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Tide Edition 8

Abstract
For the first few days it seemed perfectly possible to pull together a literary journal in ten weeks — starting with no submissions, no design layout, and no money. After ten weeks of pressure and doom, it at last seems possible again. We'd like you to meet the 2011 edition of Tide. Look into the cover and tell us what you see. There are no wrong answers. Except for the one you’re thinking of. 2011 brings the largest Tide issue yet — in scope as well as pure size. Its cover strains to hold in pieces from local writers as well as interstate and international offerings. From poetry to prose to monologue, from coming of age tales to affairs with refrigerators, Tide has it covered. We've put together an issue where, we feel, even the most eccentric reader can find something written just for them. We were attracted to pieces that blurred boundaries and looked at familiar themes in a new way. You'll find pieces that mix teen angst with text adventure brushing up against twisted interpretations of romantic bliss. Our contributors will carry you wide-eyed to the roar and grit of the streets of Saigon, to Bali's exotic shores, and back again with unexpected homegrown tales. These pieces will cause you to look again, seeing some new quirk that you'd swear wasn't there the first time. So look at the cover again. Really? That's interesting. Now tell me about your mother...
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# the tide team

**Designers**  
Adam Carr  
Adam Formosa  
Daniel Fudge  
Libby Popper  
Ben Semenchuk

**Editors**  
Jessica Cooper  
Kate McDowell  
Luke Rule  
Jess Southwell  
Bettina Tyrrell

**Fundraisers**  
Allison Belgre  
Leo Clayton  
Melanie Doncas  
Elizabeth Julian-Tivoli  
Sarah Massih  
Amy Wheeler

**Featured Artist**  
Simanion  
facebook.com/simanionart

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So look at the cover again. Really? That's interesting. Now tell me about your mother...
As Sheila grew older, she began to notice a disturbing similarity between magnetism and love. The first clues came from her parents, who were average in most ways except for the force of their dedication to one another. Sheila grew up used to the way her parents’ hands would connect with a dull thunk over the breakfast table. It wasn’t until later, when she was compiling her evidence of magnetism and love’s relationship, that she remembered her parents kissing, and the effort they would make disengaging their lips, the slight delay like separating a magnet from the fridge.

The theory was well under way by the time she met the man she would marry. At a work Christmas party, under the influence of thick red wine, she found herself speaking to a small grey man in the corner. Sheila found ways of touching his hand lightly, in order to test if they had the magnetism. What she found was inconclusive. Towards the end of the night, emboldened and slightly dizzy, she bent down and kissed him. He was surprised, but kissed back after a slight hesitation. When she finally pulled away, she found their mouths parted with the slickness of oil. She cried once she got home, knowing that if they had any future, their love would exhibit symptoms of magnetism. The next day, however, she found her watch had stopped — at the exact time she had kissed him. Her knowledge of magnetism was hazy, gleaned from high school science classes from years ago, but she knew that magnetism and electric currents could stop watches. Within a few months they were married, Sheila convinced their love could only grow.

Sheila’s older sister, Helen, watched the nuptials with a cold, discerning eye. Never a pretty woman, she still carried off a type of handsomeness, as long as you could ignore the granite set of her jaw, a clenching that spoke of determination. Helen had pursued love doggedly, with a single mindedness others might give to
a career or an expensive hobby. She brought a different man each year to family functions, all looking mauled by Helen's affections. Sheila knew that Helen tried to hold on to these men as stubbornly, and brutally, as a pit bull with a bone. But they all left.

At Sheila's wedding, after the dancing and cake, Helen accosted Sheila amongst the white tablecloths. She was drinking champagne with large, economical gulps.

'You have to tell me,' said Helen, 'how you knew you loved Franklin. How you know he loves you'.

So Sheila explained her theory of love as a scientific principle, like gravity, or chemistry. Helen didn't care about understanding, only taking the knowledge as some sort of cheat. For the next ten years she roamed the city, her left hand cupping a small pile of iron filings. On busy street corners, in bars and shopping centres, she sidled up to men and held their hand. She would watch the iron filings, waiting for a twitch, or for them to stand on end. Unfortunately, the reaction she sought never occurred. In the last few years of her life, Helen began to look haggard, her face slowly matching the colour of her iron-gray bob. One afternoon on a busy train, Helen grasped the hand of a moderately handsome businessman. The iron filings didn't twitch, but Helen felt her heart stop for a few seconds, and then laboriously beat again. After she collapsed, the doctors told Helen that a tumour had grown in her heart, depriving her blood of iron. As she died, Helen realized her incredible need for love had manifested as this growth, the frustrated magnetism sucking the metal out of her blood.

As Sheila's marriage to Franklin progressed, a doubt grew in her own heart. Since the night of the stopped watch, there had been no more sign of magnetic love from her husband. She waited patiently, thinking something would happen as they kissed during the wedding ceremony. When that didn't occur, she kept her eyes open during the wedding night itself, wondering if the bedside lamp shook from magnetic love or just awkward sex.

Sheila and Franklin divorced, but not before she gave birth to a set of twins. The last years of their marriage would find the couple seated further and further away at the dinner table, with a slow drift. Almost immediately after the divorce, Sheila too began holding a little pile of iron filings in her hand. But she didn't have to search for long, because one day when she was making a cup of tea,
she put her hand on the fridge and felt the tiny magnetised filings click to the surface.

Sheila married Calvin the fridge, wildly ecstatic with the strength of their magnetism. He immediately charmed her friends and relatives, who appreciated his understated humour and endless supplies of beer, dips and adequately chilled dairy products. He also seemed to understand his role as a step-dad — being constantly strong, silent and supportive for Sheila — and rarely clashed with his step-children.

Sheila felt she'd finally found the kind of love her parents had shared. Usually so silent, pale and reserved, she shocked the kids by singing loudly as she cooked dinner, Calvin humming along.

When her children were old enough to date, she told them earnestly about magnetism. She exhorted passionately, with tears in her eyes, for them not to ever, ever settle for anything that didn't fit together like iron on polarised iron. The twins, who saw their real father on the weekends, were understandably sceptical. Calvin was diplomatically quiet about the subject.

Yet Sheila's second marriage ended with a long argument that stretched throughout the night. She ranted and raved and threw all the magnets from the house. Calvin, she claimed tearfully, had so much room inside for everything except love for her. Leaving, she slammed the door, crying over her shoulder and wondering how Calvin could watch her leave so impassively. Calvin made no move to stop her, and gradually froze a lettuce.
a spring wolf

LEO HUNT

i.
I signed up for an exchange program with a wolf pack. The bus drops me by the side of a road, in the wilderness I was not permitted to bring clothes/a toothbrush/shaving equipment.

The wind blows flakes of ash; grey faced, I am becoming wild.

Between tree trunks dark faced beggars slink low sniffing the dead ground, I am gently bitten and dragged away.

Back in Newcastle a wolf makes a nest in my bedroom; gnaws at my CDs, shits under my desk.

ii.
It is an elk, black legs churning the snow eyes fever hot, snorting. We surround the beast snarling red snow/black earth/black meat.

My pack are hunched and eating, clotted greasy faces; unobserved I employ the knife and fork that I secreted on my person.
iii.
I find myself unable to howl, call it stage fright.
It’s not that I don’t try but I can’t seem to get
the knack of howling, no matter what I do
I can’t fill up the night forest with the chilling
majesty of my voice.

I blame the damp, smoker’s cough,
I explain to the wolves about
speech impediments.

iv.
Back home, the wolf attends a club night dressed in
my jeans/two pairs of trainers/a black hat.

The wolf does five shots in a row and
is arrested for biting security staff.

v.
At night we sleep in a pile
hair on tooth on tail on hair on me.

At the bottom, crushed by wolfy smells, jabbed by paws.
I dream I’m buried in earth being drowned in bloody giblets,

I dream I’m smothered by carpets which isn’t
far from the reality.

vi.
One month and I emerge from the wild hair matted with
ash/grease/blood. Eyebrows grown in frightening inclines,
beard in pubic curls, fingernails ground-down
from walking on all fours.
The wolves stand silent as I board the bus home, I tell them how honoured I was to learn their ways and live like my ancestors. I tell them the scales of modern life have fallen from my eyes.

On the bus I prepare to write about the experience on Facebook.
A Turkish bloke with açık kapı
tattooed across his neck, bickers with
a teenage Leb. They
fist fight under my collarbone
scorning the underside
of my vertebrate. The Turk targets
shallow skin and empties it
purpuric. He launches forward, his knuckleskin thinning
like a test,
collecting a cluster of crimson
under my jawbone.
The Leb
dodges a shift of my shoulder blade, he
hides amongst the holes of my pelvis, wraps a loop
of chain around his palm, circling my spine
like a stingray, gliding through muscle straw
to the spot
where the Turk is
writing
tattooed words
into clefts in my chest.

The cops turn up and switch
the lights off.
i should probably do a lot of things

SARAH MASSIH

It's eleven past four and I've been staring at the clock for almost two hours. I think she's on the phone, or Skype, in what feels like the room next to me. There's so much silence and I can't help fixating on the sound of her voice within it. There is hope for sleep yet, and I'll continue to try but the longer she talks, the angrier I get, and the more I can't escape from the idea of suffocating her by shoving my fist down her throat. I throw the sheets from myself because I know what's left of the night is fading into light, and I can hear birds beginning to call from the trees. The stairs creak, the floorboards are loose, and the second step from the bottom is almost cracked the whole way, so if you use too much force you run the risk of falling straight through. I stagger. It's early and I'm tired so I use the banister to hold myself up. By the time I reach her door I feel like maybe this was a bad idea, but I knock anyway.

'Are you fucking serious with this shit?' I massage my eyes and try to look dishevelled and affected.

'I'm sorry?' She smiles and covers the mouthpiece of the phone with her hand.

'Everyone else in this fucking building is trying to sleep, speak softly for fuck sake.' She doesn't seem fazed, but her chest flushes.

'Look, I'm on the phone to a friend overseas, don't speak shit to me right now.'

'If you keep me awake all night I will speak to you however the fuck I want.' I turn to leave; I've made my point but I'm probably fighting a losing battle. The door slams when I'm already halfway down the stairs. She continues to talk early into the morning and I wonder what she could possibly have to say that merits such a long conversation. *Fuck you Maggie, I'm going to put your filthy cigarette out on your arm next time I see you.* I fall asleep to the sun rising and the birds conversing louder than she was to begin with.
Two weeks into redundancy, and the job situation is looking bleak. I haven’t had sex in a month, and I’m starting to go into a depression spiral — a twitching anxiety in my arms and legs. Maggie didn’t come over on Tuesday, the petty bitch, so I made my way down Broadway and met up with a girl I know through a friend from (my old) work. We slept together once and I didn’t follow it up because we were both drunk and useless and I didn’t want to be associated with the whole event; however, it’s $10 Steak Night, and I feel like I need at least one night of getting heavily liquored up to make this week okay. Her name’s Elia. I remember this much and made sure of it before I left. She’s contemplating the election, but I can see her apathy as I chew through my overcooked steak, wishing I could be bothered to ask for more gravy because the meat is rusted dry. There’s something about her I suppose, and I try to break through the hum in my head so I can hear her voice as her lips curve around words and her tongue licks gravy and lettuce from her fork. Her hair is cut like the sphinx and it’s shiny all the way to the ends. I try to run my hands through the curls that mat at the back of my head and I realise maybe I need another mirror so I can see it, because I don’t think I have for months. I drag the last of vodka from around the ice at the base of my glass, and I go for another. She looks at me as if to say nothing at all, which inclines me to buy her a drink too. We’re six drinks deep before I’m pushing my lips against her neck in a bathroom stall, pulling her wet hair from my mouth with my fingers. She smells like incense and tastes like it too. I drag my hands up the back of her thighs to the edge of her underwear before she breathes into my ear that we should leave, and we do, slamming the wooden door behind us.

I woke at 7am, thought it was 11am and wished it was. The sun bled through the thin curtains onto the carpet, the walls, the floor, the bed, and us. Elia slept; I was trapped under an arm and leg and wasn’t sure where my underwear was, so I lay still, staring at the glow-in-the-dark sheep on my roof. I wondered if sheep dream. Could they overcome their life up until a point and dream of becoming the shepherd, of being the grass? Did they dream outward and outward until they reached an ocean they’d never seen? I flipped her off me, gently, so she didn’t feel her sweaty skin peeling from mine. I felt uncomfortable as I loitered around my own kitchen, leaning on the bench trying to recall next day protocol. I remembered her vomiting last night while I held back her hair, in a stairwell somewhere between Broadway and Edward Street while I urinated onto a tree on
my knees. I dropped the toast butter side down, left it there, and decided to take a shower.

Two weeks and four job interviews later, I had a bubbling realisation that hospitality and retail will only cover my rent if my ego can take the daily battering by a middle management bastard on a power trip. I assess the situation and realise it can't. I continue to search. I wait for phone calls and receive none. I run out of cornflakes and forget to buy more. I eat toast instead of cereal. The milk goes off. I start drinking tea. Maggie's cat gets sick and dies a few days later. The glass she puts her cigarettes in fills up quicker and they stay dry as winter becomes spring. The days become long and hot and I find myself with nothing to do but wander around in the cool evening wind, listening to music I wish I understood. In and amongst the ennui — a smoke signal drifting along through hours and days — I'm strained by an inability to evolve when left to my own devices. Now would be the time. I need a hobby. I decide to buy a goldfish. She dies and I replace her with *The Anarchists Cookbook*. I read it online and decide against building a bomb, though I appreciate that I now know how. I smoke the last of the weed on my own, in the kitchen, with the balcony door open and I watch Maggie's body drop quickly past it. They say it will take at least a month for her bloodstains to fade from the roof of the lobby, and that's providing it rains. It's early spring and I worry it will be days, even weeks until the clouds break. I wonder what it will smell like, and imagine the wet rusted smell of my dad's old Ute. I'd never seen anyone die before and I decide to keep the cigarettes she left, in the glasses she filled.

Maggie's parents start collecting her things around midday on Thursday and finish early Friday morning. I think they probably slept in her bed, to smell her scent, and were disappointed when it reeked of stale cigarettes and dried spit. Their empty footsteps shuffled dust from the cracks in my roof, and I feigned sleep to try and suffocate the image of a million tiny thoughts falling through those gaps. A flake of paint fell on my cheek, and — for a moment — I had an image of an old man wandering around in the dark, hesitating at the window, leaning out to look before stepping back in, and trying to look out again.

I spent the next three days in the basement of the building, cleaning every item of clothing I had, and tried to consume as much of the smell of concrete, paint, and warm washing that I could. I put my resumes in the drier and watched them spin and when I pulled them out they burnt the tips of my fingers so they shone and
briefly lost their contours. Every so often I’d imagine something embarrassing I’d done or said and I would cringe and scrunch my fists and kick items of clothing and send them fluttering across the room. I’m not sure why. I’m not sure why these days, at this particular time, I just felt sickened to my stomach at the thought of myself and I wanted it to end and I wanted it to change and I wanted to be angry and disgusted and sad and bleeding all at once, in that cold room, under a pile of warm laundry, with the sound of paper chattering on metal, and the smell of dry concrete stuck in my nose for nights, and nights, and nights.
Me and Billy were kids when he killed the magpie. Shot it with an arrow made from bamboo so it wasn’t a clean death. The bamboo caught in the wing and tangled in the net that covered the bird, so when it flapped, the mesh jerked with an unnatural movement. We had set the trap earlier in the day, when the grass was still wet: an old fishing net we once used for catching tadpoles back when we were too stupid to realise the tadpoles could swim through the holes, a length of rope and a stick to prop the net up off the grass. We grabbed crusts from the loaf on the bench, and ripped them into crumbs, throwing them on the ground under the net like we were feeding fish in a pond of grass. We tied the rope to the stick and withdrew back to the deck, lying on the warm wood with the end of the rope close to our fingertips.

We waited, but nothing happened. After what was probably only several minutes, we lost interest and went inside, leaving the end of the rope lying on the deck. The magpie must have tripped the stick itself because by the time we remembered to check the trap it was tangled up pretty good. One of its wings had caught in the netting and was flexed out like someone had grabbed the wingtip and was pulling it away from the bird’s torso. The anatomy was shockingly clear to me, as thought it was some kind of prehistoric fossil.

I was horrified and fascinated, and I didn’t notice Billy leave my side. The next thing I remember, he was pulling back the twine of his bow, aiming at this confusion of black and white feathers in front us and I was screaming. His first shot struck the wing and I screamed harder. The bird was tripping over itself, the sharpened bamboo jerking with each crack of its wing. In the blur of motion, the bird’s eye found mine. Blood-red and locked open, it stared at me and I spun away, pulled my body around as if I were standing on the bottom of the pool — far away from the splash of the sun and the muffled screams of children.
It isn’t until years later, sitting bored and alone at the back of the class, that these images come back to me.

‘A lonely child who believed death clean and final.’
The teacher quotes ‘Barn Owl’ from memory, walking between us, fingers steeped purposefully in front of her chin.

‘Not this obscene
Bundle of stuff that dropped,
And dribbled through the loose straw
Tangling in bowels.’
She leans scholarly against her desk, arms crossed.
‘Pretty horrific stuff...’
We nod.

‘What do you think Harwood is trying to say in this poem?
I think back to that day — to me and Billy and the magpie. Something separates me from whatever was expressed in the eye. Something anchors me within my own mind and pulls me away from the blood-red disc. But the disc grows and expands around me, and I am enclosed within a waxen membrane, a glowing skin laced with delicate threads of sinew and pulsating veins.
I've run out of space
to allocate all this memory
& if my mind were to resemble my workdesk
then I know,
   the trick,
is finding room between spent bottles of Extra Dry
towering
   above the clutter
   like tallest trees
   in a field.
& if my memory
   as a pointing device
works anything like lightning
then I'm not so surprised
that down here,
   on the forest floor,
all I can hear is thunder
& sometimes,
   when the wind is right
or the bolt
   not too far above my head
I can feel the ash
   from that canopy
settle into my soot-black hair —
it feels like a word on the tip of my tongue,
   something
   beginning with A.
Do you remember
when I tried to explain cicadas?
    This forest is littered with vacant shells
    & sometimes,
    I'll pluck one from a charcoal tree,
feel the weight brittle
    in my palm
    & run my fingers along the body
looking for the tear
where you outgrew me.
we sit out on the rooftop
to worship the stars

the backyard below us
a patchwork kingdom of nettles and weeds
salt dunes beyond the paling fence

strange to want to make time
for the omniscient
nothing seems worth saying out loud

I strip leaves from their spines
he strains to see the falling meteor dust
tens of tonnes a day, he tells me

solar panels of a satellite
catch the set sun
and a pin-prick flares for a few seconds
the wonder starts me chattering

he proves supreme at join the dots
but he likes my shapes better
southern kite with bows
lawnmower minor
jellybean galaxy
the moon floats gradually upward
a balloon that's lost its toddler

we listen to our playlist on repeat
one headphone each
the short lead draws us ear to ear

we wait for the bats to fly home
like tiny black umbrellas
When Kat asked Peter to be her date at the end-of-year work party, he hoped Leah would interrupt with something along the lines of, 'Oh sorry, Kat, but Pete and I already made plans to go together', and Leah hoped Peter would just tell Kat he wasn't interested. Instead they plastered awkward smiles on their faces; Peter stared at a faraway stain on the wall and Leah tried to ignore Kat’s too-tight work blouse. And so it was that Peter went to the local steak house with Kat and Leah took her Wandering-Eyes, Wandering-Hands ex.

Kat wore a white dress, black sash around her waist and a lot of leg and cleavage. She sat with one leg crossed over the other, always pointed at Peter. Eyes-Hands sat across from Peter, happy to see his Old Buddy again in the midst of such stuffy office workers. Peter didn’t look at Leah until after dinner, when Eyes-Hands wandered outside for a smoke break and Kat disappeared to the bathroom with the broken-hearted receptionist.

Leah’s dress looked like someone had eaten an assortment of leaves, vomited them up, flattened the mess and stapled it at the shoulders and under the arms.

Your dress is... unique, Peter told her.
That’s not the point, she frowned.
Well what is the point?
I wanted to make sure there was nothing to grab or look at.
Why didn’t you just come alone?
Why didn’t you?

Each hoped to hear the other say, 'Actually, I wanted to come with you.' Each were gathering the courage to say it first. But Kat returned, doing her best to entice Peter away to somewhere more fun. Leah excused herself to find out why Eyes-Hands was taking so long.

Soon Leah came back and paid, ready to leave. Eyes-Hands had skimped out. Peter apologised to Kat: he was actually feeling a little ill, maybe she should
just leave with the girls. He paid for the two of them and went outside, where he found Leah on the phone to a taxi. He wished she would just ask him for a lift. She wished he would offer. But he smiled his goodbye and went to his car.

Two streets away he decided to turn back and get her. She was gone. It was okay, he thought. When the holidays were over he would return to work, boldly ask her for her number and take her out to dinner. He wouldn't skimp out or disappear. It would be great.

Alone in the taxi, Leah decided it was time to quit her job.
toga shindig

LEO CLAYTON

A 21st so bad it makes you say ‘when you’re done with that corpse of yours can I eat it?’ just to get some space & it’s as paranoid as the time you swore that

cheating was the case. Your plus one can’t stop laughing during the serious speech but this house is without taste like a poem about the beach so you let him laugh and

relocate outside instead, where you move around the party saving face with quips like ‘well dandruff is just like Autumn for the head.’ Time starts to slow &

so you call up oldmate Hawking on the phone and tell him these strangers &

their gawking have a weird pace that’s really starting to fuck with clocks &
your ego's fluid grace but he doesn't answer & Sagan's in the loo. When it does come time to leave, you kiss cheeks, reminisce, & stumble out the place.
Mike was the kind of bloke other men skirted on the streets. With a beard nailed grey and an Indonesian keretek smouldering at the corner of his mouth, he had a ‘don’t fuck with me’ look about him. I was electrified. I wanted to fuck with him.

We met in Ibu Wayan’s courtyard garden.

‘I’m Emma,’ I told him.

He grunted and ground out his cigarette, and for the next week he ignored me.

Ibu Wayan ran the cleanest, meanest losmen in Kuta. I’d found it after bumping between a series of dirty rooms; rooms with sweated-on, fucked-on mattresses and tap water that wriggled out grey. It was tucked away from the main tourist drag, down alleys of temples and tin. In the mornings, I could hear the faint call from the mosque, prayers that augmented the air, soulful and soaring. In the afternoons, I could hear the sound of the gamelan, rattling tones of tension and despair.

Breakfast was at seven. A plate of fruit and a cup of volcanic coffee. I didn’t like coffee that much, but drinking it reminded me of my mum; she always had black coffee with breakfast. Ibu Wayan made the breakfast while her staff, all boys, swept and scrubbed our rooms. If she caught them resting with brooms across knees, she’d chase them back to work with the kitchen knife, all bones and nose.

At breakfast I’d chat to the rainbow-beaded Italian, Fabio, with his wildly broken English and tea-leaf eyes. I never saw Mike. He didn’t eat with the rest of us.

One morning I was unlocking my bicycle when Mike swung shirtless into the carpark, surfboard strapped to the side of his bike. He dropped me a wink.
dropped my keys.

‘Where ya goin’, Chick? I’ll give ya a ride.’

He offered me a helmet. I hesitated. His mouth lifted in a sneer.

‘You gotta problem jumpin’ on a bike with me?’

I climbed on.

He smelt how I imagined. Like broken earth, salt and violet sweat, and tobacco.

I pressed my nipples hard against his back.

We arrived at the wartel just as rain began to smoke through the palms.

