



UNSW/EETENED


LITERARY JOURNAL 2015






FOREWORD

When I was 15 my older sister came home from UNSW O-Week slouched under the weight of all her freebies. Buried in an Arc bag between her already forgotten flyers and brochures was the 2008 edition of *UNSWeetened*. This became the first literary journal I would ever read.



Now in its 18th year, *UNSWeetened* has become a staple of the arts community at UNSW. To be quietly proud of a story or poem sitting on your hard drive saved under an innocuous name is one thing. Seeing that same piece published in print is another feeling altogether. *UNSWeetened* offers students the opportunity for their creative efforts to be celebrated and validated – an endeavour proving more and more important in a country where funding and support for the arts are being heavily cut and undermined.



This year we received the most submissions in the journal's history. It takes courage to submit your work for publication, but to see such an outpouring of talent reassured me that the creative spirit of UNSW students is very much alive and fighting. The pages that follow are filled with extraordinary writing – turns of phrase that capture fleeting moments with perfect clarity; the kind that makes reading so rewarding in the first place.

Finally, this publication would not have been possible without my talented and inspiring volunteer team. Your hard work and dedication over the last six months has meant so much to me. I could not have asked for a better group of friends to work with.

More than six years after reading that 2008 edition and here I am coordinating a journal I'd only ever dreamed of being published in. It is my sincere hope that you find the stories and poetry within this year's edition as beautiful and engaging as I did all those years ago.

Sarah Fernandes
UNSWeetened Coordinator

UNSWeetened acknowledges the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, who are the traditional custodians of the land upon which UNSW was built. We pay respect to the elders past and present of the Eora nation, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal students and staff in the UNSW community.

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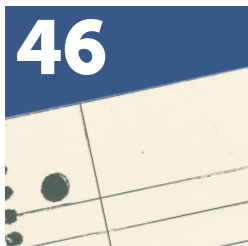
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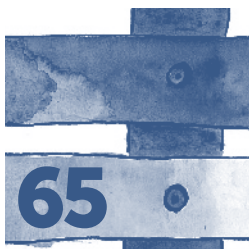


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ICEBERGS & FIREFLIES

by Anastassia Kouxenko

This is how they'll wait for you, Persephone, darling; chapped lips and cracked earth and too much faith in the weave of their woollen gloves.

This is how you leave them, although *leave* is such a funny word for coming home.

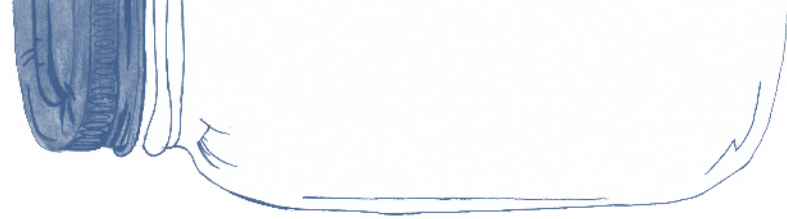
You come down here, all cotton wind and fresh tattoos and dew drops in your hair like you stole 'em right out from under the rising sun. You swallow me first with your eyes and then hold out your bluebird arms and we crash together like icebergs, the way we're both part ocean and part mountain and whole desert island and we stay that way, till the ripples settle and the permafrost melts from our aching feet.

I'm wearing the coat you made me out of raw silk and wheatgrass and you laugh at the wobbly pink flowers blooming all over it 'cos you sure didn't plant them there, and I tell you all about the little one who got his hands on it when I let him sleep in my room last night after his daddy sent him here with his woollen beanie and without his front teeth. *I guess no-one took the Sharpie from his pocket when the forest buried him.* You stop laughing then and hold me close and say *don't you dare wash it* and I swear on You that I won't, I won't, my love.

6

Your turn now and you tell me how the girls up there are carrying less weight on their hips and more on their shoulders like you always do and I gesture 'round and say *I know, I know* and you cry a little out of anguish and then a lot out of anger and I stroke your trembling fingers till we find enough courage between us to talk instead about lunar moths and the smell of storm-clouds and the way thunder sounds just right when the rain comes down heavy, even though it reminds us both too much of my Father.

