him out of their room so she could dress.
At the opera, her new look was lauded by friends and family, who complimented Mrs Heather on the wig. At first she was upset at the wig being referred to by name, though soon enough she came to embrace the attention lavished upon her and the very next day demanded that a dozen new wigs be bought so that she could promenade a new look at each social occasion.

‘If you want a new wig for every outing, you’ll have every wig in the shop within the season!’ Mr Heather complained.

‘I suppose you’d have me wear the same wig twice?’ Mrs Heather asked, rubbing moisturiser into her scalp. ‘Go at once and buy me a new wig for tonight!’

Mr Heather soon found a confidante in the wigmaker, the two meeting on a regular basis.

‘Would Mrs Heather care for curls this evening?’ he asked one day.

‘She had curls three nights ago,’ Mr Heather said. ‘Tonight she wants something short and straight. Red, if you have it.’

‘I may have just the thing,’ the wigmaker replied, taking a box down from the shelves in the store.

‘I just wish I could do something to her,’ Mr Heather said, picking up a conversation the two men had been having earlier. ‘Something horrible. She’s so horrible to me and I’ve never fought back. I suppose that makes me sound awful.’

‘Not at all,’ the wigmaker said. ‘I’d be more than happy to help, if I could. Your wife sounds positively beastly.’

‘She is,’ Mr Heather replied. ‘Though short of weaving an asp into a wig for her, I don’t see what you could do. But thank you; it’s nice having someone to talk to.’

‘My pleasure,’ the wigmaker said, with a peculiar twinkle in his eye.

At the height of the season, Mrs Heather placed an order for a wig of significance: something radical that nobody had ever seen before. The wigmaker assured Mr Heather that something would be prepared within the fortnight.

‘This is the biggest night in the opera programme,’ Mrs Heather warned her husband. ‘This wigmaker of yours had better pull something together.’

Going to collect the new wig, Mr Heather silently prayed that the wigmaker might have taken his joke literally and sewn a snake into the piece, though it was not so. What the wigmaker delicately lifted from its box turned out to be a very short, curly wig, dyed bright blue.

‘Blue?’ Mr Heather asked.

‘At your wife’s request,’ the wigmaker said, ‘something that has not been seen. I sourced the colour from the firm that made the dress your wife is wearing tonight – a perfect match’.

‘Where did the hair come from?’ Mr Heather asked, turning it over in his hands.

‘Well, in fact, this is men’s hair,’ the wigmaker explained. ‘I had to use men’s hair this time. The wig is one of a kind.’

‘I should say.’ Mr Heather left the shop to bear the wig home to his wife. Watching him
climb into a cab, the wigmaker smiled.

At the opera, Mrs Heather received more compliments than ever before over the striking colour of her hair which, as the wigmaker had predicted, matched her dress perfectly. At intermission, as she was mingling with the crowd, Mr Heather was approached by a gentleman who introduced himself and struck up a conversation.

'Your wife looks particularly stunning this evening,' he complimented.

'Thank you,' Mr Heather said.

'Such an interesting hairpiece. The wigmaker has done some fine work.'

'He has. Do you know him?'

'Quite well. In fact, I contributed to the wig your wife is wearing this evening.'

Mr Heather was taken aback.

'You did?' he asked. 'But you're not bald!'

'Oh no, none of us were left bald,' the stranger assured him. 'The wigmaker left us all with plenty of hair on our heads,' he winked at Mr Heather and walked off.

Mr Heather stood by himself, confused. He looked about the room and made eye contact with a number of men who were suddenly watching him, all of whom gave him sly winks before returning to their respective conversations.

Across the room, Mrs Heather and her friends were startled by a sudden fit of laughter and turned to see Mr Heather clutching at his stomach with tears streaming down his face, laughing so hard he turned red and had to excuse himself from the theatre for the rest of the evening.
confection
arcadia lyons

she perfumes right through me
warm cloves, tangelos, baked passion fruit
bet she wouldn’t even need soap

colour-by-numbers outfit
cherry bomb hair, custard tights
turquoise ballet slippers

chewing on her headphone cord
like it’s white liquorice

skin so bronzed
even her brain must be bronzed

she puts on a jumper and I watch her
as though she were taking it off
His skin was luminescent. Glossy from the sweat of work, fluorescent in a burnt caramel hue. It had the texture of a dark auburn whiskey soaked into a man's white shirt: silken and decadently moist. In every movement it collected the surrounding light, bent it around muscle lines and grooves, curved it against his jawbone. I wanted to press my face against it. Instead I instructed him to finish topping up stock in aisle five.