I called my sister and she asked how I was going. I said fine. She asked when I was coming home and I said I didn’t know. Then she said that she was hoping to fly to Thailand, during her uni break, and that if I still had enough money left I should come and visit. I told her I’d love to.

On the way home, the trees shook with mango-wet light. Mike slid his hand up my thigh.

I wasn’t studying Indonesian in Denpasar like I was supposed to be doing. Instead, I filled my days reading and dreaming through the backstreets, and drinking es kelapa muda with lime. Sometimes I’d go out at night, but I’d always end up dancing with a bloke who’d get that long stupid look on his face, and I’d suddenly get shy, slip away, ride my bicycle home.

At dusk, I would go to the beach to run. When the ocean was pulled high, right up to the palms, I would dodge women with plates of pineapple on their heads and beach boys banging drums next to quivers of surfboards. The beach was strewn with the crispy bodies of tourists, curling against the wind. And the wind: there was always this shimmering, white gold wind over everything.

When the ocean had drawn breath, I would run over a bonework of coral scrolls and driftwood.

One evening, when I got back to my sarong, I saw Fabio with his wood-banged wrists and boardies low on hips, talking to one of the beach boys.

‘No more, no grazias!’ He was saying. ‘I’ve hadda plenty scare today!’ Fabio pantomimed paddling towards a wave. His face stretched with horror and his chin lifted, as he gazed up at a trembling sheet of water. In panic, he swung the board around and tried to out-paddle the wave to shore but was lifted then thrown, face-first into the sand.

The beach boy laughed and slapped his chicken-skinny thigh. Fabio noticed
me and waved. I waved back, and took a last look down the beach. Kite strings stitched the air silver, and the sun had made a red bell on the water. I turned to go.

'Hey, Chick!' I spun around. It was Mike, with a surfboard across his knees. 'Wanna go for a feed tonight?'

I climbed onto his bike, lust ticking fresh against my chest. We veered down back lanes like hooks, through air dusky with cloves and cooking oil. We passed night markets lit with gas lamps, and kaki lima stands selling piles of gorengan.

My ankles were almost whipped paisley on the corners.

The warung he'd chosen for dinner was nestled between shops selling red and white bintang singlets and 'I drive like a cunt' stickers. It was simple: electric lights, wooden benches and a glass window stacked with plates of food. A girl was wiping the tables. She looked up and welcomed Mike with a smile. Then she looked at me.

'Ini pacar?'

Mike shook his head.

'This is Kadek,' he said to me, and I smiled at her.

Kadek pursed her lips. They were beautiful lips, bitten to this crazy redness. I wanted lips like that.

We rinsed our right hands and while we ate I asked him how much longer he was here for. Five months, he said, then it was back home to shovel concrete and save up, so he could come away again. I asked him what happened to his arm. It was misshapen, cuttlefish coloured. He said he'd got stuck on a fence in Timor, on the way to a remote surf spot.

'One of the wooden stakes went right through my arm. I hung there for nine hours, until some militia came by at dusk. When they lifted me off, all the muscle fell out.'

'Ew, that's gross!' I said, impressed.

Then Mike asked me how old I was.

I'd been dreading this.

After I told him, he thinned his mouth.

With her frank, dove-dark eyes, Kadek watched us eat the rest of the meal in silence.

When he'd come back from the surf, Mike used to sit in Ibu Wayan's courtyard garden, a garden of drifting frangipanis and mandarin-coloured blossoms. He'd
sit up on the pagoda, chatting and sharing keretek cigarettes with the local boys. Sometimes I’d see him open a bag of oily gorengan — deep-fried banana or tempe or tofu — and share it around.

‘How much of a cunt would I feel like if I didn’t,’ he once told me, then looking over at Ibu Wayan, added, ‘the boys get paid fuck-all.’

Ibu opened her eyes behind her fan. They were full of bladed and vicious vim. She sat up, and looked at Mike.

The air went black.

Then the rain came and hung a white curtain over everything.

Mike was on the pagoda, surrounded by beaked orange flowers. We’d barely spoken since dinner that night. Sometimes we’d catch eyes across the courtyard. He’d be the first to look away.

I joined him and put a bottle of buttery arak between us.

Later that night, we twisted the sheets into mad, wet coils.

Later that night, he left a dark grubstain on my neck.

So everyone would know.

Over the next few weeks, I found gifts of frangipanis tucked into my bicycle and gifts of words tucked into my hair.

With my mouth still burning from arak, he’d give me late-night motorbike lessons along the beach road. When I was confident enough to ride by myself, we’d slam ephedrine and then race around potholes and onto pavements, scattering puddles and people and chooks. We’d ride to my favourite es kelapa muda shack, the one with a tree growing through the roof. Mike would spoon the creamy coconut into my mouth then taste my lips, while the Javanese owner covered the eyes of his daughter with a tea towel.

I’d just got back from a run and was waiting for Mike to come out of the surf, when Fabio appeared and staked out a corner of my sarong. I hoped he’d go away before Mike got back. He didn’t.

Over the ocean, the sun stung the clouds red. Along the water’s edge, the sand gleamed like sable, wet stone. I could see Mike down there now, bending over, unfastening his leg rope.

Fabio was warming into a story, with a gathering audience of massage
women, Germans and beach boys. He’d just got up to the bit where his boat was attacked by pirates off the coast of Djibouti, when Mike walked up.

‘Emma,’ he barked.

I shook Fabio from my sarong and followed.

At the warung that night, a bloodless silence fattened between us. And so I tried to open him, softly, softly.

‘It’s got nothin’ to do with you. It was a bloke out in the surf. Shit style. He kept paddling back out on the inside of me. Fuck him, I thought, and I dropped in on him. The bloke tried to whistle me off the wave. “Dontcha fucken whistle at me,” I said to him, “I’m not a dog. If ya whistle at me like I’m a dog, then I’ll bite and bark like a dog. I’ll bite ya fucken face off.”’

I poked at my nasi campur.

On my lips, a faint tingle of chilli.

In my belly, a faint curl of fear.

A couple of days later, he came back from the surf as I was unlocking my bicycle.

‘Where are you off to, Chick?’

I told him I wanted to ride up to Seminyak to have a coffee.

‘You want a lift?’

I hesitated.

‘Nah, it’s okay,’ I said.

He grimly inspected his cigarette.

‘Long way to go for a coffee.’

I shrugged and unlocked my bicycle.

‘You know what I reckon? I reckon you’re going up there to meet a bloke.’

I didn’t say anything. Ibu Wayan watched us from behind a dripping fan of leaves.

The boys were on the doorstep, brooms across knees, waiting to clean the room. He slammed his cock back into me. I could feel his hips hard against my hips. I could see the tin-grey threads through his curls.

‘How come you’re so distant?’

I’d been thinking about my sister. She’d sent me an email to say that she’d booked her ticket, and that maybe we could meet in Kuala Lumpur if I didn’t want to fly all the way to Thailand. My visa was due to run out in two weeks,
and so I told her that I would.

I didn't say anything to Mike.

'I love you,' he threatened.

I couldn't move.

'Well? Do you love me?'

The sun on the wall was swept and cut and swept and cut by fan spokes.

I was sitting on the doorstep of Mike's room, smoking a keretek, when Fabio came past.

'How was your day?' I asked.

His eyes grew big and wicked with glee, and he told me about the policeman who had tried to pull him up at a set of traffic lights by grabbing on to the surfboard racks at the side of his motorbike. As soon as the lights turned green, Fabio revved off. But the policeman wouldn't let go. He was bouncing along beside the bike when ——

From the bedroom came a roar.

Fabio looked at me, and I looked at him, pleading, please don't leave me, and then his eyes dropped from my face, tea-weak and pale.

I watched him walk back over the bruised mouths of frangipanis to his room.

I looked at the ashen cloves between my toes.

On the other side of the garden, Ibu Wayan cackled behind her fan.

That night we lay in bed together. We didn't touch. It was hot. I got up and went to the toilet. It welled with that Bali sewer smell. I went back to bed. The geckos chi-chaked, chi-chacked in the corners. I reached over to the water. There was only a mouthful left so I swung out of bed into a bra and jeans and tee then grabbed my wallet.

'Well fuck you, Emma,' he hurled at the closing door.

When I got back with two bottles of water, he was gone.

The next day I went to the warung at two, that dead hour when the shop keepers stretch out on cane mats and the kites are tied and let fly like windy blood and when everything is hot and quiet along the lanes except for the occasional buzz of a passing motorbike.

At the warung the lunch rush had finished; the fan clicked, ticked and whirred. Kadek swept slowly.
‘Capek deh!’ she sighed.

Just as I finished an es kelapa muda he came in. His face was an inscrutable pottery mask. Barely a crack of acknowledgement. He didn’t sit with me.

‘Kadek. Satu bintang besar.’ Kadek stood her broom against the wall and slid over to the fridge.

I waited. He didn’t turn around. And so I got up and softly, softly, put my palms on his shoulders.

He turned around and bit me.

It was the morning I was leaving for Kuala Lumpur. I sat up at Ibu Wayan’s breakfast table, drinking a coffee that left gravel on my tongue, wondering if I would see Mike before I left. Five minutes before my taxi was due, across the arboreal courtyard, the door to Mike’s room opened. A girl stepped outside and lit a keretek. The coffee splintered in my hands. Even from here I could see the crazy redness of her lips.

Ibu Wayan ran out of the kitchen and stood behind me, following my gaze. She placed a crooked palm on my shoulder.

‘That is the life, Emma,’ she said.

Then cackled.
I was given Keith Richards the day after a fox ate my pet lamb Barge. I stood over the bloody mess and winked at it. His cloudy eyes were frozen; he didn't wink back. I didn't cry. The air smelt like horseshit and dried blood and flesh. His large intestine was resting like a snake in the grass, but I didn't cry. Mum gave me the 'that's nature' talk. Over her shoulder, I watched Dad lugging the ravished carcass by the front legs across the field. That night I overheard Mum in the kitchen asking Dad if there was any meat to salvage for the Sunday roast. Then I cried.

I'm now a loyal vegetarian every day of the week, except Meatloaf Mondays.

Keith is vegetarian too. He eats carrots and Minties. Keith's my roommate, he watches me study and sleep and mop up milkshakes with my school shirt. He even witnessed the travesty of August 2009. Jessica Hartley told the class I had wet my pants when really an unfortunate ant bite had disabled me from right-handed use.

'It's lemonade!' I persisted, cursing my clumsy left hand and that pesky ant.

To be fourteen and assumed incontinent can really bash a guy's rep. I was distraught and Keith saw the afternoons of embarrassed tears, the mornings of Mum dragging me by my ankles — not unlike the way Dad dragged the late, great Barge — from the safety of my bed. Then there were the sweaty weekends spent lifting weights far too heavy for my size, an effort to prove my masculinity. I would give up and masturbate instead, but Keith never saw that: I'd throw a towel over his cage.

In December of that same year, Jessica Heartless ballooned by about 15 kilos. She tried to act all mature and experienced, blaming her obvious fluctuation as a side effect from going on the pill. I saw through her lame excuse — she was shielding the root of the problem; comfort eating fuelled by her adolescent female insecurities. She got what she deserved.
Now I'm fifteen and I don't care about those juvenile things. My days are spent thinking about girls, masturbating and working on my art. Yes, I'm an artist. Truth be told I think I'm kind of revolutionary. Have you ever heard of an artist who uses his guinea pig as a paintbrush? I haven't. Yet, I will research this further to secure my confidence.

Keith's and my own artistic relationship derived from the harrowing effects of a uselessly ambiguous letter from NASA.

For months I had so graciously been offering Keith Richards, sacrificing my best friend, for the benedictions of science. I had written — not too frequently, perhaps weekly — a letter to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration informing them of my willingness to send Keith, a very capable, independent guinea pig on a space mission. One could only imagine how excited I was to receive an envelope with the little blue and red emblem in the corner. I almost vomited. I ripped it open with my teeth like a savage. A bit of saliva smudged the official font, I could taste it; the glory, the ink. It read:

Dear Mr Saxon,
Please abstain further contact with The National Aeronautics and Space Administration.
Regards, Peter Salsbury, Contact and Advice Consultant.

What the fuck Peter?! I adhered to his stucky request and wrote a passionate letter signed 'Keith Richards', but I needed a new hobby. A new goal. I needed Keith to reach his full potential. One sullen Wednesday I was enticing Keith on a path around his cage with a Mintie when his back paws stepped in a puddle of piddle. He left little wet guinea pig paw prints in shapes and lines wherever I conducted him to go.

'Keith!' I declared, 'We're gonna be superstars!'
Keith was silent and killing my buzz so I poked him until he squeaked.

Many feared that post-artistic discovery, I might become one of those pretentious art types — you know the indoor scarf-wearing types? Sometimes I notice Keith's watery eyes possess a certain conceited glare. I have to remind him that although our pad has been transformed into a galleria we're still Keith and James, regular milkshake-drinking, pie-eating dudes. Sometimes I prefer Jacques.

Our artworks don the walls of my bedroom. The exhibition stands at twelve
canvases of all sizes with little paw-prints that trace out a word, generally an emotion. Perhaps my most ambitious canvas is ‘Blue’ — blue paw prints on a white canvas that spell out the word ‘blue’ — a piece we painted after the permanent marker travesty of class 8A. (I’d rather not lament on this day, so I will go forth with another anecdote.)

‘James! Dinner’s ready!’ Or perhaps I will accept my mother’s loud intrusion as a blessing and descend to the kitchen where I will surely be poisoned.

I return to my room with an empty stomach (pea and cabbage casserole) and a starving appetite for success. My hunger grew during dinner when my father announced he would no longer be wearing underwear.

‘The elastic Sue. Stretched! They fall down, hang around my arse all day.’
My mother, the convergent thinker replied, ‘Buy some new ones love.’
‘Can’t afford to. Save money on water and washing this way. Saves time gettin’ down to it too.’
Mum whipped him with the tea towel and I excused myself to watch enough porn to forcibly remove the image of my parents having sex from my mind. I refuse to live the second half of my life broke and commando — the rubbing, the chafing, the raw skin on denim. Yikes!

I will be successful and I will be rich, and I will bathe in a bathtub of bottled spring water every evening. Of course when I say I, I mean Keith and I. Of course when I say Keith and I, I refer to the success, not the bathing.

Now I sit holding a tissue to the bleeding pimple on my forehead, waiting for inspiration, enticing the slinky minx to crawl under the crack of my open window, shimmy across the room, sit on my lap and whisper in my ear the million-dollar secret.

Fuck. Waiting is boring, and employing the metaphor of a sexy woman for inspiration has got me excited.

Shit, the towel! I jumped the gun and popped my cock in front of Keith. The air in here is awkward. I don’t know where to look, and so I divert my eyes to the computer and search ‘success quotes’. Ah ha! A quote by Pablo Picasso. How relevant. The great Pabs says: ‘Action is the foundational key to all success.’ Interesting.

‘Keith, Pablo says we need to take action. What do you propose?’
Keith preens himself; his little paws combing away at his fur, his face lost in the folds of his skin and fat. He stops to sneeze.
'As artists the obvious course of action would be to hold an exhibition. Should we hold an exhibition?'

Keith's eyes water and I decide that although this was not the triumphant Chariots-Of-Fire-path-to-success-epiphany, it will do.

Cue montage: Keith and I making posters, working furiously through the night, cutting coloured paper, concentration and determination in our eyes. We don't talk. Keith gets a glue-stick stuck to his fur. We share a fleeting laugh. Back to work. We arrange canvases, discuss our best options, Keith yawns, I yawn, it's contagious, I want to sleep, but I want success more, Keith falls asleep, I wake him. We print flyers. Lots of flyers. It will be on Sunday, people have nothing to do on Sundays, people think more on Sundays, people appreciate art on Sundays. It will be in my garage, a little grungy, a little homemade, a little independent, a lot respected. I become a victim to sleep and finally collapse at my desk with Keith curled on my lap.

It is morning and I have just caught sight of my pale face, blood-shot eyes and the purple bags that hang from them. I look like a slave to the paint, like I haven't left my den in months. I look like a fucking artist!

Step two, hype. The flyers have been distributed. The neighbours have them (hopefully rescued from their letterboxes and stuck to the fridge). The kids at school have them, the Principal has one, I strapped them to street lights and telegraph poles, I sent one to the Mayors office, I even disregarded my hostility momentarily and sent one to that jerk Peter over at NASA. Hype is important.

I'm a success, I'm a fucking success! Someone paint me in gold and mould me into a statue! Everyone came. (Peter the NASA prick did not). There were people, actual real life bodies, bodies with eyes — eyes that looked at my canvases. Regina Milford from the Hepsford Herald came with her voice recorder, camera and a note pad.

'How did you train Keith to perform like this?' she asked.

It's going to be front page. I don't know why I'm so excited, I expected a good turn out. Keith is more excited, he just peed on his carrot. Nothing was sold, but the hype is there. Dear Picasso, hype is the foundational key to success.

Regina Milford is a lying snot sucking bitch. Page twenty-three of the Hepsford Herald is ink-stained with lies!
She wrote an article all right — a fucking expose on Keith!

‘Keith’s owner attends Hepford High School and is very proud of his furry friend.’

‘Keith’s owner?’

Firstly, Keith is a free spirit. Although he lives in a cage and eats only when I force food through the metal slats, he is free to go and do what he wants, he belongs to no-one — I am not his owner, I am his partner. That is my second point — Keith and I are partners; we share equal creative genius and credit. And thirdly, Regina Milford is a ridiculous name.

‘Keith, what did you say to Regina? You were honest right?’

Keith isn’t answering me.

‘Keith, I’m not mad, it’s not your fault journalists do this — they’re trying to tear us apart, they want this to happen, they want drama. Why didn’t you eat your carrot today? Not hungry? Is it ‘cause it’s not peeled? Is it because I didn’t peel it? It’s because I didn’t peel it isn’t it! You self-righteous fame sucking pig! I can’t believe you! What did you tell Regina, Keith? What did you say? Yeah, that’s right, you sit there and sniff the air like the arrogant back-stabbing jerk you are. I can’t look at you.’

I throw the towel over Keith’s cage and bury my face in the pillows. I’m so angry. I need to paint. I need to let out this potentially creative frustration, but my paintbrush — who also happens to be my partner — has let me down. Creativity is trapped like an animal in a cage. I like that metaphor. Perhaps I’ll be a writer instead.
Jeffrey had managed to sing his way down to nine bottles of beer on the wall, and a single finger of cheap scotch in the bottle on the table, when the doorbell rang.

‘It’s open,’ he called out. There was no response.

‘I said it’s open.’ The doorbell rang again.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake! It’s open, okay? Open!’

The doorbell rang for a third time and Jeffrey stood, cursing. ‘Jeez-lou-fucking-weez,’ he said, walking to the door. ‘I’m coming, alright?’

He opened the door to find Brad, who was trying to shake water out of his hair and overcoat onto Jeffrey’s front porch.

‘Are you happy?’ Jeffrey asked. ‘I’m up. I’m out of my chair. I’m walking.’

Brad smiled, slow and cautious. ‘Jeffrey. Nice to see you again.’

‘Fuck you.’ He grabbed Brad by the sleeve of his coat and pulled him through the door, into the flat.

‘Well? Are you happy now?’ Jeffrey waved his hands around, vaguely gesturing at the Spartan furniture and peeling wallpaper. ‘Is it everything you ever dreamed of and more?’

Slowly, Brad looked around the flat. ‘Uh, what?’

‘Well, look at me. Standing on my own two feet, like some sort of... cow. Just a standing cow. Does this please you, Brad? Does this give you pleasure?’

‘No, Jeffrey, cows don’t give me pleasure.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m relatively certain, yes.’

Jeffrey took a deep breath, glaring at his new guest. ‘Well, make yourself at home.’

‘Thank you,’ Brad replied, turning on the spot as he took in the flat.

‘Please, do sit down.’ Jeffrey gestured to the single chair by the table, a faded green fold-out. Brad took one look and shook his head.
‘I’m fine,’ he said.
‘Sit down.’
‘There’s only the one, it’d be rude——’
‘Sit.’ Jeffrey’s voice came out a growl and Brad quickly darted into the chair. He winced as the fabric on the seat made a tiny squishing sound.
‘It’s a lovely chair.’ Brad’s smile was wide, thin and false as he looked up at Jeffrey.
‘Thanks. Picked it up at a garage sale.’
‘Really?’ Brad nodded with fake approval. ‘That’s... good. How much was it?’
‘Huh?’
‘How much did you pay for it?’
Jeffrey raised an eyebrow. ‘Pay for what?’
‘The chair.’
‘I got the chair at a garage sale.’
‘Yeah, but how much did you pay for it at the garage sale?’
‘What do you mean?’
Brad didn’t say anything, only nodding slowly.
‘I think you need a drink,’ Jeffrey said.
‘I’m fine.’ Brad waved his palm at Jeffrey.
‘No, you need a drink. A big fat whopper of a drink. A drink so big, that... she’ll... look huge...’ Jeffrey shrugged his shoulders. ‘...compared to something tiny...’
Brad looked at the scotch bottle. ‘Jeff, how much have you had to drink this morning?’
‘A lot.’
‘Right. Makes sense.’
After a moment, Jeffrey said, ‘By morning, you mean?’
‘Since midnight.’
‘Oh. Okay. I’ve drunk fuckloads since this morning.’
Brad did a slow double-take. ‘What did you mean by morning?’
‘From when I’d normally have woken up if I hadn’t spent the last nineteen hours awake and drinking.’
‘When do you normally get up?’
‘Ten-ish? If I’ve got stuff to do.’
Brad checked his watch. ‘It’s ten to eleven.’
‘I’ll get you a drink,’ Jeffrey repeated, grabbing the coffee mug from the table as he stood and walked to the kitchenette. Empty glasses and dirty plates had piled high in the sink, and cockroaches scuttled across the counter. Jeffrey looked left and right, shrugged his shoulders, and returned to the table. He placed the mug in front of Brad, picked up the bottle of scotch, and poured.

‘That’s just the same mug——’ Brad started to say.

‘Just drink it.’

As Brad sipped from the coffee mug and winced, Jeffrey sank to the floor and curled his legs up to sit cross-legged. He took a swig from the bottle and watched Brad gag slightly on the taste of cheap scotch.

‘That was hers,’ he said, as Brad put the mug down.

Brad looked down at him.

‘The mug,’ Jeffrey pointed to it. ‘That was hers.’

It was pale blue, except for the raised flower patterns that had been painted with yellows and pinks and pale oranges. The handle was thick and sturdy, and patches of white surrounded the rim where ceramic had chipped away.

Brad took a sharp breath. ‘When was the last time you left the flat? Huh? Or...’ He shrugged. ‘I dunno, went to get a paper. Took the bins out. Showered. Ate food that wasn’t designed for some kid’s lunchbox?’

‘Don’t know,’ Jeffrey replied. ‘A while?’

‘So maybe it’s time to do some of those things.’

‘I’m fine here.’

‘No,’ Brad shook his head. ‘No, mate, you’re not fine. It’s been two and a half weeks.’

‘So?’

‘So. So you’re not dealing with this like a man.’

Jeffrey chuckled. ‘Should I run out and slaughter something for my food? Or join the army? Or... I dunno, floss?’

‘You should do something other than sit in your flat and drink.’ Brad reached out for the coffee mug, still with scotch in it, and looked over the flower patterns. ‘And get rid of this.’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘There’s no point.’

‘Of course there’s a point.’ Brad stood, clutching the mug. ‘I’ll go throw it out right now.’
'I said no!' Jeffrey shouted.