We lie side by side like two halves of the same wishbone and I almost wish you'd tell me again just how the sky looked that time you went out in the oat fields with nothing but the nightdress on your back, but then you'd ask about the lightning bug you snuck down here for me



in a glass jar and then I'd have to tell you how I only meant to touch it but its little light went out, and I said *no, no please come back*, but that's not how it works, not even here. I guess I just wanted to know if stars really feel like the aftermath of fire lit under an oak tree like you said they do but I fucked up, I fucked up so I uncross my fingers and ask instead about what you've been up to because if I know you at all, and I do, then you always are. *Up to something*, that is.

You smile real big and wicked like maybe you'd just skinned the Cheshire cat and I shiver, 'cos the last time you looked that way was right before saying *they finally figured out what Cannabis Sativa is good for*. You say that you've whispered a secret truth about the Universe into the ear of a greedy man with a loud voice and I frown a little and you laugh and laugh and say *oh honey, have you forgotten what they do to sane people up there?* and I suppose I have but I'm thinking now about how you leave, you always leave, but then somehow you always come back, too, and we get to love again like vodka and pop rocks and ashes back down the red-raw throats of volcanoes and if we were teenagers with bitten nails and cherry gloss they'd call it sick puppy love, but it's been centuries since we studied the whole dirty chemistry/alchemy of it inside out until we'd outlived every one of them, and they don't say nothin' any more except that maybe I tricked you somehow and I hope you know that I didn't, or maybe I did and I can't remember now.

7

If anything we've grown selfish; we're drunk then hungover then drunk again on each other, my dove, nothing more. Up there they say the frost is melting too quickly and the bears aren't hibernating and the sea's too warm now and they'll hate us for it but I hope, I hope one day someone knows it's you who's been lighting it from underneath.

We make a furnace of this frozen place.

Anastassia is studying a Fine Arts degree, with a few sneaky writing electives. She loves loose-leaf tea and good cider and can't decide if getting writer's block while writing her own biography is amusing or depressing.

STREAK OF BLUE

by Andrew Signor

The elderly hit on each other
in trains, churches and chemists
They recognise their previous bodies
in eyes of those who share
a past long gone.

She's somebody's grandmother,
somebody's sister,
somebody's first girlfriend.

Trip to the pictures?

Popcorn and soda?

Or trip to a sleazy motel with Evil Knievel
defying gravity?
Degenerates!

8

Some say her mind is gone
her wits are at an end
And all her teeth are false;
her hair is white with a streak of blue
hidden inside the locks.

She stares out the window
not looking at anything new,

She's looking at what used to be
shadows of memories
grayscale railways
of fibro houses
and the one storey home.



The world passes quickly around her
on both sides of the brain
while she sits clutching onto an umbrella,
the sun shining so bright
– she’s seen it all to be ill-prepared.
Some say there’s a parallel universe
where anything could be
She guides her finger
over the bumps of the train window,
tracing her image
reflected
inverted
One seat in the train
and one seat outside,
flying down the tracks
at a lightning pace.

Andrew is a hopeless romantic who’s been working on a good margarita. Bob Dylan devotee and Vinnies tie addict, when he’s not at the library reading Australian plays, he’s either on his typewriter, rehearsing for NUTS, or tossing up some leggies down at Snape Park, muttering “bowling Shane”, to himself. He is currently studying third year Arts/Education, majoring in Theatre and Performance Studies.

HOLOGRAMS (PRE-HISTORY)

by Camilla Palmer

Winner Open Fiction

1.

In Marseille, the sun could dull your brain, like red wine in the middle of the day. Then the sea would refresh you. Marseille is chaotic and there's this ambivalence that fills all the empty spaces, a kind of generalised disregard for consequences. You see it in the peeling paint and the rats that live in the holes in the wall. A woman could be raped, her body discarded in one of the whitewashed neighbourhoods that tourists come to take photos of, and yet just around the corner, in some side alley with a stencilled picture of Nelson Mandela spray painted on the wall, across from a shuttered 17th-century church, inside a vacant shop lit by a single fluorescent bulb, five Muslim men would be kneeling toward Mecca.