‘Frank, when you’re done, give the front mat a vacuum as well. It’s looking a bit worse for wear.’

‘Yes, Russ,’ Frank said in his sharp Maori accent. I watched him work for a minute, lifting boxes, his underarms darkening. He was Saturday staff; seventeen, spinning with life. I fantasised about taking him into the loading dock after closing, giving it to him quickly over a shrink-wrapped pallet of stock with enough time to make it home for dinner with Jan.

‘I’m glad I hired Frank,’ I said to his parents when they popped in to see him one Saturday afternoon. His mother towered over a display of mangoes. His father ran a hand over the individually packed fruit and picked one up.

‘He’s a fast learner. A real asset to the team.’

‘They hardly smell,’ his father said after drifting a mango under his nose. He put it back in its plastic groove. ‘I bet they don’t smell like that at the orchards.’

‘They’re different picked straight off the branch,’ I said. ‘I have a mango tree at home. My wife hates it.’ I ran my hand over the neatly displayed fruit. ‘Hates all the fruit bats it attracts at night, all that mad squawking.’

‘Wild mongrels,’ he replied.

‘But Frankie’s doing very well,’ I said, picking up a mango and smelling its worn fragrance. ‘A real natural.’

Weeks passed. I grew restless in the store and at home. After he held my gaze in the men’s toilet one Saturday I asked him to stay back and tidy up. We ended up in the loading dock with our foreheads resting on each other’s, panting, exchanging breath.

I lifted his shirt up and felt his taut stomach. It was warm and my pale hand stood out against his tanned skin. He took off his shirt and threw it around my neck, looping me in. He was skinnier than I imagined. His forehead was glossy, his face exuding heat. I untucked my shirt as he reached for my zip. But as soon as I undid my belt buckle, my head broke into tingles and flooded towards my feet. My face drained cold and splintered down my spine. I put my hands on his bony shoulders and slowly pushed him away. I looked down at my
dangling belt and waited for him to understand. He didn’t say anything as he reached for his work shirt, put it on and left.

I stayed behind, closed up the store and drove home. Before I turned the key to the front door, I heard the shrieking of the fruit bats feasting in the backyard. Inside, Jan was sitting on the lounge with her feet pulled up beside her.

‘Where were you?’ she asked. I switched off the TV, pulled her down on the couch, took off her pyjama top and kissed the milky skin between her breasts, breathing in her night aroma of lilac and lavender.

‘I’ll cut down that mango tree tomorrow,’ I said, looking at the pale spot where her breasts sagged away from each other.
Maggie is such a cunt, I think to myself as I watch her devour the filter of a cigarette beneath her big wet lips. When she pulls it from her mouth there is a moist red ring around the base, and she tries this seductive thing that would work well if she didn’t stick her chin out so far. She looks like a god damn turkey. She lives below me, outside of Tuesdays and Thursdays when her cunt of a brother takes her to visit her father in Pyrmont and they stay there. She stubs her cigarette in the IKEA glass sitting on my balcony, already full of her bent-out, whore-stained filters.

We share twenty square feet of floor and roof and twenty minutes of conversation each Monday. Today she is telling me about someone named Baker who has occasioned to stop by her cubicle and ask her how her day is. She is fixating, and I know because of the way her mouth involuntarily curves into a smile whenever she manages to steer the conversation in his direction. She doesn’t know his last name, she tells me, and I lick the sticky part of a Tally-Ho paper, struggling with the little hairs of tobacco falling from the end.

It’s Wednesday morning. It’s a Wednesday morning and I have to go but I let myself forget as I try to stretch my bones and avoid the smell of my own breath. I look at my phone. It reads 8:13, and I’m suddenly perfectly aware that work starts at 8:30; 8:30am five days a week, same as everyone else who walks the streets in the rain, wearing grey suits like iron men, sprouting umbrellas from their arms and trying to avoid one another’s gaze because it’s too early, too fucking early for this shit and their eyes are fixed forward anyway, too exhausted to move.

I run to work; it’s humiliatingly necessary, and I push my way through a crowd of angry commuters who are just as startled by being touched as they are by the man in the suit running so fast that water and mud have splashed all the way up to the thighs of his $300 pants.