Slowly, Brad sat down again, watching Jeffrey.

'I tried that. I tried giving it away, but they wouldn't take it, they'd just leave it next to the door on the way out. And I tossed it a couple of times, I did, right in the bin.'

'Then what happened?'

'I needed a mug.'

'Jeff, if you want, I'll take it for you.'

'Don't. Seriously, don't.' Sulking, Jeffrey sipped from the bottle of scotch.

'It's fine, just leave it.'

'You shouldn't keep it around.'

'I said it's fine.'

'It's not fine. You aren't fine. Look at you.'

Jeffrey finished the last mouthful of scotch and rolled the bottle away, across the floor towards his bedroom. 'Thanks for coming,' he said, watching as the bottle twisted across the lino.

After a few moments, Brad stood. He placed the mug on the ground in front of Jeffrey and then let himself out of the flat, quietly closing the door behind him.

Jeffrey picked up the mug and drained the scotch. He looked at the flower patterns for what seemed like an hour before hurling it at the closest wall as hard as he could. It struck handle-first and a sliver of white ceramic cracked off, spiralling through the air. The rest of the mug fell and skittered across the floor, coming to rest by the leg of the table, perfectly intact.
the adults only joke book

LEO CLAYTON

i.
Your life gets nice

Someone comes along and suddenly
it’s all a pastoral
you go to bed early and get upset
over the hardware store losing business
to the new chain one suburb over.

ii.
And it’s nice like Paris Hiltons’
baby photos

and funny like ‘I only write poetry
for the money’

or how you thought the Illawarra
Coke Company made cola
and you asked for a free tour

instead you bask in the sun,
your genius being too precious
for logic.
iii.
Sex becomes like masturbation, and
in the words of Martha Stewart
it’s a good thing
as I can relax and not try so hard
to impress you

and instead lean back and laugh,
trying to use Bobby Frost’s
The Road Not Taken
to convince you to try anal.

iv.
You take the courtesy of not comparing
me to your past lovers and in my poems
I don’t compare you to rust, which
I always found beautiful, but you wouldn’t
like it because it only grows on machines
that have stopped moving or slowed down.

As I gather moss,
we do the super-literal tango
and say things like
no you hang up first
and I like you more
over & over & over

and it’s not enough to be great
but who wants that anyway?
sketch

JESS SOUTHWELL

You're paper thin, your skin white beneath lead-smudge cheeks, hair thick strands of grey. I fold the creases into your forehead and crinkle the corners of your eyes. I age you.

The ocean's touch teases the shore, and I taste the salt in the air, feel its sticky fingerprints on my skin.

I am sorry now that I didn't take a photograph — just this rough sketch of the landscape of your face as you let the sun dry your skin. You were daydreaming, as you often did — your eyes glazed over like frozen lakes — and I kept that moment, mapped the contours and built you up in lead. A blueprint. I curled your earlobe, and you blushed to notice the way my fingers touched the paper.

You were exhausted and beaded with salt water, and when you touched my arm I could feel your skin still held the coolness of the ocean. I watched you stretch and settle in the sand — your hair collected the grains and shook them loose on the page. Your chest heaved.

You closed your eyes and drifted, let me sketch you with my salt-flaked fingers. The beach moulded to your body and embraced you. The ocean pooled in the hollow of your belly button.

Overhead, a gull orbited; I shielded the page against the gifts it might bring. A couple, at the fringe of the beach where the sand combed through the grass, crumpled their chip paper and pulled the gull into their gravity.

The sun dipped lower. Your stomach rose and fell to a steady beat, the flare of your nostrils breaking the tempo. I shaded the shadows from your nose — the bulge on the bridge amongst the field of freckles is still a mystery.

You slept until your skin was dry and your paper twin was stretched out on the sand beside you. We were too far down the beach and the tide was coming in, kissing our toes with foamy lips.
The sun, with its Midas touch, turned the sea gold. You wanted to be gold too. I should have said no.

I curl my toes into the sand, searching for water. The paper is brittle now, the corners no longer opaque where the strands of your hair have soaked up the oil from my fingers. I touch the place where I carved out the base of your neck, the grains of sand just small dots of lead on your paper-white skin.
saigon filth
TAYNE EPHRAIM

i.
out from the taxi
quickly enveloped
in something like
battery acid or
rancid, acrid, crumbling rust,
rotting fish, gasoline —
grabs your nose and says
this is Vietnam

ii.
Saigon Reds piling up
on a little dented table
by the side of the street
a city crawling
a meth circus,
of shrieking horns
frying squid and
rattletrap machines

too many nights spent
in fold-out deck chairs
with the bailed dregs
of the West
ill.
‘Dude, I was on the freeway
I saw a guy,
I think he was dead
a pool of blood

a semi cleaned him up
and a guy stole his wallet
hella fucked’
SENT 3.41AM

iv.
flaying loaded
down 12am streets
burning a neon blur
of hot stink rush

in the morning I wake up
on a scorched kitchen floor
with no shirt
the smell brings it all back
On an afternoon in late February, Alanah and Jayden decided to run away together.

'I want to be with you forever,' she had said in the dreamy voice of a teenage girl who believes life is just like TV. Her head lay on Jayden's chest, ear pressed just above his nipple, as they watched late afternoon reruns of *Home and Away* on the shabby old television set in the backroom of his parents' house. It was summer and the door was wide open, letting the hot air and flies into the already stuffy room; the ceiling fan was broken, bent after his brother kicked a football at it.

'You're just saying that because being here means you don't have to listen to your parents fight.' He kissed her forehead.

Alanah spent most afternoons at Jayden's place; from the moment school let out until just before dinner, they would hang out in the extension at the back of his parents' small fibro house. Jayden had built the new room with his dad the year before he passed away and now used it as his personal living space. It was divided in half by a small step, which had once been the back verandah. The upper level housed a pool table that was missing half the balls, and the lower had a couch, TV and coffee table covered with old magazines, guitar picks and cigarette butts. It had become their little love shack; whenever his parents weren't home, he and Alanah would have sex on the couch. Or they'd take an old picnic blanket into the bush beyond the dry creek and do it there.

'All they do is scream at each other,' Alanah complained. 'And when I get home they start screamin' at me. It's such a joke. And they're always pissed 'cause I spend so much time here with you, 'cause they don't want me seein' you, but I can't stand to be at home 'cause they're so fucking annoying.'

Jayden turned twenty-five a fortnight ago. He'd had a rowdy party in the backyard and when the police came to break it up they weren't impressed to find a fourteen year old girl, drunk and smoking amongst a group of young adults.
Alanah had been escorted home by the cops in the early hours of the morning. That was when the fighting began.

‘If you stopped comin’ here would they stop fighting?’ Jayden asked, his hold on Alanah tightening.

‘I don’t care if it did — I’m never leaving you.’ She sat up, her knees either side of the older man’s waist. ‘Let’s get out of here, away from all this shit. Let’s go somewhere we can be together.’ Her eyes were intense and her smile wild as she pounded her small fists against his chest.

Jayden knew how this would look — running off with a minor could never turn out in his favour. He nudged the girl aside and sat up, elbows resting on his knees as he reached for a cigarette. He could tell she was pouting without looking, but kept his eyes fixed on the fraying rug beneath the coffee table.

‘If you loved me you’d do it,’ Alanah said through the silence.

Jayden had heard those words before. Every girl he’d dated during his own high school years said that when they wanted something; nothing had changed. He butted the cigarette in the already full ashtray. Alanah was sitting with her knees tucked beneath her, scrunching and un-scrunching the ends of her black-dyed hair. He usually let her have her way but this was a decision he couldn’t take lightly.

‘What about school?’ He asked, plucking at the first excuse he thought of. Standing now, he paced back and forth in front of the lounge.

‘What about school?’ She echoed. ‘I fuckin’ hate it. I skip most days to hang out with you anyways.’

‘Well, what about my work then? We’re gonna need money wherever we go.’

‘Jay, you’re a bloody plumber. You can work anywhere. Why do you even care about this shit?’

‘I’m just thinking about you, baby.’ Jayden sat back down beside her, hands clasping her shoulders. ‘I just want you to be happy.’

‘Running away with you would make me happy.’

Looking at her face, Jayden could see the resolve etched across her deceivingly mature features. He always thought she looked older than she was — the heavy makeup and her choice of clothing contributed — but her naive assumptions of love and life gave her age away. Jayden accepted he wasn’t a very smart man (his School Certificate results proved it), but he knew Alanah’s proposition was risky. Despite his hesitations, he found it hard to deny the excitement in the young woman’s eyes.
Jayden didn’t know where they were driving. He’d just jumped in the seat of his silver Camry sedan and started the engine. Alanah had only what would fit in her small, pink Billabong schoolbag, which had been graffitied with liquid paper and permanent marker. They’d made a quick stop by her parents’ house so she could grab some clothes and say goodbye to her dog before getting on the road. The plan was to put at least 200 kilometres between them and the town before nightfall. They didn’t leave a note.

It was raining and the rusted windscreen wiper scraped across the glass. The air-con was blaring and the rain did nothing to cool the searing summer heat — instead it made it unbearably muggy. Alanah was sleeping with her head against the passenger window and Jayden turned the radio down so it wouldn’t wake her. She wore the white singlet with a fake Von Dutch logo across the chest she’d had on when he first met her a year ago outside Woolies trying to convince someone to go and buy her smokes. As he watched her sleep, his earlier anxieties washed away and he was now as excited as Alanah.

The lights bounced off the green road sign as they approached a small town. The neon digits on the dashboard informed Jayden that it was almost midnight. His eyes burned and he’d kill for a beer, so he decided to pull off the highway at the next exit and find a cheap hotel. He’d emptied his bank account at the ATM before leaving, in the hope that it would stop a money trail, just like on Blue Heelers. The only problem was the money running out.

‘Where are we?’ Alanah rubbed her eyes as she woke.

‘I can’t remember the name of the town.’ Jayden glanced out the window, but it was dark and there were no distinguishing features anyway — everything was dust and gum trees.

‘I don’t care where we are,’ she said, ‘As long as it’s away from them.’

The hotel they checked into was nothing special: the room was barely big enough for the double bed, small dresser and a bathroom the size of a wardrobe. The old CRT television was mounted in the top corner of the room. The décor was dark, with exposed brick walls and dull green carpet. Overall it was uninviting, and well worth its fifty-nine dollars a night. But it was affordable and they could be together, which was all that mattered.

Alanah wasted no time making herself at home. She threw her backpack in the corner of the room and flopped down on the bed without even bothering to remove her shoes. Jayden flicked through the wad of notes in his wallet and placed it on the dresser; they could afford to stay here for quite a while.
‘Well, first night of our new adventure,’ Jayden observed as he took a seat beside Alanah. The mattress was firm and not particularly comfortable. ‘What do you want to do?’

She grinned, biting her lower lip. ‘Let’s root,’ she suggested and pulled off her shirt.

Living in a hotel together for the rest of their lives was starting to look grim. Alanah was sick of eating Maccas every night and being confined to the room because Jayden was paranoid about being spotted and reported to the police. Alanah had already received twenty-seven phone calls from her parents, none of which she answered.

While eating the pizza they’d splurged on for dinner, a news bulletin came across the TV.

‘Police are concerned for the whereabouts of fourteen year old school girl Alanah Berch, who has been missing for five days,’ the newsreader announced. ‘Alanah’s parents urge anyone who may have seen their daughter to contact the police immediately.’

The broadcast cut to a clip of Alanah’s parents, sullen-eyed and embracing as they assaulted the camera with pleas for Alanah’s safe return. Her mother bawled into a handkerchief while her husband addressed his daughter directly:

‘Alanah, Sweetheart, we just want you to be safe’

Jayden switched off the TV. ‘Fuck.’

‘What did you do that for? I was watchin’ it.’ Alanah whined, dropping her half-eaten pizza slice back into the box. ‘Put it back on.’

‘We have to get outta here. Pack your shit. We need to move.’

Jayden threw their belongings together and gave the room a once-over to make sure nothing had been forgotten. He rushed down the stairs to the car park with Alanah in tow and dropped the room keys into the letter box on the wall beside reception guests could use for check out after hours.

‘I never thought I’d get on TV,’ Alanah mused as she slipped into the car.

By the end of the month, everything had turned sour. They never stayed in the same place for more than a week and with money running out, they were starving. Sitting in the car driving to yet another backwater town, Alanah turned to Jayden and said, ‘I think it’s time you took me home.’

‘I think so too.’
Jayden had not heard from Alanah since she returned to her parents. He skipped town as soon as she was home safe and they'd said their goodbyes. After explaining everything to his own family, they gave him a small amount of money and arranged for him to stay with his uncle in southern Sydney. He worked at a service station on the highway and joined his cousin at the local pub for a beer every afternoon when his shift finished. It wasn’t the same as living in the bush or on the road with his girl, but he couldn’t really complain — staying at home was too dangerous.

It was right before knock-off when a middle-aged man with a beer gut and greying hair walked into the shop. Jayden was watching infomercials selling some miracle kitchen appliance while the man grabbed snacks and magazines off the rack.

‘Pump two, thanks mate,’ he said and placed a Snickers bar and copies of Zoo and New Idea on the counter.

Jayden scanned the items but paused at the women’s magazine.

‘For my Missus, mate,’ the customer defended.

But that wasn’t why Jayden was staring: Alanah and her mother were photographed on the cover, embracing tightly, with the caption ‘I was abducted by an older man’ below them.

‘That’s just fuckin’ wrong!’ Jayden shouted, almost dropping the scanning wand on the floor.

‘I know, mate.’ The man slid his credit card across the counter. ‘There are some sick bastards in the world, aren’t there?’

Jayden swiped the card, his fingers numb and voice sunken. ‘There sure are.’
Hitch, thumbs blown fat with heat
along a deadly, Syrian-like sand corridor.
Dune 7’s distant, crawling with quads
and mirage when our lift (young, lusty,
white Namibians) ask if there’s ‘blacks’ in Australia.
‘Sure,’ we tell them. They look at each other.
‘But not like here? Not as many?
here, they’re everywhere!’
Everywhere and so we marvel sickly
their displacement, segregation:

the shy Himba with mud-bright
breasts with hair in thick ochre tubes
their clothes the warm colour of desert
the placement of their hands
patient, patiently out-waiting the sun; but become
products
displayed
inseparable from what they sell.

We think of the dog at Desert Sky
trained to bark and bite blacks
of the families in the hostel
campsite sleeping on blankets
instead of foam centimetres
instead of mattresses. I think of the black
waiters in restaurants
whistled at 
clicked at 
barked at 
by brandy-guzzling Boers.

I think of Namibia: its black with black 
white with white. Its young white couples 
in four wheel drives 
who sigh and tell us, 
'Ve've always wanted to go to Australia!'
LEA appears on stage. She paces slowly and intermittently, but she never looks down. Her hands are twisted and tight around each other, and she opens and shuts her mouth indecisively. Finally, she stops.

LEA:
My family doesn't know I like girls. The day I tried to tell them was the day Dana told me she wanted something more... lasting. Something official. I said no. She called me a pussy. Not a pussy licker, like most stupid people did, but an actual pussy.

I never touched her again.

Look, my tendency to screw girls into meaninglessness meaninglessly has never been to do with my family's stance on sexuality. I just don't do relationships. They're messy. The other person is never good enough for me. They get pathetically sad and angry when I don't get the feelings they get. So, I don't do relationships. I don't do relationships. I. Don't. Do. Relationships. I don't do relationships! ...And that's exactly what I yelled when the noise at the dinner table got too much. My aunt and her three kids who live with us and everyone else finally shut the hell up... and it was quiet until my dad spoke. Know what he said? 'Well, that's okay, sweetie. Relationships aren't for everybody at your age.' He was all understanding and shit. Then my five year old cousin Ben said 'Yeah!' and everybody laughed at how cute he was being. The racket with the forks and knives and chatter started up again. I finished my osso bucco in silence and smiled and left the table with the impression that I was relieved to get that off my chest.

(Hesitates) I went out and screwed a boy that night. And then I laughed in his face at how awful it was and he did the same. He called me a bitchy dyke. I called him an ignorant asshole. But that's okay — Christian and I are friends.
We meant it in jest. So anyway, then I came home and washed the sex off me and put myself down for sleep. Except, I ended up lying there for a few hours. I think it was probably just hard to sleep because of the commotion that is six kids under one roof. There's always some sort of noise every hour of the night. Yeah... there was nothing wrong with me other than sensitive hearing. I mean, just because I didn't tell my family at dinner that I like girls, it didn't mean I was chicken. Just because I screwed a boy, it didn't make me a fake.

(Shifts stance) I was off my game the next day. Which was absolutely funny because there were all these girls at the club that were exactly my type. Totally tuned into me like I was their favourite radio station, too. It was such a waste. Especially since Christian, Max, Justin and I have this pact that if somebody doesn't get some hot girl action each time we go out, they get a pity fuck. (Chuckles) And believe me, they would actually screw each other. They never made me feel as if I had to do any of them, though. (pauses) I'd never been on the receiving end of those pity fucks, either. The loser's side.

But that was before last night. (Shakes head) Before I felt really nervous, because — all too quickly — we were in Christian's bedroom and I was under him. Naked.

(Sighs) You know, I really... I hate when girls cry during sex. I seriously, honestly, truly, infuriatingly do. But I started to cry then, and I didn't know why I did — and I didn't know why I bit his shoulder either, why I told him to keep going, why I said to go faster, that everything was fine. That it was all okay.

The considerate bastard actually finished quickly, knowing I wouldn't.

We were both wordless as we got dressed. It was a silence that had understanding — one of those where we didn't need to talk, to explain a thing, because we just got it. Everything. I had gotten everything back on except for my shirt when he stopped me with his hands and started doing up the buttons for me. Then he looked me square in the eye, took my hand still wet with stupid eye junk and said, 'Let's go tell your parents that you like to bone girls as hard as I do.' I smiled at him. Laughed a little, even. I couldn't help it. Then I let the considerate bastard lead the way.
and it’s not really any of your business anyway is it?

DONNA WATERS

It's a dark night, even though all the streetlights are working. The green fluorescence from the pub's sign loiters on the footpath. It signals the smell of stale cigarettes and beer-soaked carpet. The footpath, which begins at the traffic lights and ends just around the corner, is clean tonight. Usually the sound of the races or the pokies can be heard through the long open window overlooking the street, but tonight is country and western night — Johnny Cash sings about a boy named Sue, but not loud enough to drown out the drinkers' voices. The drinkers seem happy.

You notice her sitting on the step. The stairs to the Sports Bar are just past the long window, where a fellow flicks his ash out onto the footpath. She's young. The lemonade is in a Reschs schooner glass, in danger of being kicked down the stairs. She's twirling her hair and pulling it. You look closer and notice there is a bald spot on the crown of her head where she has been twirling and pulling. She's wearing socks with Jesus sandals and is reading The Wishing Chair. You notice the title when she puts the book down on the step to sip more lemonade. You think she might prefer a milkshake, but the milk bar is long closed. She blows bubbles into the drink before trying to lift out each piece of ice. It isn't easy with the straw.

Someone has changed the music and it's Willie Nelson. Or Kenny Rogers. The Sports Bar door opens and the lemonade is smashed all over the footpath. You can't tell if this was deliberate. As a man and woman go down the stairs, the woman leans against the wall and vomits. The man turns and signals impatiently to the girl to come. The three of them start inching their way along the footpath, heading towards the traffic lights. The man swears at the woman, almost in time with Kenny Rogers. The girl watches her feet as she walks. The traffic lights are still red and the night is getting darker. But they walk into it anyway.
You notice the book lying on the step. It has managed to stay dry. A fleeting thought but you think perhaps you should pick this up, run after the girl and see if she's alright. You ought to give her book back because she seemed like a good reader and she mightn't have a lot of books at home. This might be her favourite one. It's getting very dark now and the book isn't likely to be here if they come back for it.

But now they're gone. And your bus is here and you see your friend looking for you from the inside. And thank Christ; it's the express bus.
In the evening — she unaware — I watch my wife make herself up. She takes such pride in her appearance. It was several weeks into our courtship before I had occasion to see her without her face. I was incredulous at what a remarkably plain woman she was behind her cosmetic mask. Stepping out of the bathroom, hair wrapped in a towel, I saw her as she was: stark, bare and without definition.

Where they would normally stand out, her eyes and lips and cheeks were uniform. I marveled at her; may have recoiled were it not for better senses, for she appeared almost ill without her usual colour. Would I have been drawn to her if I had first seen her thus? Would we have dined, become lovers, married? Would I have fallen for her face if I had first seen it bare?

Her eyes, a little swollen as though she might have wept all afternoon (though this is certainly not the case, as ours is a happy union), are always first after she has smoothed foundation along her brow, the bridge of her nose and blended with (or is it to?) the neck.

Always grey, or charcoal, or slate above her lashes, separated and made full and thick. She commented to me once (was it at the theatre?) that she held no particular care for outlandish colours above the eyes. No greens or pinks or blues were to be found in her vanity bag.

She lined her eyes only so much, just enough to draw a glance. Indeed, yes, there are her eyes. Are they not lovely? Can she not hold court with but a flutter, a wink?

Her lips are outlined, traced around their edge, filled in with a deep red. Sufficient, they are pursed, blotted and pursed again.

An actor friend of hers — waifish fellow, shadow of a man for whom I’ve never cared — once commented that she only ever wore enough makeup to tread the boards. With a wry smile she joked that life is merely a performance with a longer wait for the final curtain. From her audience, the appropriate laughter
and warm smiles. Yet, how truthful the playful remark. Does one not perform constantly for one's audience? My darling wife, my own, does she not make herself up in order that she might better play to her admiring crowd? How lucky a crowd to have her, if only for as long as most may. And how lucky am I, the luckiest of all, to have her as my own. A private performance whenever I wish.

She draws out her cheeks, studies herself briefly for any errors, and is done. The master has perfected her canvas and how perfect it is. She rises to dress and I too, to slip away. I have no interest in her wardrobe, only her face. To study keenly — a student entranced as she transforms herself effortlessly with such speed — will suffice until the next occasion when next she takes up her brush, and I my private vigil.
is it a prison?
who would say
  her ribs are bars
and the sky
  a distant postage stamp

a rat
her only visitor
  fur sleeked over
complicated organs

he submits to stroking but
  would eat his own young
In this house I hear weak thuds and a constant slow trickle of water; it is as though the house has become alive. Perhaps sometimes it takes death to bring something back to life, for it to rise from its own ashes. I believe veins run along the walls, past the plasterboard, along the piping and tangle amongst the electrical wires. If I concentrate hard enough I can hear the pulsing of blood, the slow ticking of a heart. Yes, I believe this house is alive.

It was once a house of impeccable tidiness, but Grandma had slowed in her old age. Now, floorboards creak beneath my feet like old bones, while cobwebs line the cornices and fill empty spaces in old lamps with delicately spun thread. A thin layer of dust covers every surface like a veil, trying to keep it all from me. But what is here belongs to me; it forms me and gives me shape like one would when moulding the human form from a lump of clay. That is what I would be if it weren't for this house and these memories: a hard lump of clay, soon to be ground into a handful of dust. It is the memories uncovered in this house that run through my own veins and the veins of my Grandma, weaving us together in our own web of stories.

When I first found out about Grandma's death, I accepted it with no tears or questions. I felt as though I had been preparing myself for months — we were given warning that she had been diagnosed with a blood disease, nothing rare or mysterious but also something that could not be fixed. Sometimes we fall into the trap of believing the human body to be a kind of toy. Growing up you think surely the doctors can fix everything; they are the miracle workers of our world. Your doll loses an arm or your teddy loses an eye but it can always be sewn back on, glued into place. When I was younger, I always thought the human body to be just like this. Now, at twenty-five years of age, I knew this would not be the case with Grandma. She knew as well, with the wisdom of her years and after
surviving a World War, this would be the one thing to finally bring about her defeat.