2.

10

One evening I came home from work early enough to see my father before he started work. Walking towards our building I saw a van and some people in bright yellow vests in a huddle. I slowed down and watched them for a moment. I noticed they were standing around something on the ground. It was a body covered in a plastic sheet. I realised the smell; that is something I don't think I will ever be able to forget. Everyone had their mouths and noses covered with their hands. I put my head down and kept walking into the lit doorway of flats.

3.

It wasn't the first time I had seen a dead body. A few years before a guy had overdosed in the stairwell of Mamma's tower. Abdi, my cousin, had dared one of us to poke it with a stick but we had all been too frightened to even go close to it. I remember standing at the top of the stairs, inside the door, thinking it looked like a heap of dirty washing.

4.

Two of my neighbours, boys with AK-47s hanging limp from their shoulders, laughed and whistled at me as I climbed the stairs to the fourth floor, their laughter echoing in the stairwell.

“Allez! Allez! Ma petite rouge!” they heckled me. *Go! Go! My little red!*

That was a bad joke that wasn't meant to make you laugh. My mum, with her red hair and freckled skin, stuck out like a bruised ego in that place and the boys called me *petite rouge* because I was her daughter, because she was little and red and I was not.

“Elle est une MILF, ta Mere!” they said.

“Va te faire foutre,” I said under my breath.

5.

Inside our apartment, my father was frying eggs. He made himself some toast to eat with them.

“Did you see those fools outside?” he asked me, his knife clanging against his plate. He snickered. I put my bag down and walked into the kitchen to see if there was anything I could make myself to eat. I hadn't eaten since that morning.

“They don't know what's good for them,” he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

6.

The smell of a burnt body lingers. It cuts through even the coldest air. Even the next morning, when I left for work, I could smell it. I walked past the same spot I had the night before, where the body had lain under a sheet of plastic, but it was as if nothing had been there. If I hadn't seen it myself and if the smell was still not there, like something solid above, I would not have even been sure it had happened.

11

7.

It was about four days later when I heard the body had belonged to Nabil. I'd known Nabil my whole life. His family were also from La Castellan and we'd gone to the same école and for a little while the same college until Nabil dropped out. He was the first person I'd ever gotten high with, when I was thirteen and he had some hash given to him by an uncle. When he didn't cut his hair it would grow into tightly bound curls that hung over his ears. Nina told me he was dead. She was my best friend, the only girl I trusted more than my grandma.

“They shot him twice in the back,” she said.

“Then they set him alight. Whatever he did, he must've fucked up,” she added. It wasn't for weeks though that they 'officially' said it was Nabil. He was so badly burnt they had to ask Baya, his mother, for a sample of her DNA, just so they could say it was him.

Everyone knew who it was though. Nabil Tir with the floppy hair. Everybody knew but nobody talked. That is just how these things work.

There was a rumour it was one of the Romas living in the squat beside Saint-Antoine station, a reprisal for Nabil having gotten too close to one of the Roma girls, but I knew that wasn't true. Nabil hated the Romas so there's no way he would've been having something with one of their girls.

8.

Nabil's mother, Baya, helped my mother become a nourrice while my dad was away. That was the year before Nabil was shot.

"Cherie, we cannot do it without you," she said to my mother as she stirred sugar into her tea. "And don't worry, you will be very well compensated." She winked at me as she said this. My mother, at any rate, had no choice and Baya knew this. That's why they asked women like my mum – desperate wives and mothers without work – women who had no other choices but to open their homes up as illegal safes.

"How else will you pay the bills? Keep clothes on your back? Food in your stomach?" She posed the questions almost as challenges, as though she were answering them for my mother as she was asking her. My mother looked frightened but she was nodding her head, agreeing with everything Baya said.

"But no drugs Baya. That is a line I won't cross, okay?" and Baya smiled warmly, of course, of course, she said, no drugs, just money.