I’m wearing a navy coat that I’m not sure I carry off. It dangles just below the seat of my pants, and I attempt to exude the nonchalant corporate thing that the jacket implies, while trying not to stare at the gap between Kate’s thighs. Maybe it’s just her tights that pull the flesh apart but it still allows me to imagine sliding my hand up underneath her skirt, her crotch warm and soft beneath her underwear. She coughs and scratches her knee. I see dust float away and am immediately disgusted. I focus on a flashing tab on my internet browser and realise I’ve left Tetris going and am now faced with a teetering wall of rainbow bricks. Restart, new game and then lunch. Kate coughs again and I decide to ask her to join me as I leave. If only so I can stare at the freckle on her left breast while I eat.

The cafeteria is busy and I am immediately reminded of the malls of my childhood, so I try to focus on food and banter about food and maybe an allusion to a real date so I can
finally lay this woman out and fuck her until she’s pink and tender. I order a Diet Coke as I am fully aware that women, these types of women, observe and appreciate every attempt at self-maintenance. It reminds them I’m not their father, yelling drunk at the television, skin slowly fusing to an old armchair. I end lunch quickly and imagine what she would look like while I gave her head, her eyes resolutely shut, her moist stomach muscles shuddering. She looks at me briefly, and I know that just for a second, she sees it too.

At 2:37pm I can tell that lunch was unsatisfactory because I’ve spent the last three minutes staring at the colourful face of a vending machine. I’m equally sold on several things and try to find a way to differentiate between them while imagining the seconds of my life ticking over on a digital clock face. I regret choosing the Snickers immediately after the black plastic curl unwinds and lets it fall with a metallic thump into the concave pit at the base of the machine.

Fifteen minutes before home time, I take a bathroom break, and chance upon some tiny black graffiti that reads ‘Faith is walking the first steps, even though the rest of the stairway is in shadow.’ It makes me stop shitting halfway through, if only because it’s true; it’s true and I would still hesitate walking up the staircase because it’s more than likely that, in the end, there’s nothing there anyway. And besides, who in this building has enough integrity left for bathroom philosophy? I’m not even sure they let us carry Sharpies to work with us.

I use Wednesday evenings to go food shopping. Aisle after aisle of sales pitches glare down at me from shelves heavily lit by the fluorescent tubing that runs the length of the roof. Funny that I’ve never looked up before.

I pick the brands my mother picked, the same still, and I don’t trust that they’re good, or cheap, but they’re familiar and that is enough. I worry momentarily if coconut-flavoured milk is the same as coconut milk, and assume that it is because there’s a recipe for a curry I know I can make on the sides of both. Small things like this make me lose myself a little every time. Shouldn’t you know by now? They’re the same thing, it doesn’t matter, this goes here, just like this, everybody knows that. It’s going to kill me. On my way to leave I buy a pack of cigarettes from behind a white faceless cupboard. They’ve taken to hiding them, but there’s no breaking this, not now, not for all the pretty-coloured pictures of grey lungs and tiny red babies in the world. I smoke the first half of the pack in the carpark, and by the time I’ve arrived home I’m down to seven.

The living room is cooled by a light breeze, and I remember the gap between Kate’s thighs as I loosen the tobacco in my cigarette. It falls in clumps into a big wooden bowl on my living room table and I mix it with the dry green buds pooled at the bottom. I chop and re-chop them between my fingers, until they’re a fine powder and a sticky layer of resin dusted with small flecks of green is coating my index finger. I remember briefly, as I roll it into a cigarette, someone once told me you could cook up mull tea and I thought it was fucking stupid and would probably taste something similar to shit.

I’m in my bed and thoughts float up behind faces of clients and store clerks. Do I do this too much? Is it the reason for this, this and this and in the end does it matter anyway? The image of me running on a black conveyor belt at the gym fades behind the thought of chicken pizza and I spend the night watching Seinfeld reruns and fixating on the food advertisements.
conversations with clem
adam formosa

All the bouncers outside the Glasshouse gossip about your shoulders. They tuck in their backs, watch you line up between bobbing platinum heads and wait.

Clem pulls you aside and asks about your tricep. Where you grew it, how slick it is. He twists the skin to ripples and tears it open, searching for congealed alcohol. You watch those wide shoulders furrow, splitting apart your upper arm.