By the time it truly happened, I felt as though I lived through Grandma’s passing a thousand times over, but everything is different in the mind. Our minds are just a small room with a very large view where everything seems possible. If we don’t like something enough we can always close the door, and this was exactly what I chose to do. I locked myself behind curtain-drawn windows and dived into other realms. I sipped tea in Phuket and sailed ships in my mind. I sat in fields of red poppies while staring up at the sun. The possibilities in my mind were endless but no matter how serene they seemed, they brought me no comfort. I had become an insomniac and only at night would I peer out of the window and pull the heavy curtain aside. My eyes would wander over seascapes of stars in the inky sky. I would curl up like a kitten and sit on the window ledge, cradling my knees to my chest while nursing a stiff drink. Looking out onto the city skyline through the rise and fall of buildings, I searched for the moon from my childhood. When I was much younger, my dad would take my brother and I into the backyard and lift us onto his broad shoulders to stare at the full moon. That glowing, iridescent gem in the sky always astonished my two-year-old self. It offered such hope, as the world seemed a strange and exciting place back then; it doesn’t provide me such satisfaction now. I thought perhaps the stillness of night would soothe my mind. But then I would hear it — her voice drifting through the house. I was unable to make out specific words but knew it was Grandma. I would whisper back at first, then gradually talk louder. I was speaking to a ghost, one I could feel but never see. Early in the morning, whilst treading around the kitchen in a thin, cotton robe with a coffee cup in my hand, the phone rang. It was Grandma’s solicitor, Mr Ruddock, and being caught quite unaware, I stumbled over my words; I thought I had finished my dealings with him two weeks ago. My parents had flown from South Australia, whilst my brother made his way from London to meet Mr Ruddock and myself in a small, cream coloured room that smelt of cheap aftershave with hints of tobacco. Without any controversies or complications, I was glad the estate was to be cleaned out and sold in a month, with the sum to be divided equally amongst her four remaining relatives. But here he was again. His nasally voice echoed through the receiver as he explained how he found a letter that morning and how sorry he was for allowing it to become misplaced. That letter led me to where I am now: this house.
I stood outside the dark, shingled cottage as the breeze whispered against my ear and gently rippled through my loose, messy hair. I walked slowly around the side of the house, kicking and crushing auburn leaves in my path, but I dared not trespass inside. I felt like an intruder, even though I had been here before. Many times I had run down the driveway, convinced I could fly if I ran fast enough with my arms outstretched. I had sat in the lounge room and peered out that same window and tugged the lacy curtain gently aside. I have buried dead insects in the backyard and created makeshift graves. Here lie the bones of a beloved pet. I've cried here, scraped my knee against that rock and sat on those steps while holding an ice cream that melted slowly and escaped down my wrist, dripping on the pavement in the sweetness of summer. Yet I could not go inside that house just yet.

Wearing the little black lace gloves and red velvet jacket my grandma once gave me in my teenage years, I made my way to the rose bush near the stepping stones at the front of the house. Bending down, I pulled my water bottle from the bag swinging at my side and slowly allowed a thin stream of water to moisten the plant's soil. My Grandma and I planted this rosebush together on my fourteenth birthday, during the crisp month of July. She told me I was now a woman and I beamed at her, wearing the brightest shade of lipstick I could find. I had become a little lady, just like she had once been.

With those memories and sugary nostalgia, I finally took the key in hand and made my way to the old clunky wooden doors. The wood seemed so heavy and thick, as though even a ghost could not penetrate its foreboding solidity. This house had not been touched since Grandma’s death and I think that is what frightened me most.

And now here I am, standing in front of a mahogany chest of drawers while sunlight emanates through the window and dust particles float, almost fixed in the air. I unlock the top, left drawer. This key is much smaller and old-fashioned, like ones you find jangling on the end of necklaces. I can hear the dull, continuous thud of blood pumping, although it seems to be coming from within me. My heart races and my head throbs but I cast this aside and focus on the task at hand. I pull the drawer open slowly as I fear it may topple out and break. I find them stacked one on top of the other, dusty and tea-stained in places but mesmerising nonetheless: Grandma’s old photo albums, the little treasures she wanted to be left solely in my possession. Slightly confused, I recall her slanted handwriting in the letter written to her solicitor. It was as though this
idea had come to her as an afterthought. I pick up the topmost book and trace my finger over the words ‘photo album’ written in silver, slowly following each curve and arch. I turn it over in my hands and admire it. I swallow hard as I open the album to the first page and a tiny square photo leaps up at me, catching me off guard. It is of Grandma standing in front of the flowers she had planted along the front path almost five years ago. She is wearing a white sundress with orange flowers printed on it. I always liked that dress; it reminded me of summer and made me dream of one day going to Hawaii. I used to sit down in front of the television in Grandma’s old lounge room while she flicked through a newspaper in the corner. I’d tell her about how big the waves get in Hawaii and ask if she would come with me one day. She’d laugh and say she was too old for that. Too old, she’d say again with the flick of her hand and a warm smile.

As I continue looking through the album, I come across a photo of my Grandma’s beloved dog, Cassius. He was walking along Fingal Head Beach, his paw reaching out to touch something beneath him on the sand as his little head looked down in curiosity. No one else is in the photograph, but you can just make out the brief shadow of the photographer along the right edge. In the background of the photo, past the vast ocean with its gentle waves, is a small, rocky island that I recognise as Cook Island after many holidays during the spring in a small fishing village. Over time the photograph has faded slightly to a pink hue but it hasn’t lost its beauty. If anything, the ageing process has made it more appealing, resembling dreamy nostalgic scenes one plays over and over in their mind.

Next to this photograph, however, is one of Cassius’s grave — a small mound of dirt over which hyacinths and daisies are sprinkled. I turn the page to reveal a photograph of my brother and I when we were children. He would have been seven or eight years old and I must have been five. He is holding a canary on his finger, grinning up at the camera as I cower and glare behind him, my hair cut in a short neat bob. There are also photographs of Grandma’s crepe myrtle tree, its flowers a magnificent magenta. It was in bloom most of the year and Grandma always made us take family portraits in front of it when we came to stay with her. Her garden, along with her grandchildren, had always been her pride and joy.

Up until now I had tried to wipe out her memory and ignore the footprints she left behind. After all, how could her death haunt me if she had never existed in the first place? It was cruel, I know, but I felt like it was the only way to deal with her absence and this sudden void.
I close the photo album and place it on top of the pile, back into the mahogany drawer. I turn the key and the lock clicks. A soft breeze ripples though the window, making the dust shimmer in the fading sunlight. I lay my head down on her old pillow, shut my eyelids and wait for the curtain close of day. Then, I will kiss my insomnia goodnight.
The first time Gabriel learns of how the world works, he is six and being chased around the playground by his classmate Ashley. She cries for him to return her doll but, rather than adhere to her wishes, he continues to race in circles, cackling wildly. Eventually, he stops, drops the figurine on the ground and listens to the satisfying crunch beneath his shoe. That afternoon, he arrives home where his mother shows him his favourite toy, ripped in two by the family dog.

When Gabriel is eleven, he finds a magnifying glass while rummaging in his father's drawers. He spends the afternoon in the front garden, sizzling ants for pleasure. The youth is so lost in his game that he returns inside hours later with an aggressive sunburn spoiling his once-porcelain skin. As an adult, there are still small scars visible in the reflection of fluorescent light.

Gabriel grows up to be an accountant. He trains, studies and strives during his years at school and university. With few friends, he is able to focus solely on his future. Dedication and perseverance shape the formula by which he lives, and it pays off. By the time Gabriel is an adult, the world is in his favour.

He builds reputation fast, outgrowing the firms he works in and establishing his own. Within a year, he’s doubling his previous salary. Reliable and resourceful, he works towards his customers’ best interests. However, he soon learns his combination of cunning and aptitude are a natural formula for personal gain. His clients are some of the wealthiest businessmen in town, and it doesn’t take him long to commandeer their prosperity.

Gabriel buys a few hundred thousand dollars worth of stock, direct from the accounts of his clients. It’s a good year, it seems, and he doubles his profits.
Doubt is a frequent visitor, but Gabriel isn’t swayed. He researches his clients, unveils their pasts and chooses his targets.

Mr Andrews is a prominent businessman in the community — his past is so successfully cloaked that his reputation has not been tarnished. He lives a decent life now, balanced between honesty and profit. But Gabriel is skilled, and finds the weak point in Mr Andrews’ clandestine history. For a year, Mr Andrews forfeits his superannuation by employing Gabriel as his personal accountant.

Late one night, fingers buzzing, Mr Andrews explores his online bank statement. The mining business is large and lucrative, and over the last six months there’s been a rise in revenue. Mr Andrews swells with excitement over the prospect of an early retirement — age is beginning to catch up at an accelerating rate, and withdrawal from the business world is becoming more appealing. Although assured of his wealth already, he enjoys the rush of satisfaction he receives from seeing the substantial sum before his eyes.

Gabriel wakes the following morning to the news of a dramatic fall in the stock market overnight. Quick math reveals he’s lost everything he took, and everything that was rightfully his. The roof over his head is no longer a guarantee. Before his shock subsides and he is able to form a plan, there is a violent hammering at the door of his suite.

Mr Andrews barges in, pinning Gabriel to the wall with a thick, powerful hand. What little breath is still in Gabriel’s lungs is driven out. He feels something digging in his stomach, and hears a metallic click. Mr Andrews’ bulging eyes are so pale there’s barely any colour visible.

Gabriel suspects his muscles are about to give out in fear. His shoulder blades grate against the wall as vengeful words spill from Mr Andrews’ mouth. His hand slides up Gabriel’s chest to his throat, cutting off air. Gabriel flails — one foot connects with Mr Andrews’ calf and for an instant, the man is weakened enough for Gabriel to hijack his gun and twist it towards his assailant.

They struggle. Gabriel’s fingers bend back, threatening to break. Mr Andrews’ breath clouds the lenses of Gabriel’s glasses. It lasts little more than five seconds before Gabriel is recoiling against the blast and Mr Andrews is bleeding out on the polished timber floor.

Gabriel watches the body deflate. A dark red tendril curls its way into the cracks between the floorboards. A tingling in his fingers spreads through his
nervous system, and Gabriel knows that this time he is going to fall.

The ground catches him hard; his knees bruise on impact, but his eyes remain trained on the body. It’s twisted — the head tilted to one side, the eyes and mouth agape. Blood has begun to circle the body.

Gabriel’s mind whirs. He needs to make a move. Aside from the shallow knowledge television has offered, Gabriel doesn’t know the first thing about handling a corpse. He does the best he can with fumbling hands and a frozen mind. It’s an hour before he’s settled down enough to drag the late Mr Andrews into his closet. In his search for a temporary storage place, he’s left a haphazard trail, which he finds harder to clean than expected. Gabriel scrubs in a haze, but the floorboards are already stained.

Hours later, red pools in the ceramic sink and blots the canary yellow towel orange as Gabriel washes his hands. The tenuous composure he’d sustained thus far begins to dissipate as he recognises the fate he has carved himself. Staggered steps lead him to the couch and he collapses.

Gabriel’s heart constricts under his ribcage, the bones tightening and closing in. His breath is slow and shallow, never filling his lungs. His body falls out of sync, as if each organ has forgotten it is part of a whole. Shadows slink across the floor and up the walls as the sun recedes, lighting the floorboards with an eerie glow that turns bloodstained oak to deep mahogany. Averting his eyes, Gabriel stares at the fluorescent clock — the minutes tick by, his heart beating faster than time.

Gabriel sleeps, his hands pressed against his suffocating chest.

Next morning, the second hand cycles, but Gabriel’s heart is still.
The mosquito grinded
into your prickling
chest
crawled
along that finite vein
you gave into that
granite itch

pressed your pistol fingers into plaid
triggered
an electric pinch
and swelled in Glasshouse
between
tweaking locals and laser-lit teak

grungy French house
engorged
around a hunching Leb
who sucked on
his heart-shaped pit
he injects
a narcotic thrust
behind your jeans-slit
finger-slipped
lips
that slick
crumbling peck
infects your sight
as he cracks a slide-pill-flick
shot into the skin of strobe lights

the scrape
of the throbbing iron mosquito
punctures along the jowl
jackhammers a jawbone fit
renders you tangled
as you pinger-dance

and slap
that flicking twitch
exploding beneath
flare licked fingertips

you stare
at your tingling palm
and see
three legs wobbling

disattached

from that shrivelled core
He watched the sun rise over her curves, kissing her crescent waist with light. There was an ocean of blue sheets between them, folded waves rippled as they breathed. She rose from the sea like smooth rock, dormant, and the sun brushed the escarpment of her body gold. He was rough, with weathered hands — fingers of salt-encrusted rock stretching into the sea.

She stirred, mountains changing shape, and let the sun settle over new hills. The bed quaked beneath them as the landscape shifted.

He lay still, letting the sun sink in and warm their skins, but not their tempers.

She woke slowly, in time with the song of the birds, and stretched her limbs in the space between them. He pressed his back towards the peeling blue paint of the wall.

'You've been watching me sleep again, haven't you?' She asked with semi-closed eyes as she crumbled the crust from their corners. He shrugged, watching the ceiling fan spin dust through the sunlight.

'And if I have?'

'I told you not to, okay? It's creepy, waking up to that.' She was already angry — she rose from the sheets like a volcano, her body silhouetted by the light filtering through the window. He reached out a hand, but her eyes burned it and he recoiled, curling his fingers to his own waist instead.

'But you're so peaceful when you sleep,' he spat, propping himself up on his elbows. 'It's a nice change from when you're awake.'

She slipped out of bed, leaving the sheets dripping over the edge.
They sat on the cracked green vinyl seats glaring at each other, bleary-eyed with empty bottles scattered at their feet. The other passengers left a one seat girth between them and avoided eye contact as their nostrils prickled from the smell of cheap wine.

‘You’re a fuckin’ idiot,’ one of the drunk men said, angry spit forming in the corners of his mouth.

‘You don’t know what the fuck you’re talkin’ about! I should bash ya fuckin’ head in!’ said his friend, wobbling as he tried to stand. His girlfriend tugged his sleeve.

‘Aww Gav, stop swearin’ all the time! We’re goin’ to me mum and dad’s, it’s disrespectful to talk like that in front of them.’

‘I don’t give a fuck about ya fuckin’ mum ‘n dad!’

‘Sit down, you’re embarrassin’ yaself,’ his girlfriend pleaded. ‘Stop fightin’ all the time — youse guys are mates, right? Aren’t youse mates? Siddown!’ She pulled his arm and he lost balance and flopped back into the seat.

‘Stop pullin’ on me fuckin’ arm, Deb!’ he yelled back, trying to stand again. He gave up after a few attempts and pulled another bottle out from a bag, fumbling to crack the foil around the lid. The wine spilled out as he drank straight from the bottle and he wiped his mouth on the collar of his shirt.

‘Sorry for bein’ a fuckwit, Dave,’ Gav said, suddenly apologetic. ‘We’re mates, we shouldn’t be fightin’ all the time. It’s the drink, ya know, it makes me say shit I don’t mean.’

Dave grumbled acceptance and picked a scab on his arm.

Deb stood up. ‘I need to take a piss,’ she said. ‘Hold this for me.’ She pushed a green shopping bag to Gav and hoisted herself up the stairs, wobbling on her toes like an unsteady ballerina as she gripped the handrail. She reached the top and gave Gav and Dave a thumbs up, then stumbled to the bathroom, palms
flat against the wooden laminated panels to keep herself steady from the jerking movements of the train carriage.

Gav peered into the shopping bag on his lap. 'Hallo!' he said, poking his finger in. 'Hallo buddy! How're ya goin'? Hallo!' He grinned, gap-toothed, as a small white dog poked its head out.

'What kind of dog is it?' Dave asked, leaning in to take a look.

'It's a Maltese,' Gav said. 'The breeder reckons it's half purebred. Fuckin' bargain.'

The two men grinned and stroked the tiny dog's head. It blinked sleepily and sniffed at their dirty fingers before burrowing back into the bag.

Deb stumbled back down the stairs, grinning as she readjusted a bra strap.

'Is he being a good boy?' she asked as she fell in the chair and held her hands out for the bag. She reached into it and pulled out the squirming dog.

'Who's a cheeky little bugger? Are you a cheeky little bugger? He knows his mummy, doesn't he?' she laughed, scratching under the dog's chin.

'Fuckin' cute dog,' Dave said.

Deb lifted the dog in the air, then swooped it down to rub its face against hers. It whined softly. She plonked the dog back in the bag and it resumed its safe position, bundled up in the fabric.

'I love animals,' she said. 'Animals love me. I shoulda become a vet.'

Gav laughed. 'You're too fuckin' dumb to've been a vet.'

'What the hell d'you know? I'd make a bloody good vet.'

'You've gotta like, go to uni to become a vet. Study doctor stuff.'

'You don't study doctor stuff to become a vet ya dickhead, you study animal stuff.'

'You couldn't get to uni for fuckin' anythin'.'

'Yeah whatever. Arsehole.' Deb crossed her arms and closed her eyes.

They sat, swigging from their bottles occasionally, then Gav slapped Dave's arm.

'Look at this clown,' he said loudly, looking at a kid of about twenty sitting across the aisle. His fist was thrust under his chin, vision focused intensely outside the window. He locked eyes with Gav accidentally and was now pretending he hadn't.

'Hey buddy,' Gav said. 'What's your problem, eh?'

The kid didn't look over.

'Oi! You!'
The kid let his eyes flicker to Gav.
'Yeah, you! What the fuck are you starin' at?'
The kid mumbled.
'What's that? Speak up, dickhead?'
'I wasn't staring at anything.'
'Fuckin' liar! What the fuck's your problem?'
The kid shrugged. 'Nothing. I wasn't staring. Sorry.'
'Too fuckin' right you're sorry. Fuckin' smash ya head in. Faggot.'
The kid's ears went red and he resumed staring at nothing.

Deb opened her eyes and blinked. 'Need to piss again. Mind the dog.' Deb left the green bag on the vacant seat next to her then dragged herself up the stairs, head lolling with each step.

'Hope Deb's mum's got stuff to eat. I'm still fuckin' baked. Got the munchies.' Gav and Dave cackled. Gav pulled another two bottles out and handed one to Dave.

'Deb's gonna be so pissed off when she finds out how much we've had to drink.' Gav tore the foil from the neck of the bottle. 'Her parents are heaps classy and shit. Got a real big house somewhere near the city. Big mansion. Think Deb's too good for a deadshit like me.'

'That's fucked. You're a good bloke. You know? They can go fuck 'emselves.' Gav nodded as he held the bottle to his lips. 'I am a fuckin' good bloke aren't I? Hoity-toity pricks.'

Deb flopped back in her seat, smiling sleepily. Water soaked through her shirt where she had leaned against the sink. 'Let's have a baby, Gav. I wanna have a baby.'

Wine dribbled out from between Gav's lips. 'What the fuck do you want a baby for?'

'There's this little baby in the carriage up there. Cute as hell. I saw it on my way back from the dunny. Don't ya reckon it'd be nice to have a little bub around the house?'

'No fuckin' way am I gonna be havin' any kid! Would have to fuckin' change shitty nappies, we'd both have to get proper jobs... it's a fuckin' shithouse idea.'

'Yeah, but the government pays for all that shit, right? Don't they like, give you money when you have a kid?'

'Easier than being on the dole,' Dave said. 'Sick of having to meet up with some dickhead every few weeks pretendin' you've been lookin' for work.'
'Yeah, and me mum and dad would give us a hand anyway.'

'Ya fuckin' mum n' dad wouldn't do shit! They're gonna flip out hard when they see you've brought a fuckin' dog along with ya. Imagine what the fuck they'd say if ya told 'em you were preggers.'

'You don't know shit about my parents. My parents are fuckin' good people.' Deb clenched her fists. 'Now look what you've done, you're makin' me angry and ya know when I get angry I can't help swearin'.' Deb started to sob loudly.

Gav reached across the seat and squeezed her thigh. 'Don't cry Deb, ya know I don't mean it. Oi. We're both Geminis aren't we? Aren't we both Geminis?'

Deb sniffled. 'Yeah. We are. We both say shit we don't mean.' She wiped her nose on her sleeve.

'We'll have a think about it, right? About havin' a baby. Yeah?'

Deb sniffled again and nodded. 'Yeah. Alright.' She grinned and squeezed Gav's hand.

'Fuck, what station are we at?' Gav fogged up the window with his breath as he tried to see through the darkness.

Dave, whose head was slumped against his chest with his eyes closed replied, 'Just passed Redfern.'

Deb panicked. 'Fuck! Quick, Gav, get ya shit together. We've gotta get that bus to me mum and dad's or we're fucked.'

Deb gathered up their scattered belongings, shoving them into bags where they wouldn't be able to find them later. Gav looked on, trying to hold two half-drunk bottles of wine under his arm while he carried another bag of unopened ones. Dave still sat dozing in his seat.

Empty bottles on the floor clinked together as Deb climbed over them to the stairs. 'Hurry the fuck up ya useless bastards,' she spat. Gav tottered slowly over, pausing before each footstep. Dave's eyes shot open and he bolted to the stairs, clearing them two at a time.

'That was fuckin' lucky!' Deb laughed. 'Mum and dad would've been spewin' if we'd had to call 'em to ask for a lift.'

They wandered towards the escalators, bumping into people and swearing as they pushed through the swarm that had disembarked from the train. The passengers still in the carriage breathed, the smell of alcohol dissipating in the air.

The green shopping bag sat on the vacant seats and barked quietly.
calypso

SALLY EVANS

A promiscuous nibble —
her incisors press
to raise careless colour.
She leaves the bedroom
unanswered.
Trademark tiny bells chatter
as she curls her wasted magic
past wax-eared ex-boyfriends.
Plays guitar,
skirt rustling erratic barefoot time,
strings troubled
into the hectic
scavenging
sound of gulls.
Jude is wearing the thing. She's angry and she doesn't understand, but she's **wearing the thing** so it can't be all bad. I've explained the thing a dozen times since I gave it to her — it's an FM08-T fuse from a decommissioned Space Shuttle. It's an intricate miracle of commonplace engineering, tied to a length of silver chain. Regardless, she just calls it the thing. Regardless, she's wearing it.

The technology that made up the Apollo missions, Sputnik, the Space Shuttle — all of it ended up in a thousand household items, I say again. I've explained this to her before, but she's not seeing the bigger picture. She wants to know why I've **borrowed her air conditioner**. I don't need the air conditioner, just part of the air conditioner. The induction coil is a Chinese knockoff of an old NASA design used in the Mercury program, and I need it. Without that coil, it's not much of an air conditioner. This does not exactly appease her, but eventually she leaves, the thing swaying in an eccentric orbit around her neck.

They landed two men on the moon in a time before personal computers or mobile phones. It should only have gotten easier.

I've been making the calculations from my bedroom window, squinting at the stars, doing the maths on my fingers. My optimal launch angle is exactly two thumbs below the middle sill. My methods are modest but my reasoning is sound. I've **modelled the mission down to the last detail in Lego and toilet rolls**. My calculations are perfect — they run down beneath the windowsill in Texta, swerving around the places where my knees knock the wall as I sit on the edge of the bed scrabbling. The only difference is scale.