9.

12

They began stashing money that night. As soon as my mother agreed to it, Baya drained what was left of her tea and said she would be back once she had arranged things. Mum kept it hidden in the freezer. It was often thousands of dollars at a time. Nabil would bring it to my mother in a red sports bag and then she would stack it in piles three-high inside the freezer.

10.

Maybe it was inevitable, what happened to Nabil. His family were in the game so he had no choice, really. They'd made him a chouf by the time he was fourteen. He was tall and cocky so it suited him I suppose. But that meant no more school. Instead, every day he just hung around, watching the towers. There were always two boys at a time and they could not leave their post until two more just like them came to replace them. They reminded me of meerkats in the desert, turning their heads to scan for predators.

11.

The last time I'd seen him, before the night they shot and burnt him, Nabil was wearing a white tracksuit with blue and red stripes down the sides and black sneakers. He'd just bought the sneakers that day and was showing them off to me. His hair was cut short and hidden under a white cap. He was standing with his back against a wall, in a stairwell, an AK-47 hanging from one shoulder as casually as my bag hung from mine. We talked for a few minutes about our families. On the wall next to us was a doorway that had been covered over in concrete. The year before a whole family had been murdered in there and in the end they filled it all in with cement, covered the doorway over. When the concrete was still wet heaps of kids had inscribed their names and at the bottom, near the floor, somebody had written the French word for 'kisses', bisous.

Nabil was eating a sandwich as we talked. There was an old Turkish man who sold sandwiches to the boys in the hallways at night, when they were hungry and bored. It was a big operation. It was a big job that all those people were doing. Once Nabil explained it to me like this:

Midi à Minuit; 25kgs; 15,000 euro; 300 clients; Celui-la, c'est la vie.

12.

My father was always listening to music or reading the newspaper. One night, listening to a Wailing Wailers album, he put his head through my door and the light settled on the bridge of his nose and in the hollows of his cheek. I could just see one side of his face; the other fell into the darkness of the hallway. He looked like a bust in a museum.

"Hey," he said, in his nice voice, his soft voice, his caramel voice. I smiled, looking up from my book. "I'll need those numbers tomorrow, my Princess." He called me Princess when he wanted something from me.

The next day I stood behind him as he sat at the kitchen table.

"Account number 550639798440," I said, reading them over his shoulder as he fervently wrote them down using a pen advertising a local hotel none of us had ever stayed at.

"The funds are deposited fortnightly on Thursdays from 2pm," he said, and his voice sounded like it was smiling.

13.

The whole thing was Sami's idea. He was my uncle but not because we were actually related but because he'd been around forever and that is what my father told me I had to call him. Sami always had these ideas and he was always getting my father to help him with them. The term Sami had used was something he'd read on the internet: **Redirecting Funds**. It sounded

professional, legitimate. When I typed the words into Google it said what Sami was really talking about was embezzling. I knew what that was, or else I had an idea. But by that stage it was too late to stop, Sami had already put the idea in my father's head. At least, I thought, there wasn't any violence involved; it was simply a matter of my father entering in a few different numbers, making the log at the electrical factory where he worked with Sami a little 'happier'. We all laughed when Sami put it like that.

14.

There was no turning back. My father just came home one day and told me I would have to go to the bank for him tomorrow. My father was not a person you questioned so I just nodded.

The one time I did ask her about it, my mother said "They don't give a shit about us anyway." I wasn't sure if she meant my father and Sami or someone else. I cared less about that than she did so I didn't question it again. *Don't complain, don't explain.* That's my motto. It's something my maternal grandmother used to say. At that time in my life I didn't expect anything from anyone, not the government or politicians or society – whoever 'they' are – and definitely not my parents. I didn't know you were meant to expect anything. Of course I knew it was wrong, stealing money like that. But to be honest, that didn't bother me. I did it because my father told me to. I didn't think much of it beyond that, not until I'd done it a few times. My mother simply referred to it as 'the deposit' and would remind me, like clockwork, every second Thursday not to forget to collect it.

15.