Clem gruffs as he plucks glassy shards from muscle straw, inspects them like clues and asks if you have been drinking. ‘Just like everybody else,’ you say at the whip of a passing blonde: you wear each other’s smirk. ‘How long have you been splintering apart?’ You shrug and drive your eyes along a forearm, slowing at a tiny cluster of cracks.

The queue swells against the straining windows. Clear lines weep into the sweaty glass, showing inside where words stick to the base of coasters and hands write into the slits of skirts.

Barry Hall fidgets in the courtyard while Benji sings aloud. You toss another look at Clem to let you in. He hands you back those tiny iced shards and stares at the spider-lines that scuttle up your arms.
'I don't want to clean up rubble,' he barks, raising his arm, ushering you into the sweaty space between the change of one track and the next.
If you hang around the Cross long enough, everyone starts calling you by your last name. ‘Oi, Murph,’ they hiss, ‘Murphyyyyy!’

They call out from the shadows with these real glazed-over, blissful looks about them, already excited about a favour or sale.

On the corner of Macleay Street, some guy with pointy boots is getting frisked and little white baggies are falling out all over the place. He raises his hands and shrugs at the lady-cop like he has no idea how they got there, and she’s saying something like, ‘Shut up and get your other shoe off!’

I shoot him a sympathetic look, but he takes it as a challenge. ‘Asshole!’ He spits at the ground and gives me the salute. Poor bastard.

The whores started as a joke, ‘cause it’s my birthday, and everyone knows you have to get laid on your birthday. But when we saw the Prado out front, it sealed the deal. If you see that black Prado with the VSK number plate, you know there’s real fine gear about and, if you’re lucky, you might even get your mitts on some.

We loiter around the entrance to Stiletto and some bouncer with a tie grabs my arm and says, ‘It’s in or out, buddy,’ and in we go because, if it’s good enough for Dave (Mr Prado) to get his knob polished, it’s good enough for us – maybe too good.

I sift through my wallet but Sam tells me, ‘Relax; our shout’ and I’m secretly relieved ‘cause I was saving that fifty for a couple of points later. The rate we were going, though, I seemed out of luck.

Dave doesn’t sell meth. I heard this from a friend who used to work at the Warren View. ‘Yep, Dave’s been there, done that,’ he said. ‘Nothing but trouble, meth. Never had so many people owe him money at one time.’ Whenever Dave came in, fifteen people would leave, he said. And I went ‘Yep, yep, uh-huh, I see.’

Inside the club there’s a floorshow and we pull up a few stools next to some old cunt who looks like he’s seen better days. I clear my throat. ‘I hear good things about heroin,’ I joke, making sure he can hear me.

He smacks his lips a little, but looks straight ahead at the dancing girl. She wraps her legs around the pole and gives the crowd her best ‘I’m so hungry for it’ look, but I’m so drunk I can barely muster a semi. She walks towards me.

‘Is this the birthday boy?’ she asks Sam. He looks at me and winks celebrate.
It's obvious I'm about to receive some special attention, but all I can hear is the guy next to us grunting and moaning and carrying on like he's never seen a pair of tits before. 'You mind?'

He turns around and I realise he mustn't be that much older than me: thirty, twenty-eight? He blubbers something indecipherable and the stripper continues prancing around in front of me.

She's heavy on her feet, but meticulous with the routine. Too cautious to be sexy. I can just make out a faded tattoo above her butt. I try to concentrate on what it says, but it's one of those cursive ones and she's shaking her ass so furiously the letters trail and blur. I wanna grab her by the waist to steady her, but I know better. Two beefy guys in matching black suits stand at either exit. The baldy is the spit-image of Woody Harrelson in *Natural Born Killers* and he's got his eye on me. The stripper's about to lose her dacks when the prick at the table next to us suddenly seems unable to hold up his own weight. He's leaning on my shoulder, so I give him a nudge. 'Chinaman's nightcap, eh?'

No response.

'C'mon buddy, get it together. Get with the ...'

He gets up slowly. He's green. The stripper moves back, sensing danger. I just sit there like a bonehead, waiting for the impending doom. Junky puke is the worst kind I've encountered. There's something unsettling about watching someone who hasn't eaten for thirty-six hours haul their guts up on the table in front of you. Some of the puke lands on my shoe and, before you know it, I deck the bloke.

Woody grabs me by the scruff of the collar and I'm on the curb in less than a minute.

'It was a love-tap!' I call. 'I was just starting to like the guy!'