I wasn't always so focused on these things. Back around the time I gave
Jude the thing, my study of space was limited to the level of knowledge one
acquires from those weekly magazines you beg your father to buy, the ones
that are ridiculously expensive and come with one precious piece of a model
spacecraft (mine was missing key parts of its outer fuselage due to clerical
oversight: my father having missed a few weeks). But mistakes are made: NASA
shuts down its space program, Jude moves out and shacks up with another guy,
one with gravitas and regular superannuation payments, and suddenly you’re
staring at a pile of discarded parts from the pinnacle of human endeavour and
the chill vacuum of deep space is calling you. The guy doesn’t last but the
damage is done, like a chipped panel on the Columbia letting hot atmospheric
gases into the wing manifold and eventually spreading seven crewmembers in a
thin layer over three US states. Yes, exactly like that. So I studied, and I started
thinking about the easiest way to hit escape velocity.

I’m not expecting much from my rocket, no complicated extra-vehicular
activity. Just something big and thumping enough to, as it were, slip the surly
bonds of earth. It doesn’t need finesse, just to burn longer and hotter. My
rocket is a Greatest Hits mixtape of sixty years of throwing money at science
— a nosecone from Apollo, some fuselage panels from Mir. Even some inflight
avionics equipment from Shenzhou (I’ve had to learn to read Chinese just to
navigate). They sell this stuff on eBay, disjointed little collectors’ items with
no sense of the whole. What I can’t get (federal regulations on rocket engines
being unfair to the backyard hobbyist), I cobble together — the induction coil,
my alarm clock, the door off a Holden Ute someone foolishly parked outside
my house. The gaps get filled with memories, and nostalgia, and bitterness.
My rocket will be perfect. Friends are getting to be a rare commodity, citing
missing power tools and stolen letterboxes, but I don’t need people. Just the
parts of people. Jude always complained that I lacked direction, momentum.
Now I’m sitting on a hundred liquid tons of rocket propellant, pointed straight
up. I am pure velocity.

I’m doing a night requisition when Jude finds me next. I’m elbow deep under
the hood of some guy’s BMW and she taps me on the shoulder, which leads
to a few moments of panicked extraction before I realise I’m not busted. She
asks me what I’ve got there, and I say ‘Starter Relay’, but since it’s sitting
in my teeth with the wires hanging down my chest, I don’t think she quite
understands my mumble. I look like I’m eating a live squid, apparently. I spit it
out. She’s a little drunk. I hold back from explaining that BMW used to make rocket engines, since I’ve probably told her it all before.

And of course she says she’s been trying to call, and I don’t ever pick up, and of course I don’t say that that’s the point. Laura, do I remember Laura, was asking tonight about how I was doing, and Jude said she’d find out. She totters a little on her heels. Laura’s birthday is in a few weeks, was I thinking about going? She pauses to wipe a streak of grease from my cheekbone. I get it, I do. I can feel the steady orbital decay that will end up with Jude and I closer together, along with the satellite remnants of our life together — the Asteroid Lauras of our mutual acquaintance. All the more reason to finish the rocket sooner and not later. I need to escape.

But we can’t escape our gravitation, and I sweep away enough fuselage bolts and wiring to let her stay in the bed we used to share, telling her I’ll take the couch. I stay up, carefully checklisting the launch supplies — two pairs socks, two pairs underwear. A paperback for in-flight reading. A box of Space Food Sticks from the supermarket. Preparation is important.

Jude wakes up late in the morning, wearing an old shirt of mine and poking around the discarded rocket parts that litter our living room. My living room. She’s talking while I stare at the calculations, trying to work out how to get more force, more acceleration. She says it’s good that I have a hobby, something to keep me focused. She touches the thing, absently, while I stare past the maths without speaking. I’d always looked forward to having an ex, when I was a kid. It seemed like something mature and complicated that older people had, that spectre of weary experience. Maybe I’d treated our relationship, treated her, as something disposable — a discarded Stage 1 to fall back to earth, while I carried on into the sky.

So I take her hand and show her, tracing her finger across the line of apogee penned against the glass of my bedroom window. I show her the workshop in my garage, with the gantry built out of milk crates and the heatshield built out of coldest regret. Sometimes you swap butter for eggs. She asks me what I do once I’m up there, and for once I’m stumped. Escaping the deepening gravity well that is my life was the whole idea.

There will come a time when I climb into the cockpit, my spacesuit made of tinfoil and Tupperware. I’ll bravely wave to those standing on the launchpad,
before sealing the makeshift hatch. One day soon I'll feel the floating freedom of space. But in the moment when Jude and I kiss again, surrounded by the detritus of a thousand discarded space launches, I think that I may need someone to keep the bedroom light on at Mission Control.
how to build an in-ground swimming pool

ELIZABETH JULIAN-TIVOLI

A table and chair sit centre stage, facing down stage. On the table are two tape recorders, a glass of water, a messy pile of papers and a pen. The sound of a hose being turned on and running can be heard in the background and this sound runs throughout the entire piece. A man, PHIL DANIEL PHILLIPS enters stage right, pacing nervously, breathing heavily. He is wearing tradesmen overalls which are smeared with dirt and concrete. He is sweaty and scared, wiping his dirt-covered hands onto his overalls, making them dirtier. Finally, Phil sits at the table and downs the glass of water. He paces himself for a moment, breathes in and out loudly and pushes a button on one of the tape recorders. A hiss can be heard. Phil gathers his papers up, like a newsreader, breathes in and out again, and presses a button on the other tape recorder. Loud cheesy music plays (something a self improvement tape would play).

PHIL:
(Nervous but cheery) G’day and welcome to Phil Daniel Phillips D.Y.I Handy——— dammit!

Phil presses another button on the second tape recorder. The loud cheesy music stops. Phil begins shaking uncontrollably as he presses another button and the sound of the tape rewinding and stopping can be heard. Phil breathes in and out, calming himself, and presses another button. The loud cheesy music starts over.

(Still nervous but cheery. He reads out the following from the papers in front of him in an unnatural way — everything he says sounds forced) G’day and welcome to Phil Daniel’s (emphasis on ‘I’ in D.I.Y) D.I.Y Handyman Show, hosted by me, Phil Daniel Phillips. Today’s show is a special one, as we will be tackling a
particularly difficult project, in a ground-breaking special. *(Phil begins to relax)*

This one rates at least four stars on my usual scale of difficulty, so make sure you got a mate around to help you out. The project we will be tackling this time is how to build an in-ground pool. I know what you're thinking: why would anyone wanna build their own in-ground swimming pool? Wouldn't you rather just have one built for you? And crikey, when you weigh up the costs, and the effort involved, and the success rate of doing it D.I.Y instead of getting it done professionally, it's gonna cost you an arm and a leg either way, but you wouldn't get the same sort of satisfaction if another bloke does all the work. My wife likes to ——

*Phil presses a button on the tape recorder and the music stops. Phil rests his head in his hands and begins to rock back and forth nervously. He then begins humming shakily, and bangs his fists on the desk in front of him. A mobile phone starts ringing in his pocket. He shoots up suddenly and then begins ruffling around in his pocket. He pulls out a bright pink phone that is ringing loudly. He places it on the stage left side of the table, sits back down and stares at it until it stops ringing, his body stark and rigid. Phil waits a moment, then collects his papers again, and clears his throat. Another mobile phone starts ringing in his pocket. Phil shoots up again, and ruffles around in his pocket and pulls out a black phone. He is startled, and then slowly answers the phone.*

*(Nervous and shaky) Hello? *(Pause)* Oh, hi Steve, how ya going mate? *(Pause)* I dunno. She drove off hours ago. *(Pause. Phil's voice shakes more)* I'm telling you, she's not here. She said something about a meeting. *(Pause)* She's had meetings this early in the morning before *(Pause)* yes, before 5am. *(Pause)* Well I'm not her assistant, maybe you should ask him. Why are you calling this early anyways? *(Pause. Phil's voice gains strength but still shakes)* Just what I thought, nothing to say. Like I said, it's not even five yet. You shouldn't have called Steve. I don't know where that bitch is.

*Phil hangs up the phone hurriedly and places it on the stage right side of the table. He quivers for a moment, breathes, gathers up his papers, clears his throat and presses a button on one of the tape players.*

*(Still slightly nervous)* First thing you got to do is find a space in the yard that you
want it to go in. You're designing this pool on your own, remember to add all the extras you want to your plan. You'll want to make sure it looks flash if you're putting all this personal effort it. Next, you got to dig the hole.

The pink phone on stage left begins to ring. Phil reaches to pick it up, but then it stops ringing suddenly.

(Slightly angry) A professional excavation team only takes a day to dig and remove the dirt. D.I.Y can take up to a month depending on how much time you got. Make no mistake — building your own pool is a long-term project.

The pink phone on stage left rings. Phil pauses and stares at it for a moment, frustrated, but then it stops ringing suddenly. Phil breathes in and tries to calm down.

(Frustrated) Make sure that if you are going to dig it yourself, you will have to find a way to get rid of most of the dirt, by yourself, as well, which is something that excavators will do for you on the day that they dig. Once you have all the plans and layouts ready, you gotta purchase the materials.

The pink phone on stage left rings. Phil pauses and stares at it for a moment then picks it up and throws it at the wall in anger. The phone stops ringing. He calms himself by breathing in and out, and then collects his papers.

(Frustrated, unstable) The next step is to cement the bottom and put up the walls. It can be done without the use of professional equipment but you gotta make sure you get the smoothest, most even and level surface possible. You can't just do this willy-nilly.

The black phone on stage right starts ringing. Phil picks it up, looks it over and answers it.

What Steve? (Pause) Well she isn't. (Pause) She took a taxi. (Pause) I never said she took her cat, what are you talking about? Are you outside? At five in the morning?
Phil hangs up the phone.

(Rushed) Once the walls and cement floor have been set, you need to put in the plastic layer. Don’t break the layer, ’cause if you do, the pool will have bubbles at the bottom. But that’s not really important when you’re running out of time. I mean, shit, we all got deadlines, and it can all be redone later. It just has to look good for now. I’ll re-lay it when the investigation is over. Then you just have to fill it with water and Bob’s your uncle, nobody will be the wiser ———

The black phone rings suddenly. Phil answers it immediately.

(Unsettled, unhinged) Dammit Steve, what is your problem? (Pause) Of course you do, why do you think I done this in the first place? (Pause) Don’t put this on me Steve. She was asking for it. It’s all done now, you can’t prove nothing!

Phil throws the phone against the wall and stands in shock, breathing in and out, his body shaking in anger. The tape player begins to beep. Phil impulsively picks it up and throws it against the wall.

(Yelling) Shit!
dunhill blues, 3.18am

ADAM CARR

Tell me the distance
you need to wall between yourself
    and your problems
    in order to feel serene about them
 & I want exact measurements,
    in kilometres, in centimetres,
    in cigarette butts
 & empty whiskey bottles.
Because I've learnt a secret recently,
    twelve hours
 & two packets of cigarettes away from home
about a special place
outside of Here
    where the only chain reaction worth observing
    starts in your cigarettes,
    ends in your nervous system.

Travelling is easier than coming home
    but lemme tell ya:
back home,
I got the most beautiful packet of cigarettes
    keeping my bed warm
 & praying I'll make it home okay,
because my baby just misses my lips so bad
    & I wanna hold her slender body tight
between my fingertips
    & I'll ride all night
if it means showing her the flame
    at the end of my banana-yellow bic
    in the early hours of morning.

Well, you know as well as I do it’s a problem
& that every problem starts
  in the space between the letters
  or separating the words
  just large enough to lose a meaning
    or insert your own

& I wonder,
  if the gaps between my teeth were smaller,
    would less be lost
to bad translation
every time
I open my mouth?

& I wonder
  if you’ll remember my teeth
    like words in a sentence
      punctuated
        by nicotine stains
‘cause when you left me Red,
all I could think to do
    was smoke a beautiful packet of cigarettes.
enter name

GORDON KNIVETT

>Enter Name: __________________

>>Name: OSCAR MARBLE

>Command?

>>Description.

> You are OSCAR MARBLE. You are 16 and grossly overweight. Your immensity in comparison to your peers would have led to much ridicule and laughter, if your peers had not quickly learnt this lead to you becoming angry. Your black leather jacket is your prize possession. You stole it from an op-shop, you think it makes you look like a tough biker. It does look as if it has come out the other end of a very serious motorcycle accident. You feel this lends authenticity. You have a bizarre fixation on the word 'gay.' If something is 'gay' then you are totally not into that, because that would be unthinkable. Instead you are very much into things that are 'wicked'. You feel big trucks, loud motorcycles and body-piercings are what being 'wicked' is all about. Things that aren't wicked may be considered acceptable if they are 'mad,' 'righteous,' 'sick' or on rare occasions 'wizard.'

>Enter Ally's Name: __________________

>>Ally's Name: BONES AHMAN

> Today you and your ally in the war against all that is gay, BONES AHMAN, are in English class. The teacher MRS PATTERSON is a temp and does not know you and BONES are not allowed to sit next to one another. Naturally, you sit in the far back right hand corner against the window. BONES is immediately to your left. In front of you sit GREGORY LONEHAM and STUART
MYTHROP. They appear to be listening diligently. Further to the left of BONES sit CAITLIN MAY and JENNY HUGHS, each with an air of annoyed boredom. On the DESK in front of you sits a BLUE BIRO, WORKBOOK, PLASTIC RULER and PENCILCASE.

>Command?
>>Use PLASTIC RULER to fling paper from WORKBOOK at GREGORY LONEHAM.

>You feel that listening diligently is one of the gayer things someone could participate in. Appropriately you tear a piece of PAPER from your WORKBOOK, scrunched up into a ball, and then use your PLASTIC RULER as a catapult to fling the PAPERBALL at the back of GREGORY's head. GREGORY turns around and treats you to a weary glare before resuming his devotion to MRS PATTERSON.

>Command?
>>Write note declaring romantic intentions to CAITLIN MAY.

>Utilising your BLUE BIRO, WORKBOOK and your vast capacity for retaining Meat Loaf lyrics, you begin to forge your masterwork. When PARADISE BY THE BIKESHEDE is complete you roughly fold the piece of paper, nudge BONES, then point at CAITLIN. BONES sniggers as he passes the note to CAITLIN, who takes it gingerly and quietly unfolds it. As she silently reads, you notice that BONES' fuss has attracted the attention of STUART MYTHROP. It seems he has caught your note-passing in the act and is nudging GREGORY jovially. GREGORY shakes his head at you in a flagrant display of attitude.

>Command?
>>Refuse to suffer patronising head jiggling.

> You tell GREGORY in no uncertain terms that he is well within your definitions of gay, and that he had better turn around before he becomes within your definition of 'in pain' as well. BONES thinks this is enormously funny. You sure
showed him. Suddenly the piercing sound of NICOLE HUGHS' laughter snaps your attention back to CAITLIN. She is showing the note to her friend and giggling. Without warning MRS PATTERSON interjects, scolding CAITLIN and confiscating the note.

*Your 'Paranoia Indicator' begins to rapidly increase, you can't help but feel you've seen this situation somewhere before.*

Catastrophic humiliation looms. You brace yourself as you watch MRS PATTERSON study your magnum opus. She scrunches PARADISE BY THE BIKE-SHED up and throws it in the bin.

*Your 'Paranoia Indicator' dissolves and you receive a free 'Endorphin Flood' as reward.*

You don’t really know why you were so convinced she was going to read the note out-loud. You let out an audible sigh of relief. With the entertainment over, GREGORY mutters something under his breath and turns back around — presumably to get on with the act of acquiring an education.

> **Command?**
>> **Assault GREGORY for calling you names.**

> You do not appreciate GREGORY’s sub-audible insults. You feel GREGORY requires reminding of his place. You enlist BONES’ help to turn the PAPER into several SPITBALLS. You dismantle your BLUE BIRO and construct the SPITBALL SHOOTER. You equip the SPITBALL SHOOTER and blow. The SPITBALL hits the back of GREGORY’s neck with a satisfying squelching noise. You let out a cheer. GREGORY stands up suddenly and points directly at you, accusing you of some kind of unruly behaviour.

> **Command?**
>> **Loudly accuse GREGORY of homosexuality.**
Your favourite tactic does not seem to impress MRS PATTERSON. She orders you out of the room.

Command?

>>Ignore her and punch GREGORY in the nose.

You feel you should bide your time. GREGORY will get what's coming to him. You feel a sense of accomplishment knowing that you are no longer confined to the gayness of the classroom. You stand in the HALL. Aside from a new POSTER, it is pretty bereft of any interesting features.

Command?

>>Use SPITBALL SHOOTER to disturb the class as much as possible.

You left the SPITBALLS back with BONES, dingus!

Command?

>>Look at POSTER.

The POSTER just happens to feature your favourite wrestler, the 'Grim Enforcer.' You immediately resolve to spend the time slowly reading all the troublesome words. It says 'Just say no to 'home-oh-fobe-eee-ah.' You don't really know what that means, but it sounds an awful lot like a funny word that you already know, so you laugh anyway. You are unsure why anyone would put such a 'wizard' POSTER up in a something so gay as school.

Command?

>>Steal POSTER

You nick the POSTER, rolling it up and stuffing it into your jacket.

Command?

>>Play a rhythmic tattoo on your stomach.
You spend the next 20 minutes exploring the acoustic properties of your girth. You would consider it an amazing waste of time, but you are pretty sure you’ve got nothing better to do anyway. You detect a faint hint of something delicious in the air. Your gastronomic system begins to make weird gurgling sounds. You are unsure whether this is a result of your recent percussive exercise or simply due to hunger.

Command?

>>Investigate source of smell.

You resolve to discover the source of the tantalising smell at all costs. Fortunately you don’t actually have to do anything as a LADY, pushing a TROLLEY with a large FESTIVE CAKE on it, has appeared from around a corner. She is heading this way!

Command?

>>Mug LADY and devour FESTIVE CAKE.

You have too much respect for anyone capable of producing an ornate masterpiece like the FESTIVE CAKE. As it gets closer you can make out the words ‘Happy Birthday Caitlin!’ in unnaturally bright pink, marzipan letters. The BIRTHDAY CAKE is having uncomfortably direct consequences on your biology.

Your 'Hunger Meter' increases a notch from 'Nagging Annoyance' to 'Distracting Pit of Emptiness.'

The LADY expresses concern in regard to your unfortunate drooling disorder. You would reply but a BELL sounds. ASSORTED TEENAGERS pour out of the classroom. They are delighted upon encountering the LADY and BIRTHDAY CAKE. It is now lunchtime. You predict a long and gay talk with MRS PATTERSON, and a narrowing window of opportunity for the BIRTHDAY CAKE.

Command?

>>Rush trolley and abscond with BIRTHDAY CAKE.
You are just about to use your enormous weight to charge unstoppably through the ASSORTED TEENAGERS when CAITLIN MAY and JENNY HUGHS exit the classroom. The ASSORTED TEENAGERS converge in a celebration of CAITLIN’s birth. You feel as if you should explain the subtleties of your note, as you think she may not have fully understood its significance. You should also, just maybe, take the chance to congratulate her. For some reason this fills you with a deep sense of dread. BONES follows directly behind the girls.

Command?
> Grab BONES, accost females.

After carefully comparing your overflowing ‘Panic Bar’ to your nearly empty ‘Social Fulfilment Gauge’ you decide to approach CAITLIN. BONES attempts to make himself useful by distracting NICOLE HUGHS with loud sexual innuendo. CAITLIN rudely rejects your attempt to reach out to her on her special day. You feel frustrated and hot and a disquieting feeling of shame blossoms.

You receive a penalty to your ‘Emotional Defenses’ as your ‘Mortification Counter’ raises by an increment.

GREGORY LONEHAM and STUART MYTHROP exit the classroom. You successfully quash your emotions with an overriding sense of anger and receive a bonus to all animosity checks.

Command?
> Enact gratifyingly violent revenge on GREGORY.

You head straight for GREGORY. He sees you and his hands immediately shoot up, palms outward. You ignore his peaceful gesture and take a wild swing at his scrawny freckled face. STUART MYTHROP is not impressed with your violent urges and intervenes in the arc of your fist, helping your arm along its journey through thin air. Your momentum spins you around and you lose balance. Unable to stop yourself you tumble into GREGORY, who sprawls on the ground. Thankfully you prevent yourself from falling over by adopting a squatting
position. Unfortunately this has the undesired consequence of splitting your pants by their rear seam and exposing your treasured GRIM ENFORCER(TM) UNDERPANTS. The POSTER falls from your jacket and unrolls for all to see. The ASSORTED TEENAGERS, BONES, CAITLIN, JENNY, STUART, MRS PATTERSON, LADY and GREGORY laugh hysterically. Your extremities suddenly feel weak and wobbly.

_Your 'Mortification Counter' chalks up another milestone. You enter into a state of 'Emotional Distress'._

_Command?

»Snap.

> Enraged you go for STUART with a wild swing of your fist. He unsurprisingly gets the better of you again. His foot hooks around your ankle and you stumble forward. This time it is BONES who is on the receiving end of your clumsy brand of combat. You both fall over, and somehow he ends up on top of you. You can feel his hot breath on your mouth. The ASSORTED TEENAGERS are hooting and clapping. This entire situation is suddenly very, very gay. You shove BONES away from you in a violent spasm. A chant has gone up round the ASSORTED TEENAGERS, they seem to be very keen on you and BONES getting better acquainted.

_Your 'Mortification Counter' begins to flash red and beep alarmingly. Congratulations! 'Death by Embarrassment' achievement unlocked!_

_Command?

>>KILL THEM ALL!!!

> You rush at STUART MYTHROP with a guttural howl. The laughter ceases. ASSORTED TEENAGERS scatter as the commitment you are putting into this charge becomes apparent. You are too large for anyone to risk standing in your way. Predictably STUART MYTHROP sidesteps your onslaught, leaving the TROLLEY with BIRTHDAY CAKE the only object in your path. The inevitable
occurs and you comically collide with the BIRTHDAY CAKE — the TROLLEY yields to the basic laws of physics and your momentum carries it down the hall. The tension dissolves and all you can feel is mush as you sink into marzipan bliss. As you leave the uproarious laughter behind, the last words you hear are CAITLIN’s. She seems to think this was the funniest birthday present she could ever have received.

>End

>Thank you for playing. Do you want to play again? Y/N?
illawarra bird observers club

LEO CLAYTON

i. The title for a new poem
doesn’t yet make much sense

but neither does Two and a
Half Men. Neither does cigarettes,

travelling @ light speed, staying
with someone you dislike, or this

poem in couplets or your life
in pictures.

ii. You take a step back
because too many have put their life
under the microscope then
lost the zoom out button

But as you do so you
see your life at a distance looks
just like Illawarra Bird Observers Club
and reads like a greeting card.

So you remember the
conversation with your boss when
he said ‘you can take the girl out
of Dubbo but...’
and so as you wonder what pigeon tastes like or what would get you loved by others

you remember that the first rule of Illawarra Bird Observers Club is you do not talk about Illawarra Bird Observers Club

and even if you could people wouldn’t want to hear about it

and even if you did stand naked in front of yet another lover

they wouldn’t understand your tattoo of a currawong fighting a magpie.
Maggie curled around the toilet bowl, flushing her breakfast through the drains. This was the fifth morning she attempted to eat breakfast and the third morning it failed. At first her mother told her she might have eaten something bad; she'd be fine come afternoon. The next morning her mother said Maggie might have caught a bug from someone and it was probably best if she stayed home from school. This morning she hastily booked Maggie a doctor's appointment before leaving for work.

Maggie considered dragging herself off the bathroom floor for a nanosecond before relaxing against the tiles, letting them cool her clammy skin. She hadn't managed to keep more than a few dry biscuits down for almost a week now and the simple act of running from her bedroom to the bathroom consumed all her energy.

If the phone hadn't rang she might have laid there all day, but the sound annoyed her to her feet.

'Hello?' she said into the receiver, groggily.

'My God Maggie, do you want to take any longer answering the phone?' her mother asked. 'How are you feeling? Better I hope.'

'Uh, about the same,' Maggie said as her mother sighed on the other end.

'What am I going to do with you?' her mother asked. 'Your appointment's at three. I won't be home in time, but your brother should be able to take you, or ask Sam if he can't. I'll be home around five — make sure you eat, okay?'

'Okay, Mum.' Maggie hung up the phone. There was no way in hell Bryce would take her anywhere unless she cut him some sort of deal. Sam would if she asked, but she wasn't sure she wanted him with her.

Maggie went to rinse her mouth and splash water on her face. She looked like shit: her hair was going on three days of not being washed, there were dark circles under her eyes and her skin was that sickly white that did wonders for a girl's complexion. She decided showering was probably a good move to make.

Half an hour later, Maggie was clean and sprawled across the lounge, her
History homework in front of her. She'd call Sam in an hour, when he was at lunch; until then it was just her, Judge Judy and a little Russian history. Her stomach was still churning as she poured over her textbook — Bolsheviks had that effect on people, she thought.

When she completed her summaries and terrible infomercials took over the television, Maggie pulled out her phone, searched for Sam's name and called his number. The phone rang a few times before he picked up and she heard the sounds of high school lunchtime in the background.

'Hey Mags,' he said; 'How you feeling?'

'About the same.'

A guy called something indiscernible to Sam.

'Fuck you!' Sam yelled back. 'Sorry Babe. That sucks; I was hoping to see you today.'

'You still can,' Maggie said, smiling, 'I need a lift to the doctors and seeing I don't feel like selling my soul to Bryce I thought you might love to.'

'You only want me for my car and my body,' Sam said, and Maggie laughed. 'I'll be at yours at two-thirty, but don't stress if I'm late. Hey, I gotta go, I'll see you later. Love you!'

He hung up.

'You look like shit,' Sam said to Maggie as she climbed into the passenger seat of his car.

'Gee, thanks,' she replied. 'You always know just what to say to make me feel good about myself.'

He laughed and kissed her on the cheek. 'You know I think you're more beautiful than anything in the world.'

Maggie slumped back into the chair and fastened her seatbelt. The motion of the car churned her stomach and they weren't even at the end of the street.

'How was school?' she asked.

'School was school. Nothing interesting to report,' Sam said. 'Hey, do you think what you have is contagious?'

'No,' Maggie said quietly. 'No, it isn't.' They pulled into the carpark and Maggie unbuckled her seat belt. 'I shouldn't be too long.'

'Do you want me to come in with you?' he asked.

'No,' she said. 'I'll be okay.'

Maggie's doctor, Anna Walters, reminded her of her mother: mid to late forties and overworked, with a gaze that made Maggie feel as if she'd done something
wrong. She smiled at Maggie as she sat down.

‘What seems to be the problem, dear?’ she asked sweetly.

‘Um, well...’ Maggie twitched nervously in her seat. ‘I’ve been throwing up almost constantly for a few days and, um, Mum wanted me to come get checked out.’

Dr Anna made a note on the computer. ‘Any other symptoms? Diarrhoea, fever?’

‘No, not really,’ Maggie said. ‘Just exhaustion.’

Another note on the computer.

‘Are you on any medication?’

‘Um, just the pill,’ Maggie said, blushing slightly. The doctor looked up and studied Maggie’s pink cheeks.

‘Are you sexually active?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ Maggie whispered.

Dr Anna made another note on the computer, took her blood pressure, checked her temperature and asked her to lie down so she could examine her stomach. When she was finished the doctor added another note to her list and turned to Maggie.

‘I’m going to get you to go down the hall to pathology while I run some blood tests and make sure everything is clear. You don’t seem to have a temperature. Okay?’

‘Okay.’

Dr Anna printed out a form for Maggie to sign. ‘Your test results should be back in two days. Until then I want you to stay home and not overdo it, okay?’

‘Okay.’

‘Wonderful. Just down the hall and to your left.’

Maggie rose from the chair and walked the length of the hall, her head spinning.

Sam was drumming on his steering wheel when Maggie opened the door, making him jump and swear. He took one look at Maggie’s face and unbuckled his seat belt.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asked, pulling her into his arm. ‘Is everything okay? Why are you crying? Maggie?’

Maggie shook her head and buried her face into the base of his neck. She was overwhelmed but she didn’t want to burden Sam. Not until she knew for sure.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, wiping her eyes. ‘I’m just tired, you know?’

Sam nodded and hugged her a little tighter.
‘I’m just going to the shop to get some stuff; I’ll be five,’ she said, pulling away from him.

‘What do you need to get?’ he asked, walking back around to the driver’s door.

‘Tampons,’ she lied. ‘Seriously, I’ll be a minute.’

She grabbed her bag and strode into the store before he saw right through her.

Maggie stalked the aisles looking for what she needed, picked it up and walked hastily to the counter. The girl took it from her. The average pregnancy test, Maggie learned, cost nine dollars and ninety-five cents. The total cost came to twenty-nine dollars and eighty-five cents. She didn’t look the woman behind the counter in the eye when she paid and didn’t say thank you. Maggie stuffed her purchases into her bag, climbed silently into the car and didn’t answer Sam when he asked if she got what she needed.

Sam pulled into Maggie’s driveway and turned off the ignition. He looked at her and grinned. ‘Looks like no one’s home,’ he said cheekily. Maggie looked up at him, and did her best not to burst into tears.

‘Not today, Sam,’ she said. ‘I don’t feel well.’

‘But it’s been, like, two weeks.’

‘Are you really going to argue with me about this?’ she asked.

He hesitated. ‘No,’ he said. ‘You’re right: I’m a dickhead. Sorry.’

‘It’s fine,’ Maggie said, ‘Would it be okay if I just see you tomorrow? I really just want to go sleep.’

‘I could lie with you,’ he suggested.

‘Sam,’ Maggie said; ‘please?’

He nodded sadly, turning the key.

‘Feel better,’ he said, leaning over and kissing her. ‘I love you.’

‘Love you too,’ she said, and hopped out of the car.

Once she was inside and had confirmed that no one was home, Maggie pulled out the three tests. The instructions said to pee on each for a minute straight. She wondered if that was even possible, but did the three at once, hoping to God that her mother wouldn’t come home, and put the packaging directly in the recycling bin before taking her pee sticks and sitting in her bedroom.

Each test took five minutes. One said if you got a plus sign, you were pregnant. The second one turned blue if you were expecting. The third one had both.

A positive pregnancy test at sixteen: an oxymoron if ever Maggie heard one.
She was still sitting on her bed waiting for the results when she heard the garage door slide open.

‘Maggie!’ her mother's voice called. ‘Maggie, are you here?’

Maggie shoved the three tests under her pillow before she walked out of her room, and out on her future.

Maggie had been forced to leave the tests under her pillow for three hours. Three fucking hours — sometimes she really hated her mother. She had to sit through dinner with her older brother complaining at length about how much of a dickhead his Legal Studies teacher was, her little brother talking non-stop about nothing that ever seemed to matter and her father calling, which only seemed to increase her mother's bad mood.

She was mute; her mind was under her pillow and her stomach was twisting in a knot, which, for the first time in days, was completely unrelated to pre­vomit. She hated family dinners. What was the point? Nobody gave two shits about each other's day. There was no conversation, merely a series of unrelated anecdotes posited one after the other. She had more important things to care about.

‘May I be excused?’ Maggie asked, the food on her plate barely touched.

‘You've hardly eaten a thing,’ her mother replied. ‘Aren't you feeling any better? You can't really afford to miss too much school, Maggie, you know that.’

‘Yeah,’ she replied. ‘So can I?’

Her mother nodded absently, shovelling another forkful of peas and mash into her mouth. Maggie left her plate where it was and walked as casually as she could to her bedroom door.

She moved her dresser in front of the door to ensure maximum privacy and raced to her bed. She took a moment to compose herself — breathe, Maggie, just breathe — pulled the tests out, and looked down at the three sticks. There was a plus sign, a blue bubble and a plus sign in a blue bubble. Maggie slid down her wall and cried until she couldn't hear the hum of her heart, now beating for two.
painting a room

JUDE AQUILINA

In the twenty years
I've slept inside this room,
I've never stripped it
or felt its rough, pocked skin
under my sanding hands, 'til now.

I am like a mortician
undressing the dead,
grooming and re-clothing:
delving into secret places
to tend and seal.

White sheets surround me,
I stroke warmth and pinkness
back on blotchy walls.
The scent of turps, like formaldehyde,
drives me to fresh air between coats
'til finally the room is clad
and open for viewing.
upstairs a woman is sobbing

ZOE DZUNKO

and downstairs a woman is listening: at first it appears to her as a sound her cat might make, in quiet opposition, as she caresses its underbelly with the sole of her foot, but the creature sleeps now and the noise is more ragged than that

so, she locks the plump V of her thumb and forefinger into his own and feels the quiet bumping of the pulse against her skin it is a good feeling, at this moment it is just about the best feeling she could imagine for a few seconds, until it is interrupted

by the sense of her own pulse beating back it is impossible to pick the time of either, as though they are conversing in hurried foreign syllables with one another — raw, unruly as that feeling in the throat, a torn apart feeling, as though she had swallowed whole, something too large, forgetting to chew: and it is there, in the speckled night amongst the delicate arcs of bodies, in a room entirely absent of those terrors that she feels very thankful, holding his hand with the cat against her leg, to have almost forgotten it.
CHRISTINA is sitting in a booth in a bar in a small village pub. Opposite would be a middle-aged Irish man. They are each drinking a pint of beer.

CHRISTINA:
(Sceptical) I'd love to go but. This is very weird. I nearly didn't come out tonight. There wasn't anyone in my room and. I've been to pubs on my own before, one in Belfast, but it's nerve racking. It was really hard to get up and walk out of the hostel, and actually sit down and order a drink. That sounds stupid, doesn't it? Even after I walked in, I thought I'd do a lap and if no one spoke to me, I'd turn around and walk out again. I've done that a couple of times. (Disbelieving) You said before. I had an aura.

Come off it.
You're looking at me intently!

Why do you want to take me? Won't Julia be wondering what happened to you? I can't believe I only met you an hour ago. (She laughs) It was only an hour ago that you stole one of my chips! And now I'm actually thinking about driving with you, up the Cliffs of Moher! I read about them today. They're the most spectacular in Ireland. Supposed to be breathtaking.

She touches her cropped hair.

(Genuinely inquisitive) Did you mean it when you said you like my hair? I think I hate it.

I'm really glad I came out tonight. I had to get over myself and come out of the hostel. I spent an hour and a half before I came out here staring at myself in the mirror. I've been trying to convince myself that it's. Pixie. Like I wanted it. And that it actually looks good on me. I dunno if I believe it. I was telling myself I look like the kind of girl who cuts her hair short. I didn't even recognise who I was looking at. I was becoming obsessive. I was nearly crying. And then you walk
up and spot me. I just don’t understand it. I was just at the bar, slowly eating my chips. I wasn’t even hungry; I just bought them to have something to do. And just so you know, I could actually see you in my peripheral vision. I could see you watching me. So I was actually less surprised when you leaned over my shoulder and took a chip. I should have told you off! But I thought it was great. You could be so cheeky, and get away with it! (Pause) You have a very mischievous smile. I turned around and you were standing there, looking daggy, and grinning like a little kid, munching away and saying you shouldn’t have done it. (She laughs) And I believe you! I actually thought then that you don’t usually steal people’s chips... How weird.

And egotistical.

But you’re not the type, are you? (Tongue in cheek) Nice pants by the way.

The way you were looking at me, it was like you knew something about me. I thought: he really wants to speak to me. But everything else was telling me I looked so unlike me, and so invisible, it made no sense. Well I thought I stood out, alone at the bar, with a haircut that felt fake. But at the same time invisible. I felt really plain. And I was still nervous. I didn’t think you were a stalker. More like a seagull. That doesn’t sound much better does it?

I am a young girl. And you get told over and over again, how all men are. And if they’re older. But I don’t think you want anything like that with me. I don’t think that at all. I can tell that you don’t. Even if Julia isn’t the ‘love of your life’, I can see how much she means to you. She sounds like an amazing woman! (Pause) So how far is it? And how many pints have you had?

I don’t even know what the legal limit is here. Are you sure you’ll be okay to drive? I’m going up in the morning.

It’s okay, you go home to Julia.

My mum called me today. She’s crazy. She wanted to know if I’d seen the latest news from home. I have no idea what’s happening at home. She rang to tell me all about a German backpacker, who’s just been found, well her body was found, in some bushes in the middle of town. Probably less than a K from my house! She was raped and dumped there. But she was in Australia with her boyfriend, and then she just went missing. She was found a few days later. She wasn’t even travelling on her own... but it’s creepy that it was in my tiny little town. It’s called Lismore. You have a Lismore. I think it’s further south, and inland. I want to go there. Mum wanted to remind me to be especially careful, blah blah blah. It’s because she cares so much, I know, but she’ll give herself a
heart attack. I’ll be home in three weeks so I think now she’s more nervous than ever that something will happen to me when she’s so close to having me back.

I do want to see the cliffs.

And tomorrow, they’ll be beautiful. But then, the cliffs in Scotland were beautiful too. And this is your country and you’re so excited to go, to show me.

She finishes the end of her beer and plays with her pint glass.

It’s amazing thinking about how I thought a year ago. I remember I thought about people who just roam, alone, without fear, with no set destination. There was a man in my head, doing this, but he was. It sounds stupid when I say it out loud. An ethereal sort of gypsy spirit. All brown with a brown backpack. Not human, not connected to my world. He was a hero, for being in control of his own body. He wasn’t restricted by that physical, gut fear that holds us back, holds me back. Humiliation or whatever. And now. That god-like creature doesn’t exist anymore.

I can just remember how vivid he used to be. Does this sound crazy to you?
Because here I am, doing this, and. I’m nothing like him. I’m just me with short hair and a backpack. But it makes me feel so alive.

Do you want another beer?

(Surprised) You really want to go now?

She laughs. She looks about the pub for an excuse to not go, but without finding one she picks up her bag.

(Decisively) All right, let’s go.
You brought home a fish; phoned ahead so I could boil water, crumble stock cubes, chop vegetables.

I wonder what else you’re bringing: the tinned beer, man-talk, fish hooks, blisters. Maybe the hot hollow of a girl.

We wait, and bake in the kitchen heat. I rest my face on the darksmelling skin between your shoulder blades, I peel raw skin-flakes from the back of your neck. I could scatter them in the stew, leave my clothes on the kitchen tiles and submerge my body,
i could simmer,
slough off my skin while
the loam bubbles down until
it's just me; soft potatoes,
the fish's bones,
my boiled blood.
secrets of the skin
KATE LISTON

My friend Ron used to take me up the chook shed to collect eggs every time Mum and I called with the Meals on Wheels. On Tuesdays we delivered the foil-wrapped meals to the old people, but Ron was my favourite. Ron lived with his sister Joyce — a cranky lady who always smelt of toilets and porridge. I hated porridge. Sometimes Ron's legs were extra arthritic and he struggled getting up to the chook shed door. My legs would automatically feel sore too, and together we would help each other up the hill. On his really sick days, Joyce would make me sit outside on the pavement and wait with the bull ants biting me, and the stray bits of grass making my eczema flare up. She told me I couldn't move and I never dared.

The last time I walked up to the chook-shed with Ron it was between Agro's Cartoon Connection and SuperTed. I remember the banana passionfruit vine was more alive than the chooks, it wound and wound around every octagonal-chicken-wired window in the shed. Its bulbous yellow fruits were spinning like tops from the roof, and Ron told me to pinch some but not to let Joyce see. Sun streamed in between the curly tendrils and warmed my body like soup. With his walking stick, Ron reached up and pulled down one arm of the vine for me to pick a yellow fruit. As one of them tumbled into my hand, I quickly shoved it in my pocket. I don't know what happened, but one of Ron's legs must have given way. He fell like a brick into the dirt. Chooks went everywhere in a flurry of feathers, and dust rose around his old body. He just lay there. My shaking hands fumbled with the gate latch and I ran out and down to the house. Mum must have heard my scream because she was already running up the pavement with the phone. She and Joyce left with the loud sirens.

I sat on the pavement until they got back. I wasn't sure whether to eat my passionfruit or not. Especially when my best friend Ron was injured. After thinking about it for a while, I decided to tear it open and suck it out before
they returned. Then, there on the pavement amongst the raging bull-ants, sat
the yellow skin of the banana passionfruit. I looked at it and I was terrified: a
gun after a murder. What was I going to do with it? I couldn't move from the
pavement because I'd done enough things wrong. So I ate it. I ate the whole skin.
It was tough and bitter and really furry. I could even taste the dust. Mum arrived
ages later, without Joyce. She looked old. She said Ron was fine, so I assumed he
was still sick. By then, my eczema had painted me a deep scarlet and I was glad
to be able to move again.

Joyce didn't need Meals on Wheels again; she must have got better. The next
summer I built my own chook shed like Ron's. It had to be exactly the same, with
the octagonal chicken-wire and barrels of hay. Mum helped cut the wire and nail
it to the wood. There was to be no banana passionfruit anywhere near the pen.

I can feel the skin inside me, like a bullet, and the sour taste still lingers. I know
Ron died the day of the fall; he had a brain haemorrhage. And now I'm left
wondering just how many white lies it takes to build a childhood.
sirens

KYRA BANDTE

I can’t hear you over the sirens
and the carousel

I’m lying on a rock
mixing salty cocktails
from white-wash and tears

somewhere along this line
you’ll get wrecked

I should send out a beacon but
my bulbs are dying
no flowers this year

no neons or roots
I’ll dig a new hole

and plant myself deeper than ever
write a few lines about it
slip them into your pockets

and watch them
pulp together in the wash
perfect strangers

LIA SPARKS

The man beside Merry was a perfect stranger. He was quite young, with messy hair the colour of sand; it was as though he'd been lying on a beach somewhere then sat up and left without dusting his head. She'd never seen him here before, which was unusual because bars like this relied almost entirely on regular patrons. She wasn't the only person pretending not to watch him either: with his collared shirt and trousers, he stood out from the rest of the footy-jersey wearing customers. Two older men by the pool table stared openly, their moustaches quivering with every breath. Merry liked to think the men were watching out for her; they were the sort to give her a polite nod of recognition every Friday afternoon when she entered — a gesture she always returned with a smile — and she couldn't help but imagine they felt a fatherly benevolence toward her.

The stranger smiled at the barman and raised two fingers. The older man approached looking indifferent, but then Lance always looked indifferent, even if you were a regular. Merry had long ago come to the understanding that he didn't like customers much, which was fine because it meant he left her alone.

'Bourbon and Coke, thanks.'

She watched the stranger's reflection in the mirror behind the bar as he bolted down the drink with his eyes closed. Merry was relieved she couldn't smell it — bourbon always made her feel sick.

The stranger opened his eyes and found hers in the bar mirror. He lifted his empty glass to her reflection.

'Cheers.'

She lifted her own glass to her lips. Vodka was almost as bad as bourbon, but it didn't make her sick like other hard spirits did. She tipped her glass back and let the contents swirl around her mouth for a moment, the vodka biting at her tongue, before swallowing.

'Can I buy you another?'
She regarded him fully now, swinging on her barstool to face him. His brows were raised in question, a fine line indented across his forehead.

‘I don’t accept drinks from strangers, thanks.’

But then the oddest thing — the stranger smiled.

‘Do you share taxis with strangers?’

It was later in the evening, and Merry was probably more than intoxicated. He wasn’t as much of a stranger anymore; she’d determined his name was Nick and he was one of those people who worked in the boring, multileveled buildings in the middle of the city and spent all day on Facebook to avoid any ‘real work’. It was funny, the way he’d chosen to explain his job in terms of work he didn’t do.

Neither of them had asked why the other was drinking alone.

Merry supposed it would be alright to share a taxi with Nick-the-office-worker, because even if she still knew nothing in particular about him, he looked like he’d be able to pay for his share of the trip.

Merry stumbled down the stairs of the bar, and Nick followed with his hands in his pockets. He was smiling again. Merry thought he must be one of those disgusting people who were happy all the time. Lance had called their drinking contest a truce and offered to call Merry a taxi himself, but Nick promised he’d make sure she got home. The regulars glared, but Nick didn’t seem bothered; he probably just thought they were rude. Merry waved, to let them know she was okay. They didn’t wave back, just watched, frowning, as Nick helped her off the barstool with his hand at the small of her back.

Outside, Merry clutched her jacket around her as Nick hailed a bright yellow taxi. The colour reminded her of a song, although she couldn’t explain why. She laughed and Nick joined in. He opened the door for Merry and supported her into the back seat. Then, he slid in beside her and gave the driver his address.

The driver turned to appraise Merry.

‘She’s not going to vomit, is she?’ he asked. Merry gave the driver her most winning smile and shook her head.

‘If it looks like she will, I’ll open a window.’ Nick’s look was stern, so the driver shrugged and they pulled away from the curb.

Nick liked the way the bourbon warmed his stomach: a particularly useful property, since the taxi was freezing. Nick had asked for the air-conditioning to
be turned off at least twice now, but the driver was pretending not to hear him.

As soon as Merry’s head had touched the headrest, she’d fallen asleep, and their journey passed in a steady silence. Merry was a comical sleeper: her chin rested on her right hand and her right arm hung suspended in mid-air. She swayed with the motion of the taxi, hair sweeping across her face as they turned left and right.

When the taxi pulled up at Nick’s apartment, Merry was still fast asleep. The driver was not amused.

‘I don’t want to wake her,’ Nick explained. ‘I think she might get quite cross. She looks like the sort of person to get cross when she’s woken.’ He had to guess because he didn’t know her at all.

The taxi pulled away from the pavement and Nick found he was carrying Merry. He learned the hard way not to search through women’s purses, even if it was just for an address.

‘N-n-nick?’ Merry stumbled over his name as he struggled to unlock his front door. Thank God he was on the ground floor; he didn’t fancy his chances of being able to carry Merry up any stairs.

The driver had insisted she’d have to sleep on his lounge, and that was Nick’s intention when he left her there, covered in a blanket, and wandered down the hall to the bathroom to piss. He hated how alcohol went straight through him — it always made him feel a little ripped off.

Nick staggered back to his bedroom, not bothering to turn on a light. He stumbled across the carpet to his bed and half fell as he pulled off his shoes. The shirt came next, and then his trousers. He kept his underwear on, because he didn’t want to be naked just in case Merry came to find him in the morning to ask for coffee or anything. He felt his way up the bed, eyes half-closed, not bothering to muffle a yawn — then he paused, puzzled, because he was pretty sure he could feel somebody else’s leg.

His first impulse was that the leg belonged to Ann; she was the only person he’d ever shared a bed with, after all, and he couldn’t help imagine — but no. Ever since Ann left, Nick lived alone. And besides, he’d changed the locks so it couldn’t be her. And he was quite sure he’d left------

It must be Merry in his bed. Nick swallowed, wondering whether there was a protocol for this sort of thing. Then she sat up and he knew for sure. In the faint light through his window, her hair was already mussed by sleep.

‘Well come on, then,’ she said, inviting him into his own bed. Nick was
wondering if things could get any more bizarre when the blanket slipped down to reveal her bare shoulders.