That's the first time I see Allura. She must think I look up to something, 'cause she comes over and introduces herself, asks if I'm looking for anything. 'You know ... something."

'Allura?' I laugh. 'Like ... Allura Eden?'

She stubs a cigarette out with a clear heel and nods. 'See the resemblance?'

Of course I can. 'Japanese?'

'Half Japanese, half Finnish,' she announces, lighting another cigarette.

I nod my head. 'Unusual mix."

'So ... what are you after?'

I look her up and down, not sure whether she's trying to sell pussy or dope. 'Well, ah ... what do you do? What have you got?' I cover all possibilities.

'You mean prices?' She smiles, playing on my discomfort.

'Quit being so fucking cute; are you a whore or are you holding?' I want to ask, but I just mumble, 'I don't think you've got what I'm after ...' and turn away.

'I dance Thursdays and Sundays at eleven,' she says. 'No funny business.'

I nod politely and look for an escape route.

'When I'm finished, I sit with the car,' she continues, motioning to the Prado.
That Prado out there?” I point to the only Prado on the street and she raises an eyebrow.

“I didn’t know Dave had a, a…”

“Girlfriend?” she offers. “I’m Dave’s girlfriend.”

I follow her out to the car and jump in the passenger side. It’s a narcotic buffet on wheels, everything you’ve ever dreamed about. I run my hands up and down the cool seat. The glove compartment on my side pulls out into a mini-fridge and she leans over me to grab something.

“Is Dave around?” I ask, curious to meet the man himself.

“I know exactly what you’re after,” she says, ignoring me. “All I have to do is look at a guy and I know what he’s after.” She flicks a small white bag with one of her two-inch acrylics.

“Actually, I was thinking more along the lines of crystal…” I say, gripping the fifty-dollar note in my pocket.

She shakes her head.

“Speed?” I try.

“That’s poor man’s coke, honey,” she whispers, getting close to my neck. “We do three-twenty a gram; you won’t find better.” She taps a bit of the powder onto the back of her hand and shoves it under my nose. “I guarantee.”

I feel like a kid at the corner shop saying, “Excuse me, how much can I buy with this many?” and opening my fist to reveal a sweaty twenty-cent coin.

“Uh, look, I gotta run. Maybe next time.” I grab the door handle and fall out onto the street.

“Like I said, honey, Thursdays and Sundays,” she calls after me.

I walk a few blocks and throw my hands up at the first cab with its lights on. The driver looks tired. Weary-eyed taxi drivers always have the same story: divorced for ten years, haven’t seen their kids in nine and a half. Always the same shift, 3am till 3pm. I couldn’t help feeling bad whenever I pulled a taxi from the airport line and said ‘Marrickville.’

‘Whereabouts in Marrickville?’

‘Addison Road.’

The driver sighs and adjusts his mirror.

‘Just starting, ay, Raj?’ I ask, squinting at his ID.

‘Just starting,’ he says.

He isn’t in the mood for small talk, so I grab my phone. I figure Sam’s still at the club.

‘Nah, long gone, man. Longgg gone,’ he slurs. ‘Place was fucking dead.’

‘Well, I’m just around the corner,’ I reply, ‘Ten minutes.’

I cover the receiver with my hand. ‘Just to Livingstone actually, mate.’

When I get there he’s laying on a foldout sofa with a beer resting on his gut and the TV on mute. Sam lives in a granny flat in the back of his parents’ yard and on summer nights like
this it’s hot as all fuck in there.

'So, did you score?' He sits up and takes a gulp of beer.

I shake my head and decide not to mention Allura.

'Good to see you gettin’ with the program.'

Meth’s the only drug Sam won’t touch. 'With meth, there’s trouble no matter what,' he says. 'You’re bloody cactus, son.'

He’s right. At first it’s just a sugar hit, an irregular heartbeat, and then your friends start walking around scratching their heads and telling you to ‘get with the program,’ but they’re not exactly sure themselves what that program might be.

I’ve already had two friends that couldn’t get with The Program. Both disappeared without a trace. The first was a cat-obsessed Kiwi girl I met while studying Youth Work at TAFE. Came to Sydney for a change of scene, she said, and by that she meant ‘to get away from meth.’ I went to check on her one day after she’d missed a bit of school and her place had been boarded up, mobile disconnected. She lived in a Surry Hills apartment block with all these Chinese prostitutes and they were all standing in the doorway giggling saying, ‘No no no, we haven’t seen her!’