He could just sleep on the lounge — that seemed the thing to do. Nick felt it was rude to impose his sleeping habits on anyone else: that was something Ann had taught him.

Merry had seemed so coy, back at the bar. He'd have to go there again, he decided. Tonight had been particularly good, and ——

Merry reached across the darkness and stroked his bare arm. On reflex, Nick moved away: it wasn't right, her in his bed, not like this. He stood up, hovered over the bed, hesitating over whether it would be rude to take a pillow with him.

'Look, do you want to sleep with me or not?'

Nick loved the feeling of waking up next to someone. To his surprise and pleasure, his head wasn't aching half as much as he'd expected, and the feeling of his thigh pressed against whoever-it-was was really quite pleasant. He kept his eyes closed, the light behind his lids painting multi-coloured patterns that flickered and changed like a kaleidoscope. He lay there watching them, embraced by the warmth of his sheets and ——

Nick remembered Merry and opened his eyes. She was hidden beneath a mess of brown hair, and didn't seem at all disturbed by his sleeping; not like Ann, who would always be awake and dressed first. Ann-in-the-morning had been the smell of cold sheets; Merry-in-the-morning was still luxuriously present in his bed.

Her eyes flickered open.

'Good morning?'

'Good morning,' he affirmed, sitting up and hunting around for a t-shirt.

'Can I get you anything?'

Merry sat up. Apparently, she was one of those people who didn't take long to wake up, after all. He always took a little while to start up in the mornings. But then, Merry groaned and clutched her head. Nick did his best not to stare at her bare breasts.

'Here,' he muttered to the lamp, flinging his bathrobe at her. 'Would you like a shower? Water? Coffee?'

Merry just groaned again, so Nick went to get her some Panadol. When he came back she was asleep in his robe. He stood in the doorway for a moment, just watching her, unable to help that he liked the look of her there. Then, he set
the Panadol and the water on his bedside table and climbed back in beside her. The sheets were still warm.

Merry didn't seem to notice. Nick closed his eyes.

Later, once they were both awake, Nick tried to offer Merry a lift home. He discovered she was very stubborn; having turned down his offer of a lend of some clothes, or even a toothbrush, she stood by his front door in last night’s dress, shoes clutched in her hand, jacket over her arm, and shook her head.

‘The bus will be great, thanks anyway.’

She was the sort of person who didn’t eat breakfast, either. Instead, she gave him a little smile, a shy kiss on the cheek, and then slipped out his front door.

Nick stood for a moment, staring blankly at the fridge. She’d left the name of the bar on a piece of paper, pinned with one of the stupid smiley-faced magnets his mother had bought last time she visited — to cheer the place up a bit. Nick wondered if the name of the bar was an invitation; he wondered if he’d see her again. He hoped so — it had been lovely to wake up beside her, to listen to her breathing and know he wasn’t completely unbearable after all — but it occurred to Nick that perhaps it didn’t matter. After all, it wasn’t as though he knew anything about her at all.
The big melaleuca
flicks and droops
like a drunken
Narcissus.
I salute it with half a beer.
A stormbird spits
one gunshot cry
in return.

The melaleuca
nods with a soft
patter
of spray:
an understanding.
vice versa

LIBBY POPPER

I can see them lined up in a row, my vices, like the naughty pill bottles that sit so perfectly shoulder-to-shoulder, hidden away from those searching eyes that watch me carefully. Irises narrowed by your lids, restricting me, following me closely but not nearly close enough. The cocktail running through my system is just so exhilarating, especially with the added element of the forbidden and the threat of being caught. I breathe in the soothing nicotine I only partake of when taking something else and breathe out promises that I will quit.

I'll try harder.
I'll be better.

I try to understand your position, to put on your shoes — but to get my feet into those tiny heels would be a hard task in itself. To me, you see, I'm not hurting anyone but myself. If you don't like it, you can leave. Don't get me wrong, I don't want to see the back of you (even though it's mighty fine), but I don't have the same cravings for you. If it comes down to it you're not my first choice.

I try to make you understand. My habits are complex, and the moment I try to stop (trying only for you, I might add) the hunger creeps into my body from some external point. It's the closest experience I've reached to feeling the presence that you label God, something that acts from above or outside our realm. It burrows into my chest and blooms — an ache, a must, a have-to — and blossoms out as it crawls down my arms and my legs, making them tingle. I might lose my mind if I don't find a way to put it all to rest. The sweat, tickling as it's trickling down my face, my body, it all itches like mad. I'm going to go mad.

I try harder.
But I need to make it better.
Even the pop is reassuring. It knows that sound like Pavlov's dog, salivating as I shake those innocent white pills into my hand. I don't care what's in them as long as it stops the threat overwhelming me. The pills wrap a blanket around me. I'm safe and warm and I know everything will be alright now. I don't need to worry until it runs out — but I don't think about that now because everything is right in my world. The guilt doesn't hit until I see your face: disapproval, disgust. Damaged by me and my vices. Those pills that make me feel so perfect and whole — bruise you. Break both you and us. The threats return, this time from you, but it's so hard to listen when you don't have the power of those tiny, round pills.

Trust me, I'm not to be trusted. Part of me wants to be in your position. To be the grown up who can handle it all, not just myself but the drug-addled man I can't tear myself away from. But if I could switch — if the positions began to turn, spinning out of control — would I subject you to my world? And vice versa?

Verses of a song drift across the party, lyrics lined up like lines of coke, waiting for me to suck them up through my nasal cavities with a little help from a twenty-dollar note and your credit card. The card will have to be cut up next month when the bills come charging you for my mistakes. Will that be the breakpoint?

You'll try harder this time.
You'll be better.

But it will burrow into the space between your ribs, finding that spot in your chest to take root, it will consume you little by little until you come back. I will wrap myself round you like a blanket smothering you and you will feel falsely safe in my arms. And vice versa.
clean-ups

MATT YOUNG

A mop and bucket. That's all the floor manager gave Jess: a lousy mop and bucket. Working an eight-hour shift she wasn't rostered on for in the first place and this kind of thing happens ten minutes after swiping on — and on her birthday.

Some brat had decided to ruin Jess' life by emptying their stomach contents all throughout Gardening and Home Maintenance. A certain disenfranchisement constitutes the casual employee position, but something like this really causes one to lose faith in the system. Jess unfolded the little yellow sign with the picture of the little stick man eating shit on it and drove the thick biley porridge from one side of the aisle to the other.

A mop and fucking bucket.

A mop so ingrained with hair and Rice Bubbles and age-old lemonade that whatever absorbing power it once had was long extinguished. But Jess made do, suffering through her circumstances by envisaging scenarios in which she took revenge upon Steve for the hand she had been dealt. Most of these scenarios culminated in Steve's murder, but they soon started to incorporate Blake as well. Although, immediately afterwards she felt a pang of guilt for thinking such things and had the impulse to call Blake and apologise to him — for nothing. Big things were happening in Jess' heart, reactions far exceeding their causes. She was just as much a soggy jumble of emotions as the slop on the floor was a soggy jumble of half-digested food. But all in all, it was the result of biology. Her body was punishing her for not introducing it to any semen. What an unchristian vessel the female body is — punishing her for not getting up the duff. Now, cleaning the spew on the floor, fate was reprimanding her as well, although the reasons weren't so cut and dry.

Just get through this shift and then you can go home, she kept telling herself, but she was unconvinced.
'I think you've found your calling,' said Tom, flanking the spew. Jess hadn't even been aware of Tom coming up the aisle, despite the clatter produced from the wheelie-ladder that he was dragging. 'We'll make a woman out of you yet.'

Now that she was aware of it, the rattle of the wheelie-ladder had ripped Jess's brain in half. 'Not in the mood today, Tom.'

'That is slaughter,' he said, getting a bird's eye view of the spew as he ascended the wheelie-ladder. 'There must be three nights' worth of dinners in there.' Tom was a night-filler, a footy player and a massive bogan; every word that came out of his mouth was pure, unfiltered thought. He was an idiot — but Jesus fucking Christ, did he have a body on him. 'Steve isn't afraid to show who his favourites are.'

'You're a fucking cock!'

But so hot.

Jess imagined what it would be like to sleep with Tom, with his broad swimmer's shoulders and sun-vestiged skin and gross egotism and self-assuredness, which was so repulsive yet so attractive. Tom was a true boy's boy.

Jess' name echoed softly down the aisle behind her. It was Lucinda, the girl from checkout with the flawless, TV-ready complexion and tits hanging half-out of her top for all to see, especially Steve. Lucinda approached, her flats nipping at the lino with each step, lip-gloss grin smeared ear to ear.

'What time are you taking dinner?'

Lucinda, the bitch.

Lucinda liked to take her break at six because that's when she would suck off Steve in the office in exchange for buying her alcohol. Knowing this all too well, Jess put her dinner break down for six.

'Do you reckon we could swap?'

No, Jess thought.

'Yes,' Jess said.

Jess wasn't good when it came to confrontation. Besides, Lucinda would get her way regardless of what Jess did.

'You're a doll!' Lucinda sounded too cutey to be condescending, but she was. 'Hi, Tom,' she said, peering up at the ladder.

'Hey, Luce.' He was stacking as many things on top of himself as he could.

'Thanks again,' said Lucinda and bounded off, the swing of her hips full with youth, the blonde mass of hair dancing above her neck, flats clicking on her heels, and Jess knew that she had slept with Tom.
Usually, Tom would watch her like every other boy there, with all the secrecy and thirst of a life yet to be lived. But now, up the ladder with three ten-kilo bags of kitty litter on his shoulder, his heart was on his work. Lucinda turned the corner and was gone. There was nothing left to conquer. Tom started down the ladder and Jess instinctively went back to mopping.

‘Good luck with it,’ he said and pretended to dry-reach, laughing to himself as he carried the kitty litter with one arm and dragged the wheelie-ladder with the other. Jess wanted to say something but couldn’t bring herself to the words. She was not afraid to show her jealousy because she wasn’t sure where it actually lay — in the fact that Tom had fucked a girl, or that it had been Lucinda. Why was she even thinking about this? She had a boyfriend. And once again, she had the overwhelming urge to call Blake in tears. She didn’t, but the very same physiology did send her body contorting with cramps. Jess closed her eyes and squatted in a ball, clutching her abdomen for relief. She lost her balance and placed out a hand to steady herself, but her motor functions quickly retracted it. She felt the world was not alright. Jess opened her eyes to see a fresh hand print gradually assimilate into the chunky sludge, gouts of sunset-coloured puke were dripping off her fingers.

Minutes later, down on all-fours, staring into the stained porcelain of the staff toilets, Jess continued thinking about Blake. Her soft palate in spasms, she began drawing clear associations with the previous night.

Jess had wanted to go out tonight, on the night of her birthday, but Blake had had to work so she agreed to go out last night instead. They went to dinner and a movie. Jess had financed the night because Blake got paid every second Tuesday, so by the second Saturday in the fortnightly cycle he was skint. At least he drove, reasoned Jess, even if his car was held together with electrical tape and Iron Maiden bumper stickers. Afterwards they had Blake’s house all to themselves because his parents were in Townsville visiting family and his little brother had gone with them. This was when Jess told Blake about her period, so he had settled for head.

When work called her this morning asking if she could cover a shift until midnight, she figured she wasn’t going to be able to hang with Blake anyway, and she could do with the money. It’s still massively depressing going to work on your birthday.

It had been a while and nothing came up, so Jess pulled herself from the floor, went to the sink and stared at herself in the mirror, her face framed by a
coppery green rim of delaminated glass. She was overdosing on hormones: her pores were exploding with pink pustules of sebum. She had never looked more like a teenager with her freckle-dotted skin and her stringy, orangey-red hair and A-cups that hadn’t grown since she was twelve. Jess would never be a girl — not a girl like Lucinda, anyway. Enormous sweat marks draped the sides of her shirt. She gave them a sniff. They smelt putrid. Had she forgotten to put deodorant on? More importantly, had Tom noticed?

Jess changed her pad and went back out on the floor. She snuck into Personal Care and Cosmetics where an imposing wall of deodorants stood before her. A mash of brands and colours and shapes, and for the sixty million different kinds of sprays and roll-ons and power sticks, she couldn’t find her one — the one with the little red bird on the can. They all spoke to her, vying for use, saying things like: ‘gentle on sensitive skin...blow the boys away...now in lavender...mountain blast...wear black with confidence...nature fresh...’ but none that boasted that it could eliminate her BO. She chose one with a metallic blue can that claimed ‘no more embarrassing sweat marks!’ which seemed the most apt under the circumstances. She busied herself with a lacklustre tidy of the shelves until one last customer was dragged from the aisle by their trolley, leaving Jess alone with the deodorants. Jess snatched the metallic blue can and furtively gave each underarm a hearty spray. Then she gave her damp shirt a go.

‘Jess!’ Steve’s voice exploded from above her. Jess’s heart compressed itself into a ball. She spun around, wide-eyed, but no one was there. ‘...please come to the office. Jess, to the office.’ The PA cracked as he forgot to use his finger to hang up.

Jess looked around, but she was still the only one in the aisle. All she could hear was the pulses in her ears and all she could feel was the pigment in her skin turning pink. After a moment her heart resumed functioning and she clipped the lid back on the deodorant and returned it to the back of the shelf.

Steve was in his office, seated behind the desk, moving the computer mouse, clicking here and there.

‘Jess,’ said Steve, momentarily turning his eyes from the computer screen as she came in, ‘I’ll be with you in a minute.’

Jess waited awkwardly in the doorway while Steve typed something purposefully on the keyboard. Steve was thirty years old. He had scrunched-up little eyes, a chubby face and a receding hairline. His grubby shirt, which doubled
as a napkin, contracted over his gut when he breathed. Steve, who considered having his dick sucked by Lucinda a tradable commodity, finally stopped typing and turned sternly towards Jess, his tiny swivel chair wheezing on its axle.

‘Jess.’
Jess stood before Steve.
‘A few minutes ago I was called to the registers——’
She wasn’t really listening.
‘—— to deal with a very distraught customer.’
She was experiencing horrific period pain.
‘Do you know what made this customer so upset?’
Steve didn’t notice.
‘She heard one of our team members use foul language.’
Jess didn’t care.
‘This customer has lodged a complaint about you.’
Her insides were being ripped to shreds.
‘A complaint?’ Jess winced.
‘Apparently, you called a fellow team member a——’
He looked down at a form on his desk.
‘—— a fucking cock.’
It was true.
‘Jess...’
Tom was a fucking cock.
‘This is not on.’
Although...
‘You have a responsibility to the supermarket——’
... it could just as equally have applied to Steve.
‘—— to uphold its image and integrity while you wear the uniform.’
Jess’ eyes welled.
‘I am going to have to file this with head office.’
She was fighting back tears.
‘There is also the other team member, I’m sure you know who.’
But Jess wasn’t sure if they were for her job.
‘He will have to file a verbal harassment report.’
Or for her.
‘If you feel the need to tell me anything else, do it now.’
Steve waited for a reply.
Jess felt the need to tell Steve a lot of things. Jess felt the need to tell Steve that she knew about his arrangement with Lucinda, and that she was confident that the higher echelons of the supermarket would be interested to know about it too. Jess also felt the need to hook her arm around Steve's neck and tell him that he was a fat perverted deadbeat and that he should remove himself from this world. She felt the need to tell him she had her fucking period and she was not up for taking his self-deluded shit. But she didn't. She didn't say anything. She just turned and left, a dank feeling that no one appreciated the welling in her stomach. Steve then furtively closed the document on the computer where he had typed gobbledygook and continued clicking cards here and there in his game of Solitaire.

The sun's light was absorbing everything into its final sparks as Jess came out onto the loading zone. Jess couldn't go back to work. Not just yet, anyway. The thought of facing that pureed vomit, let alone any other human beings, choked her to the core. She had to take a break, even if it wasn't her time yet.

Jess stood on the scarred silver concrete. A semi-trailer was trying desperately to marry itself with the dock. There were three loadies in hi-vis, flailing their arms at the semi-trailer in encouragement, but it couldn't grasp at what was directly behind it. It seemed all too elusive.

The loading dock was adjacent to the car park and you could see directly from one into the other. Jess balanced herself on the loading dock rail, locking her legs around the painted yellow bars. She watched the cars come and go in the orange light of the car park. She watched the people driving them, hunched over the wheel, squinting through the gap between the dash and their lowered sun visors. She took some deep breaths. The semi-trailer jerked forward with a hiss and someone yelled.

What happened next was blurry. It was almost as if it didn't happen to her at all, like she was watching it happening to someone else. It was like Jess herself hadn't seen the car parked on the other side of the loading zone, someone else had, and she had seen them see it. It was like someone else had recognised it, not from its make or model or colour or number plate, but from the Iron Maiden bumper stickers. It wasn't Jess that jumped down into the pit of the loading zone, it was someone else she was watching. She hadn't been told off by one of the loadies for not wearing a reflective vest. She hadn't walked across the loading zone, the glazed concrete glowing white in the half-light, someone else had.
But they were very much her tears.

It was suddenly very much Jess who peered inside Blake's car and saw him and Lucinda, her tits out the whole way now, silent behind the light-splintered glass. It was very much Jess who backed away from the car, very much her lip quivering, very much her voice cracking, saying something, and very much her who didn't hear the loadie in hi-vis yell.

The reason the semi-trailer couldn't connect with the loading dock was because the driver couldn't distinguish it in the dying light. The semi-trailer itself was indiscriminate. It couldn't discriminate the loading dock from the concrete it was driving on, just as it couldn't discriminate the space where Jess wasn't from the space where she was. The loadie in hi-vis screamed to tell Jess about the semi-trailer, but the semi-trailer did nothing to tell the driver that Jess was behind it. Jess, with her pink pimples and stringy, orange hair and A-cups; Jess, who turned seventeen today.
This place is a theme park to you — yawned
by some sepia clown
with salt spray
at his throat.
Here, the roar
is not of traffic, water sits
on air, thick as noise,
and plants can choose
to grow beyond concrete cracks. You could watch
the sea bite chunks of sky
white incisors bared slow
and shut fast, each piece
of blue brought thrashing
to shore, as the sun blinks on
with the glint of a dying eye —
instead you lay, back pressed
in sand, hands held above,
stretched as the buildings
laid like broken comb teeth,
across the city you love.
All I saw were his eyes, brown like mine and slightly curved, focusing on the balcony and withered strips of paint that had begun to coil over the edges, before finally setting on me. A smile spread across his lips and curled back to reveal his coffee-stained teeth.

'Hey buddy, sorry I'm late.'

I didn't even bother to answer him as I trudged down the stairs, keeping my eyes focused on the rockery that had already been filled with overgrown weeds and rocks that were stained with brown moss.

Grudgingly, I opened the car door and was exposed to the stench of jamocha and the sort of deodorant that causes you to retract a few steps from the strength. I coughed into my fist and sunk into the leather seat, pulling the door closed behind me. The door shut quietly behind Dad, and moments later the roar of the engine smothered the awkward silence that hovered between us like a storm cloud. I watched as his head would tilt to the right and his lips pulsate, as if to say something, but then he'd changed his mind and move his face back to the front. I lowered my gaze to the floor where a McDonalds takeaway bag lay open, with contents of rotten food still inside. I pressed my shoe over it, watching as it recoiled into what looked like an uneven ball of brown play doe.

'I thought the car broke down.' He commented, lifting his eyes to the rearview mirror so he could see me.

'I figured.'

'How's your sister?'

'Rebecca's fine.' I unzipped my bag and pulled out my iPod, fiddling with my earphones in an attempt to connect it into the porthole. My hands shook furiously, so it took a little longer than normal. He glanced at me again. 'And your mother?'
I pressed one cushioned earphone against my ear and felt the tension in my chest drain from my body.

'Tony?'

My eyes stung, and I blinked away the moisture quickly.

'Fuck, Dad.' I glared up at him through the mirror. 'I don't know, what do you want me to say? Why do you even give a shit?'

'Watch that language, Tony.' He reprimanded me and I shook my head, glancing out the window. I watched as the local park — brightly lit with colourful play sets surrounded by a sea of sand — transform into a blur of brown, green, pink and yellow. I pressed my forehead against the frosted glass and watched as the white lines of the road sped past like the lines on a heart monitor. I could almost hear the beep, beep, beep.

When we arrived at school, he deviated from his usual routine of dropping me off and disappearing. He parked on the sidelines instead. Folding my arms against my chest, I waited for the inevitable bullshit that had become routine whenever Dad dropped me off. He switched off the engine and stared at the steering wheel; his fingers traced the outline as though he were admiring the shape. I removed my earphones. His incessant tracing ceased when he abruptly gripped the rubber between his fingers and squeezed firmly. We both observed as the blood drained from his knuckles and grew a ghostly white. I pulled my knees up to my chest and rested my elbows against them, ignoring the fact that I knew how much Dad hated feet on the seats. My white converse, stained with mud and flecks of wet grass, shaped themselves into the grey seat cover and smeared them with dirty skid marks. I didn't care.

'Anthony,' He began. 'I'm sorry, kid. I really am.'

I shook my head and fiddled with the earphones cord, interweaving it in the gaps between my fingers like a cobweb. My eyes searched for a safe place to stay focused on, and I finally decided on the cavernous hole in my jeans, just above my knee.

'Your mother and I, well — we tried, you see. We really did.'

I pulled a few of the loose threads and the hole split open even more, gaping at me like a white-bloodied mouth. The ashen shade of my skin contrasted with the navy material and I fingered the hole mercilessly, pulling out more white threads and collecting them in a bundle.

'There's not a lot you can do, bud. Sometimes, things just happen, you know?' He cursed under his breath and removed his fingers from the wheel,
leaving five thin silhouettes of sweat. ‘Shit, that’s not what I mean. I mean, we
didn’t want to do this to you... now, I know — I know how you must feel. And
I’m sorry, pal. Please believe that.’

I didn’t answer; instead I wrapped one of the threads around my fingers and
tied it into a tight knot. A faint blush glazed over the tip of my finger, blood
percolating beneath my skin.

He sighed, ‘All right Tony. You can go. I’ll be here after four, alright?’

I got out and pulled my skateboard, avoiding any possibility of eye contact.
The door groaned in protest.

‘I love you, kiddo.’ He called after me; I slammed the door closed and kicked
it just below the handle.

‘Do you know it’s Rebecca’s fucking birthday today?’ I shouted, cleaving
another dent above the wheel.

He drove off, the engine sounding like a rainfall of boulders.

‘Yeah I’ll be there didn’t.’

School was pretty crowded that day, even more than usual. Someone ran into me
as I made my way up the stairs, slinging a heavy arm around my neck.

‘I didn’t think you’d be here, today.’ Rudd’s breath was rank with the smell
of butler tobacco. I shrugged off his arm.

‘Why wouldn’t I?’

‘Just the shit with your parents and all — fuck man, I don’t know.’ He
glanced at me.

‘You still ditching with us? Guy’s gonna be there at two.’

‘Yeah, where’s he meeting us?’

‘Bradley found some new place.’

‘Fine.’ I shrugged and sifted into my pocket for some coins, the very few I
had. Rudd patted my shoulder and leaned in, as if he were about to inform me of
something serious. His mouth ghosted over the curve of my chin. ‘Don’t forget,
we’re leaving just after second period.’

‘I’ll be there,’ I assured him, unable to ignore the sudden shiver that cleaved
through my spine. He squeezed my shoulder lightly and grinned. ‘See ya.’ The
warmth of his breath lingered on my neck and then disappeared.

Rudd met me outside at ten to two, a cigarette poised between his fingers. I
raised my eyebrows and moved past him, ignoring his amused chuckle. He
grabbed my arm.