After four weeks absence, Mrs Lambrinos crossed her name off the roll.

My other friend’s disappearance wasn’t as much of a surprise; Danny was the cook in this small, residential meth-lab in Riverwood. The place was a toxic wasteland, full of make-shift electrical wiring and volatile chemicals – and the stench was horrific. Meth-labs smell like shit on a platter: drain-o, fertiliser, acetone. When no one heard from him for a while, we all just figured he’d blown himself up. Don’t get me wrong, I miss the guy, but chain-smoking tweakers don’t last long in that kind of environment.

I sigh in Sam’s direction. ‘Yeah, yeah, the program.’ I spritz open a beer and fall into a corduroy beanbag. My ass sinks straight to the floor. Piece of shit. On the telly Letterman is in silent conference with a dishevelled-looking Joaquin Phoenix.

‘Chuck the sound on, Sam ... Sam?’

But Sam’s asleep. The bastard. I slide back into the shallow pile of polystyrene and close my eyes.

'Seventy-eight, seventy-nine, eighty, eighty-one ...

I think of Dave’s Prado. The silver rims turn over and over in my head.

Eighty-two, eighty-three, eighty-four ...

I’ve been up for three days. That’s meth for you: can’t eat, can’t crap, can’t sleep. You get desperate. You sip warm milk and crack your knuckles. You lay awake all night counting backwards, counting sheep, anything. You just count like fucking Rain Man.
audrey (uminoyami)
jessica dendy

Your Ursula stares despondent by the jars filled with ocean creatures past I imagine them pulsating fast as lovers’ hearts in their preserving liquid. Slowing with the chemicals a final fidget before dark.

Audrey, how do you capture? Hair fluid as water, those eyes that sulk somewhere off canvas, ears that have heard the disappointment that could have been my own.
Oh dear, thought Rupert. This man appears to be avoiding me. Rupert didn’t like this. Not at all. The stranger wore a black overcoat and a bowler hat, was about his own height, and appeared generally uninteresting. All the same, he thought, the kinds of people who don’t stop to help their fellow man aren’t usually the most savoury of characters. Despite this, Rupert was lost, so he pressed on.

It had been precisely four minutes, thirty-two seconds since Rupert had arrived in the middle of Nowhere. The place. Or rather, no place at all. Everywhere he looked, there was nothing. He was standing on nothing, breathing nothing. And since Rupert knew that such a place could not exist, he knew that where he was did not exist. Therefore, he was Nowhere. Which was a bit of a bother.

‘Please help!’ Rupert called out, but the man continued walking into the distance — walking nowhere really. Rupert wondered if he might know a way of getting Somewhere, but trying to approach the fellow was proving to be unsuccessful.

Perhaps he hasn’t heard me, thought Rupert. Fumbling through his coat, he pulled out an apple and hurled it at the man, striking him on the back of the head. There could be no way the stranger hadn’t noticed him now, but he only paused, picked up the apple and ran farther away. Moments later, he stopped, and after several more seconds, vanished into thin nothing. Rupert didn’t like this one bit.

To add to his unease, Rupert realised he could hear footsteps. Glancing back, he saw a dark figure following him. Rupert detested being followed. He decided it best to ignore this new stranger and hope he went away, but before long the man began to shout at him. Rupert quickened his pace. Suddenly, he was hit on the back of the head by something hard. Looking down, Rupert saw a bruised apple. He picked it up.

What kind of person would deliberately injure someone like that? Rupert wondered. He wasn’t waiting around to find out. He took off. Looking over his shoulder, he saw that he was still being pursued and, in doing so, failed to notice what was in front of him until he ran into it. It was a door — a very strange door, for it was the colour of nothing and blended in with the nothing surrounding it.

Of course, thought Rupert. This must be where the stranger went. He straightened the collar on his coat, opened the door and walked through.

Stepping out of Nowhere and into Somewhere Else, Rupert realised that once again he was
in an open expanse, but this time it was filled with something. Doors. Lots of doors – endless rows of doors stretching out in every direction as far as Rupert could see.

*Perhaps I’ve died,* thought Rupert. *And I’ve accidentally ended up in door heaven.* About twenty metres to his right was the man he had followed through the first door. He still had his back to Rupert and when Rupert turned around, he saw a seemingly identical man facing the opposite direction. Both stood in front of their own door and beyond them were rows of black-coat-and-bowler-hat wearing men standing in front of doors.