‘What’s your problem?’

‘Serious, man?’ I pulled my arm away and he released his grip. ‘On the school lawn, in front of everyone? Way to make a fucking statement.’

‘It’s as good a place as any. You ready to go?’ He offered me a drag and I declined.

As we drove off, it became clear that he was restricted to conferring with me about this particular client; as disgusted as I was with myself, it only elevated my intrigue. We met Bradley on the outskirts of the suburb’s local and isolated beach. As we headed towards him, the son of a bitch reclined back in his seat, his feet already crossed over his steering wheel with the glass rolled down.

‘Well well, look who’s back.’

‘I told you, I need the money.’ I replied flatly, pulling my hat off my head. I ran my fingers through my messy hair and placed the cap back on, repositioning it so the front flap faced behind me. He smirked and kicked his door open.

‘Money ain’t what keeps ‘em coming back, I’ve been around long enough to see it.’

He stood before me, and I met his gaze, unwavering and impenetrable. His lips curved slightly, as though I’d given him the answer he wanted.

‘I don’t know his name, this one. He’ll give you fifty.’

‘For what exactly?’

‘I think it’s better you hear it from him.’

At that moment, a blue car pulled up beside him and parked discreetly amongst the bushes. Rudd nudged my shoulder clumsily.

‘That’s him.’

I took a step forward, and froze. My vision became indistinct, as if I was trying to see underwater. I blinked rapidly to remove the black dots that swarmed and clustered around the rims of my eyes. The lights switched on and off, and my heart thumped in my chest. I swallowed thickly. Bradly moved behind me and shoved me another few steps forward.

‘He won’t wait long.’

I didn’t look back at them, rather, I took the few steps forward that I needed to, opened the car door and climbed inside. I was overcome with the stench of whisky and some other intoxicant I couldn’t name. The car was dark, the windows tinted so no one could see in. Although I was aware of Bradley and Rudd only a few seconds away, I felt disturbingly alone. I looked up to meet his
eyes, and the first thing I noticed was his hair: a blond so bleached it was almost white, with tips straight and rigid due to an excess of gel. He smirked at me.

‘You’re just a kid.’

I didn’t know what to say, so I just sat there. He moved a little bit closer and breathed into my face.

‘What’s ya name?’

I shivered. ‘Tony.’

‘How old are ya?’

‘Seventeen.’

He chuckled and locked the door. ‘Old enough.’

When I saw his teeth, yellow and stained, I felt the sick churn in my stomach, rebating and merging together like soap suds in bath filled with water. As he moved towards me, I saw his eyes: hazel green and disgustingly plain. When his lips traced the curve of my neck, I swallowed down the bile that slithered up my throat. My fingers, pressed forcibly into my palm, drifted from the edge of the seat to uncoil on the curve of his shoulder, while my lips, swollen from compression, detached breathlessly. The last thing I saw before my eyes closed was the baneful smile that hovered above my Adam’s apple.

I hadn’t known what to buy Rebecca for her birthday, but I’d finally settled on anything to do with the Rugrats; she’d been obsessed with the show since she could talk. I handed over the fifty as quickly as I could; I was glad to get rid of it.

Bradley and Rudd laughed all the way back to school. Bradley waved a dark bag in my face, dangling it in front of my eyes as if he was attempting to hypnotise me.

‘It would have only cost you thirty, dickhead.’ He laughed and turned to Rudd. ‘But no, he goes and spends it on Rugrats stashes.’

I grounded my teeth together but remained silent. Once we arrived back at the front of the school, I jumped out of the backseat, even before the car stopped moving.

‘See you later, faggot!’ Rudd called after me, jeering loudly. I headed towards the car park; it was just after four and I was unaware of the time I was to meant to expect Dad. I really didn’t give two shits if he turned up or not; I just preferred not to board home with a bag.

It was then that I witnessed déjà vu in the form of a blue Mercedes that parked on the curb in front of me. My arms felt as though they weighed double
my body, and my fingers grew numb around the wheel of my skateboard. My
father surfaced from above the passengers seat, smiling hesitantly.

‘Hey, kiddo. How was your day?’

I was going to be sick. My stomach trembled. My legs tried to move, but
they couldn’t.

He glimpsed at the car, then back to me.

‘I had to drop my car off at repairs, so my friend offered to come with me.’

At that moment, the perfected, glistened tips of bleached sallow hair emerged
from the car; his hazel green eyes sparkled with amusement. Even as they set on
me, there was no change. If anything, the curve in his smile seemed to stretch
further past his cheeks, rippling the faint creases around his eyes. Dad reached
over and took his hand shyly.

‘This is Mark,’ Dad introduced us. ‘This is my son Tony.’

Mark smiled at me over the bonnet of his car; his teeth still a bilious yellow.

I vomited all over the grass, coughing and spluttering frantically. I tasted
blood in my mouth, my hands were induced with frenetic tremors and my
knees felt weak. I vaguely heard my Dad call my name, moving beside me and
embracing me.

‘I’m sorry, Tony. I’m sorry — maybe it was too early for you to know, I’m
sorry —’

The second time that I vomited, all I could taste was him. After a few
moments, my stable breathing returned and my stomach unclenched, exhausted
after retching. I opened my eyes tiredly to see Mark and Dad beside me. Dad’s
anxious eyes were on me, but my gaze wasn’t on him, rather, it was on the man
next to him. Seeing the way he smiled at Dad caused the bile to rise in my throat
once more.
...i wouldn’t share her with anyone

GILLY GRUNDY

I shake hands with Bob knowing we’ve exchanged the un-exchangeable. We’ve been friends for fifteen years, yet this goodbye has the unease of a first meeting. I shake hands with Bob knowing we’ll never shake hands again.

Bob’s wife Susie is a stunning woman. Some people don’t fit their names, but she gushes Susie like foam in a champagne glass and squeaks like imitation leather when she laughs at her own jokes. She’s not at all funny, not at all bright— but she’s sexy as all hell. I remember the first night Bob brought her over. They’d only been dating a week. She was wearing a dress so short that when she bent over you could see the cups of her arse cheeks, her airbrushed-magazine-model flesh spilling out from under the hem. As she leaned over the breakfast bar chatting to Janice I imagined myself taking her right there, ripping off her undies and slamming her into the cold marble counter while Bob and Janice looked on with stunned faces.

I know I stared at Susie a lot that first night, hardly surprising, even Janice couldn’t keep her eyes off her — pulling self-consciously at her own prim blouse, picking over her dowdy trousers. She’d worn trousers almost every day of our marriage. The first time I saw Janice, she was wearing skin-tight, pin-striped jeans and white high-heeled shoes — it was the eighties — and she looked so hot I asked her out. She never wore that outfit again. I tried to picture Janice in the short dress Susie had on but I couldn’t do it. What was surprising to me about that first night, though, was how little Bob looked at Susie. If she were my wife she’d never leave the bedroom.

That was a year back and since then I’ve pictured Susie in every possible pornographic scenario: against a bookshelf in the library, over a chest freezer in the supermarket, on the neighbour’s lawn, in the queue for the Post Office
while old grannies behind the counter seductively lick stamps. Sometimes Janice catches me staring at Susie, watching her curled blonde hair roll over those huge breasts that strain to escape from a too-tight sweater. Janice points out that it’s all ‘curling tongs, bleach and silicone’ and I point out ‘who the fuck cares?’

The four of us got so comfortable over that year that formal dinners transformed into pizzas in front of the telly, and polite conversation turned into childish prattle. Nights would usually end crashing out cold on each other’s sofas from too much wine. This whole thing started during one of those pizza-in-front-of-the-TV nights. We were watching one of those late night insider-insights into dogging, fetishism, swinging and all that kinky stuff. It was the kind of show that makes people think they’re doing an expose when they’re really out to humiliate the violators of social norms on national television. We started quipping about the four of us swinging, laughing over the witty minutia of our imaginary rule set, and imagining the process of comparing notes afterwards. Toying with this possible reality only exacerbated my Susie fantasies.

I admit I wouldn’t let the subject lie. I started joking about it with Bob during squash matches. He’d just laugh, shake his head and say ‘if Janice were mine...’ but never once did he say no. Never once did he say anything about Susie being too much of a prize to share. Bob actually seemed keen. I congratulated myself on my own ingenuity — how many married men get an opportunity like this? No lies, no cheating. I’d managed to convince everyone that it was as much their idea as it was mine. And finally I’d get to indulge the fantasy that had encroached on every waking — and sleeping — thought for a whole year. If I wasn’t thinking about Susie in the shower, accompanied by Mrs Palm and her five lovely daughters, I was doing it in the bed right next to Janice while her back was turned, even in the gents toilet at work.

Bob’s a solid bloke and he seemed to like Janice. I knew he’d treat her right. In truth, I was convinced that Janice wouldn’t go through with it anyway. She wasn’t that kind of woman. But that didn’t matter, as long as she was onboard with it.

I can hear the engine of Bob’s car running outside. He’s waiting for Susie to finish touching up her makeup in the bathroom. There was something in that handshake that makes me think something did happen with Janice after all. I feel nauseous. I suddenly remember the way Bob talked about Janice on the squash court. I think I know why he never looks at Susie.
Janice appears at the top of the stairs. She’s carrying an overnight bag. The penny drops. Bob isn’t waiting for Susie.

‘I didn’t go through with it.’ I blurt out these words before she’s made it to the foot of the stairs. She doesn’t speak.

‘We didn’t do anything baby, I swear...’ She looks me in the eye. Is it sadness or sympathy? I’m almost begging now.

‘...I couldn’t even get it up.’ She gives me a weak smile. Touches my cheek. And walks out the door.
The garage is empty. Erin busies herself — boiling the kettle, putting away last night’s washing up, getting the plates out of the cupboard — but when she checks again, there is still no car. She goes to check their bedroom, to see if maybe he’d somehow returned home and was in bed, but all she sees is a half-made bed, her own side crumpled. There is a pile of books on her bedside table, topped with a pair of reading glasses. His side is bare.

She knocks on the other two bedroom doors and returns to the kitchen to make three cups of coffee. She takes the first to a door with peeled flower stickers, easing it open. She moves slowly around the hills of dirty laundry to put the coffee on the desk against the window, touching the blanketed bundle to her left briefly before leaving the room.

The bench in the kitchen has a pile of old notes:

*Hey mum, I’m spending today at the Robinsons’, can you pick me up in the afternoon?*

*Hey mum, I don’t need a lift to soccer today. Love you.*

*James and Becca, could you guys clean up the house today? Love Mum.*

Erin sips her coffee and places the remaining mug on the breakfast bar, making sure to move the notes out of harm’s way. She rummages through the cupboards to find a frypan without stale pieces of food stuck to it, but ends up picking off old pieces of fried rice before putting on her omelette.

The pipes groan their shower noises and Erin thinks of ways to account for her husband’s absence. She wonders if they currently have any sick relatives, preferably in hospital with strange visiting hours.

She hopes they don’t ask.

She takes the omelette from the stove and serves to hungry plates at the breakfast bar by the coffee. Erin turns to take the frypan to the sink and knocks the egg carton. One stray egg spills out and rolls off the bench.
She stops to watch.

As it falls Erin thinks of the mess she is going to have to clean up. She thinks of the stickiness and the broken bits of egg shell that will spread across the kitchen. She is annoyed because she could have eaten that egg or cooked it later and now it's going to break.

Before it hits the ground a hand reaches out to save it. James stands up, egg in one hand and the coffee, spilling from the tilted cup, in the other.

'Rebecca's taking too long,' he says.

'He's at work,' Erin replies quickly.

James puts the egg on the bench. He walks around it and sits before his omelette.

'I know.'
seven excerpts

SPENCE POWELL

It was one of those regrettable unguarded moments, like when you’re eating a bag of something delicious like chips and you find yourself pawing through the bag, feeding the deliciousness to your waiting lips, probably making infantile expressions of pleasure with your face muscles and eyes, really getting off on your private snack, only then to look up and find someone’s been watching you through a window the whole time.

He imagines a girl at a bar. She asks him, all sexy-like, ‘So... what do you do?’

He wonders how he would reply to that. He wonders for some time. Finally, he hears himself say: ‘I spend money on unnecessary items — usually trendy gadgets or just shelf-clutter — and then work eight hours a day to pay down my credit card bill. I watch TV regularly. The news shows make me feel angry, sad or hopeless and the reality shows make me feel smart, superior and empty. I go to the gym, where I pump iron and read magazines while on the bike. I maintain a budget intended to help me reduce spending and plan for expenses. I used to read science fiction but so much of it these days is so awful, so mostly I read literature. I socialise infrequently, but enough. I go to movies and evaluate how I’d have done them. I play video games on that Japanese home gaming system, preferring it to the other major brands because I find the Japanese and their games wacky. I feed and pet my cats, and shovel their waste from trays of dusty gravel. I do dishes and laundry every other night or so, as much for hygiene as a sense of having accomplished anything with my life. I write fiction too, but the less said about that the better because we do not live in an age when fiction writers can thrive on their art. The rest of the time I stare at calendars, planning, biding
my time, keeping my eye out for anything I might have missed, any part of "the plan" that just doesn't feel right.'

12:13 – Conduct Internet search for Canberra Times to locate new employment opportunities. None found.

12:15 – Conduct thorough review of coffee club cards stored in wallet, assessing the stamps/punches of each to work out which is closest to earning the next free coffee. Marvel at how old the card for that place back in Victoria is.

12:17 – Begin this log.

12:19 – Stare at monitor.

12:23 – Open and read email sent by someone (never heard of before) who advises that a particular work team (never heard of before) has created a new team mailbox and that if any emails have been previously sent to the three people named below (none of whom are known) those emails will need to be re-sent to the new email address "for actioning". Print email.

12:24 – Collect print from printer. Drop print off at desk. Look for manager to discuss possibility of new work assignment. Fail to find manager. Go downstairs to purchase:

- 2 lots of hard mints from lolly machine (20 cents per serve).
- 1 50 gram bag of corn chips, “Nacho Cheese” flavoured, from vending machine ($1.60).

12:26 – On way back to desk, conceive of the following cartoon:

Cowboy (pointing gun at man): ‘What are ya, yella?’
Man: ‘It’s pronounced “yellow”.’

Three men in business suits, each holding a coffee, leave the mall just as a young woman in a tight white top enters. Her breasts are the size of mixing bowls. After she passes by, the youngest man says, ‘Now I know I’m not gay.’

‘What’d you say?’ asks the second guy.
The first guy says, ‘Now I know I’m not gay,’ and the second guy laughs for a full minute, appreciating the humour on several levels.

Having been distracted by something else until now, the last guy takes note of the laughter and asks, ‘What’s so funny?’

‘Just something he said,’ the second guy replies, and the first guy explains, ‘A young thing was walking past in a top two sizes too small.’

‘Oh, yeah,’ the last guy recalls.

‘And I said “Now I know I’m not gay”.’

It occurs to him that there is no easy way to say this: some cooked foods smell like fresh faeces, and some faeces smell like cooked food. He thinks about this as the smell of someone’s lunch wafts over his cubicle partition. Is it lasagne? Some ethnic concoction? Whatever the case, its scent is identical to that of a fresh shit in a cat box. He imagines just such a box — its glistening turd glaring, its author audaciously neglectful of covering it up — but there is no cat box here. Over the partition a woman chats cheerfully as she scrapes out the bottom of a plastic container. Thank God it is entirely in her now, he thinks. Thank God it is contained within someone once more. The strange truth that the odours of shit and food may mimic one another cannot be discussed in mixed company, but he wonders how many others have noticed. Has no one ever held in contempt the offensive contents of a tray under a heat lamp and thought such crude thoughts? Has no one ever been in a toilet at work, and suddenly wondered, ‘Is that person in the next stall eating a cooked lunch?’

He wakes up Thursday morning to find the water in the river higher than any of his neighbours have seen it in seventeen years. Across the street and down the slope dead trees the size of sailboats drift on their sides, tearing branches from anything clinging to the banks. Wombats wander the shore, flooded out of their holes, including one baby wombat that follows people around like a puppy.

He goes to work, but when he hears parts of his town are being evacuated and that ‘the peak’ will soon be reached, he races home. There, in heavy rain, spectators line his long river-side street and choppers go overhead. After it seems
the water will not climb any higher he considers going back to work, but then
his wife calls to say that people in her office say the dam upriver will be opened,
presumably to relieve the pressure. It seems reasonable: the town is already
flooded, so what’s a tract of semi-rural suburbia lost too? He calls the insurance
company to confirm he is covered. They say they don’t cover for natural floods.
Rather bluntly he is told their reasoning: if you choose to live near water, you
accept the risk of flooding. He asks the insurance man what about people who
choose to live near forests — can they get covered for bushfire? ‘Sure’, the man
says, ‘they just have to pay a little bit extra for that.’

In the end there is no racing wall of water-death tumbling up his street, but
he and his wife do drive up to the dam, as if a thorough search for massive leaky
cracks or for fleeing workers crying ‘Run for it — she’s gonna blow!’ might help
them regain something lost to this exhausting day. Instead, they are treated to
an unbelievable view: a tongue of water — so huge as to seem motionless —
disintegrating into hypnotic patterns as it collapses into the river’s chaotic churn,
the Godzilla of all frothing lattes, along whose high banks sit cranes and workers
so perilously minute that they demand from the carnival of spectators all manner
of action movie exclamations and zooming slow pans.

In bed he asks his wife a question. ‘Do you ever get the feeling that you’re doing
everything in life the wrong way? Like any sane person would look at how you’re
doing it, and say, “Huh, well that’s not how I’d have done that, but it’s your life
so go ahead...”

She tells him she has this feeling all the time. He thinks about this the
next morning at work when the depression and the panic return. He doesn’t
belong here. This is all wrong. He is not interested in any of this. He has been
imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. He sits at his desk at work and feels a
surge of tears that do not come, thwarted by shame and a sense that real men do
not do such ridiculous things. Then again, he is no real man. He is a eunuch in
a tie, he thinks to himself, mentally castrated for the privilege of a mortgage and
the comforting whispers of reverse cycle air-conditioning. He feels it rising again,
that messy bulge below the floorboards that — in times of supreme resignation
and adult commonsense — he always manages to ramp back down. But this time
he can feel the skittering go differently in his backmost cave, the black blood of
it boiling to get out. The breakdown is coming.
author biographies

**Melanie Apps** likes writing in bed and eating toast, but doing both at the same time can be pretty crumby.

**Jude Aquilina** teaches at Adelaide College for the Arts and is Chair of Adelaide PEN: rallying for the rights of imprisoned writers.

**Kyra Bandic** in the words of James Joyce, is ‘the beautiful ineffectual dreamer who comes to grief against hard facts.’

**Allison Belgfe** is an almost-writer and Potter-enthusiast who spends most of her time explaining the difference between Arts and Creative Arts.

**Jessica Caneto** wishes to have been the love child of John Steinbeck. She indulges in creating neurotic characters with desolate lifestyles, and is greatly optimistic about life.

**Adam Carr** may not play by the rules but by God, he gets published. His poetry has appeared in *Voiceworks*.

**Jamilfl Chotlbassi** writes in the absence of light and the presence of junk food. Many stories are successfully written this way.

**Shay Chungue** is trained in Hapkido and classic deviation. Her super curly hair gives her the ability to be invisible and write crack fiction. Her weakness is chocolate.

**Leo Clayton**

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**Jessica Cooper** is a frustrated short fiction writer who prefers to dedicate her time to larger projects. She runs on coffee and really enjoys pie.

**Madelaine Dickie** is about to burn off into a tropical sunset to finish her first novel, courtesy of Ms Gillard.

**Melanie Doncas** is a twenty-one year old, soon-to-be-graduate of Creative Writing who likes dreaming up short works of fiction. It also appears as though she likes hyphens.
Zoe Dzunko worked for The Lifted Brow and now co-ordinates Marketing & Publicity for Kill Your Darlings. Her poetry has featured in antiTHESIS and SWAMP. William English writes because it's as much as his limited upper-body strength will allow, and because expressing himself otherwise could be misinterpreted as mental instability. Tayne Ephraim is another UOW Creative Writing schmo and enjoys eating jazz apples in his spare time, which is all the time. Sally Evans. Book nerd. Tea drinker. Dilettante. Poet. Small-town girl. Insomniac. Origami crane enthusiast. Structuralist. Geek. Academic-in-waiting. Lover of the em rule. Adam Formosa has been published in Best Australian Poetry 2010, Wet Ink, Overland, Voiceworks, Cordite, Dotdoidash and Five Bells. He aims to work in Australian television. Daniel Fudge is a Creative Writing student at the University of Wollongong. Deal with it. Matilda Grogan wrote poetry and prose fiction until her family installed Austar — now she just watches repeats of Friends and Seinfeld. Gilly Grundy is rumoured to be John Steinbeck's secret love child, is an ex-Wollongong Creative Writing student who has returned to the UK to work on her first novel. Debi Hamilton is a Geelong woman who spends her days being a psychologist and her nights being a poet. She has had poetry and short stories published in several journals. Leo Hunt is an Englishman, and the worst person in the world: he once messed up his taxes so badly he nearly got the lethal injection. Elizabeth Julian-Tivoli's middle name is Latoya. It's for this that she resents her parents the most. In rebellion (not homage) she exclusively writes trash. Megan Kennedy lives and writes in Canberra, which is part of the problem. Gordon Knyvett only has twenty-five words to inform you of a device so absolutely fantastic that if you just finish reading this sentence you ca—— Patrick Lenton: if writing theatre, prose and blogs were hats, then Patrick would have a lot of hats. The Spontaneity Review can be found at http://spontaneityreview.blogspot.com
**Kate Liston** proudly comes from Pambula. She, along with three Herefords and a couple of stray water-fowls, has ventured north to enjoy a life of writing and grazing.

**Bridget Lutherborrow** is a writer/designer with a hat for every occasion. Her work has found a home in places like *Voiceworks, Islet* and the Sydney Fringe.

**Arcadia Lyons**. Made by Mattel. New and improved. Limited warranty. Ages five and up. Several moving parts. Does not include batteries. Clothes sold separately.

**Sarah Massih** has since been removed from the premises.

**Kate McDowell** would like you to read a bio full of bold type, but instead she has birthed a company of that name (Bold Type) in order to gain some.

**Paul Pearson** is a Creative Writing graduate, geek, Browncoat, podcaster, time traveller, legend, lunatic, book ninja, zombie pimp, devious romantic, Magnificent Bastard and serial liar.

**Libby Popper** can read upside down, in cars without motion sickness, and was known as a child to read by torch-light long after bedtime.

**Spence Powell** is a time-travelling cyborg from the laser-cooked hell-scape of 2041 AD. His mission: get his fiction published or destroy humanity in the attempt.

**Luke Rule** is the world’s laziest perfectionist. His name has appeared in *Voiceworks, ZineWest*, and *inkjerk.com* — but he denies everything.

**Jess Southwell** collects images to weave stories, and listens to fortune cookies when they advise her not to lose her ability to find beauty in ordinary things.

**Lia Sparks** is (amongst other things) a student, writer, sugar addict and accidental almost-lawyer. She lives in Sydney.

**Bettina Tyrrell** is very honest. She likes your haircut, honestly, she told me.

**Donna Waters** is a maturing-aged student with a penchant for books, writing, all things tea, her partner, three kids, and cat called Hagrid.

**Amy Wheeler** sometimes feels sorry for her characters, but not enough to stop making horrible things happen to them.

**Matt Young** is currently seeking love. His likes are cartoons with cats dressed as ninjas and burrito night. His dislikes are many. Apply within.