‘Excuse me!’ Rupert called. ‘Stop that at once! Turn around!’

There was no response. How could he make them look?

‘Ouch!’ came a roar from all directions as Rupert was hit on the head again with an apple, just after throwing his own. His hat fell off and he stooped to pick it up. He hadn’t realised he was wearing a hat. Something began to occur to Rupert.

‘He’s finally starting to get it,’ came a crackled voice from nearby.

‘Oh yes indeed! I say, this fellow isn’t especially quick-witted is he?’

‘You can say that again.’

Looking up, Rupert saw a vulture and a parrot sitting atop his door.

‘Get what?’ he asked the vulture.

‘I beg your pardon!’ declared the parrot. ‘We were having a private conversation.’

‘Yeah! Eavesdrop again and we’ll have to communicate through italics!’ said the vulture.

Confused, Rupert asked, ‘What ever do you mean?’

‘Well, in this particular example,’ said the parrot. ‘It would be to represent that we are thinking.’

‘But you can’t know what someone else is thinking!’ said Rupert.

‘You can’t,’ snapped the vulture.

‘Anyway, as we were saying before we were interrupted, we believe you have finally deduced the truth.’

‘What truth?’ asked Rupert.

‘That the other men are you.’

‘How could you know what I was thinking?’

‘In this case, because the narrator implied it.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Why, the narrator my good man,’ continued the parrot, fluffing his feathers in frustration. ‘And I must say he is a most unexciting chap.’

‘That’s right!’ blurted the vulture. ‘I’ve had enough of his boring voice. He’s too much like Rupert. I’m gonna change him.’

And so the cunning, witty and handsome Vulture did away with Rupert’s yawn-worthy narrator and replaced it with a far more interesting one.
‘Excuse me,’ said the dumpy little man. ‘I don’t understand what’s going on here.’ He stared up at the magnificent Vulture like a puppy pleading for scraps.

‘Of course you don’t, you idiot!’ Vulture scolded with all the authority of a king. The ugly creature before him was left speechless under his majestic gaze.

‘I say,’ remarked Vulture’s loyal sidekick, Parrot, ‘that does seem rather fun! May I have a turn?’

‘You didn’t bring a narrator,’ replied Vulture the Great.

‘That’s quite alright. I’m equipped to perform the act myself.’

The human male appears uncomfortable when removed from its natural environment. It is the responsibility of Mr Vulture and myself to explain how he came to be here and how he may go about leaving.

‘Oh, good!’ says the beast. ‘I have been wondering!’

‘No!’ says Mr Vulture. ‘You’re not allowed to reply to him unless he uses inverted commas.’

Rupert, the human, appears to consider this for a moment. This is demonstrated by his creased brow and darting eyes, indicative of confusion.

‘What on earth are you on about?’ he asks, turning to me. ‘And why do you keep repeating everything I say and do?’

‘Why, I am only following the rules of literature,’ I explain.

‘You can respond now,’ Mr Vulture adds in a whisper.

‘This is getting extremely annoying!’ Rupert exhales, scratching his forehead in frustration.

I agree. I think it’s time I move along with the narrative.

‘Not you again!’

‘You’re such an awful bore!’

‘Who are you talking to?’ demanded Rupert.

‘I suppose we should proceed,’ said the parrot.

‘Oh, alright!’ said the vulture. ‘Rupert, do you want to know how you can get home?’

‘Of course!’

‘Then answer me this one question: where exactly is home?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ said Rupert. ‘Home is where I came from.’

‘Yes. But where did you come from?’

Rupert paused and looked at the vulture uncertainly. It shifted from foot to foot, waiting.

‘I came from ... Somewhere.’

‘And do you know where that is?’ The vulture looked sure of his victory now.

‘No ...’ Rupert conceded. ‘No, I don’t.’ But he had to have come from Somewhere, hadn’t
he? He had to! He racked his brain, pulling at his hair in an attempt to remember Home. He knew he hadn’t always been here; why, he seemed to have arrived only a matter of minutes ago.

‘If I didn’t know better, old chap,’ said the parrot, interrupting his train of thought, ‘I’d suggest that you never leave this place. You see, you are nothing more than a flat character. That is to say, you did not exist before this place came into being and you have no life beyond it. You’re simply not developed enough for a life beyond the walls of start and finish. However, as a flat character, you are incapable of change. You exist here purely so you can leave.’

‘And we’re here,’ said the vulture, ‘to help you do it.’

‘You,’ continued the parrot, ‘were created with all the knowledge required to leave, for that is your very raison d’être. Our only advice is this ...’

‘Yes?’ asked Rupert.

‘Look for symbols. Goodbye.’

‘But you still haven’t told me where I am!’ pleaded Rupert.

‘You are at both the Beginning and the End!’ shrieked the vulture, flapping up into the air.
‘You are in the perfect world, where anything can happen!’ cried the parrot, taking flight.
‘But what does that mean?’ screamed Rupert.
‘It means,’ they called together as they flew away, ‘that you’re in paradise!’

Looking around, Rupert saw that all of the doors and all the other Ruperts had vanished. He was, once again, in the Middle of Nowhere.

‘Look for symbols?’ called Rupert. ‘How am I supposed to find symbols when all there is, is Nothing?’ All he had were the clothes on his back and an old apple. His mind wandered back to his conversation with the birds.

‘You were created with all the knowledge required to leave ...’

_How does one go about escaping paradise?_ Rupert pondered. Reaching once again into his overcoat, the uninteresting man removed the sad looking apple, its skin wrinkled from being thrown too many times. Rupert took a bite and, as if he’d never even been there, went out like a candle, leaving ... Nothing.

Except ...

Apple.

Not the object, apple, but the representation of Apple, spelled out in letters and spoken aloud simultaneously as a symbol for things that both are and are not.
you smelled warm and stuffy like worn shoes
and the day tasted of chewed gum
sunlight stretched my vertebrae apart,
made me warm and slow
and I bit the inside of my lip

the stonehenge pattern of my teeth,
wisdom tips grinding
up from my gum beds,
as loud as the tree next to me
sucking its food from the ground
or the thousands of insects
crawling under us in the soil

the riot of our cells dying
and splitting, dying and splitting,
is deafening

unswallowing ideas at each other,
we don’t hear the big things
taking up space

kyra bandte

She is walking up stairs, lifting one foot over the other; slowly getting somewhere, slowly ascending. Her feet find the top step as her hand finds the door handle, fingers trickling over the chipped paint. The trick is jiggling it as you turn. Her mind is a pocket and her pocket is heavy. She takes out her telescope and opens the door.

This morning her alarm clock changed its own time and made her late for work; she didn’t get to wash her hair properly, or shave her legs, or let the water shoot from her fingertips while she thought of shooting stars.

On the bus, a man with Saturn’s rings around his eyes sneezed on her shoulder and didn’t say sorry. At lunch she found a mould-spotted cherry tomato in her salad. She sat on a wooden park bench with missing slats and felt the black hole in her solar plexus grow deeper.

The weatherman had lied, forecasting high temperatures and rain; now the wind made goose-bumps on her arms. On the bus home, a woman whose face was freckled with constellations squashed her against the window and didn’t say sorry.

She got to her front door before she realised her key was inside the apartment, sitting on the kitchen bench; she’d forgotten it in her rush out the door. It’s half an hour before the landlord’s misshapen key makes a click in the lock; his face is the scarred surface of Ganymede.

From its place on her shelf beside books on Galileo and Copernicus, she takes out her telescope and puts it in her pocket.

On the roof of her building she is met by the moon, his light cold by the time it reaches her. He is constant yet waning and so far away. She lifts the telescope so she can reach him. As her fingers slowly adjust the lens, she closes one eye and focuses the other; her vision is clearest through cyclops view.

She is light years away: past the telescope, past the edge of the roof, past the city lights. Her body is a galaxy, holding in planets and moons and dust; her heart is on fire, a burning star in Orion; her soul is a supernova, an explosion of aura. She is where things are universal, where things never change; through her telescope she is never betrayed.

Eventually she lets her hands fall, lets her eyes open wide and sees things for how they are: standing on this roof is the closest she will ever get to being stable, and her life is just taking up space.
1.

Cicadas on the back veranda
look out at the oil-stained fence –
fresh and deliberate. The air is
darkness and salt. They speak
loud all night and leave husks

2.

Small spaces to press
against – legs like a
spider’s. Paint
washed from skin with
saltwater. There are ways to
escape, but no way back

3.

Moonflowers curl their
bodies up with morning, scattered
on the grass like ship sails
slumped after a storm
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