14

I waited across the street which was something I always did before collecting the money. It calmed my nerves which even by the third and fourth times still raged like bulls in my guts. A group of chattering white girls walked towards me carrying take-away coffees and their voices hushed to whispers as they passed. I held my hand up towards the sun and spread my fingers apart so the sky showed in the gaps. That blue, which will always be there, which, in spite of everything, will never change, was deep indigo. It was resonant. There were thousands of feet moving in all directions around central St. Charles station and the sun was bouncing off the large windows, turning them silver like alfoil. Some guys were break dancing around portable speakers and behind them an upright piano was thickly cabled to a wall near the tracks. I watched a pale white woman struggle down the monstrous staircase with a small child and several bags of shopping, past the bosomy women that reclined down either side of the staircase. The statues of the women, whose features are racial caricatures, are labelled: one 'Asian Colonies', another 'African Colonies.'

The windows in the bank stretched up high and the early afternoon sun was

flooding the room. The man in front of me was taking up everyone else's time, asking about non-tax-refundable charity deposits. I was the only one grateful for his methodical questioning because it stretched the time between my waiting and my being served by the next available teller. Seven. I counted them for the fourth time.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.

Next!

16.

My father, he wasn't a bad guy. I know that sounds defensive, like probably he was a bad guy and I just don't like admitting it. But it's true. The bank thing was his idea. He said I should do it. He thought it would be easier that way because people are more trusting of pretty, young girls than they are grown men. There were seven employees working the first time I did it. I counted across the room, from left to right, three more times and each time I counted to seven. Three sevens are auspicious, I thought. It's in my father's favourite song – *When the three sevens clash*. I was very nervous and I counted them, over and over, the first time from outside, after my father kept calling me and I kept ignoring it. He could never relax when he wasn't in complete control. Finally he sent a text: *How many?* '7' I texted back. I counted again. Not that it mattered how many employees there were, it wasn't as if we were holding up the bank. But for some reason my father got fixated on that detail: how many employees there were. Each employee was wearing a blue shirt with the bank's logo embroidered on the chest. He insisted I get served by a woman or one of the trainees, as if I could decide who would call me first.

15

17.

I say I was nervous those first few times, but really, it got easy fast. It became less of a thing. By the time I did the last one, it was just another part of our routine, a normal occurrence in our lives. Sometimes my father even forgot – oh yeah, it's Thursday, he'd say, smiling, as I handed him the receipt for the transfer.

It was a warm, autumn day the last time I went. I followed the woman into a small, glass-panelled room.

"Asseyez-vous," she'd said politely, motioning to the chair with her slender hand.

"If I could just please ask you to sign here... and here," she tapped a blank space at the bottom of the page with a shiny, pink fingernail.

"As you understand, Mademoiselle, the bank requires a release for withdrawals over 10,000 euros." I nodded. I remember feeling very weird at

that moment, when she called me Mademoiselle. It was such a strange thing for me then, to be spoken to so politely, having all that money given to me so willingly, as though it really did belong to me.

“And here is your money,” she said.

It was so much money, it was actually heavy. I placed it inside a cotton bag, inside my backpack.

18.

I left the bank and walked to a nearby travel agency and I paid for the ticket to Sydney International Airport, which I had paid a deposit for the week earlier.

When I first asked about places to go the agent had handed me several brochures; elaborate folders with pictures that were bright and glossy and smelt freshly printed. I looked at the one for Australia first: fireworks on New Year’s Eve in Sydney Harbour; a kangaroo bounding across a red desert; a couple embracing atop a giant cliff face overlooking the ocean. But it wasn’t any of those things which convinced me. It was the picture of Uluru – though I didn’t know its name then – that struck me. I didn’t know if I wanted to be at the rock or on the rock or just like the rock – remote and still – but I decided in that moment that I would go to Australia.

“Bonne chance,” the man said to me as I left the agency.

HEADING NORTH

by Rachael Koch

Highway Tracer, headlights like the moon,

Dream trees on the outskirts of a mind.

White lines on grey road,

Kilometre, kilometre, kilometre.

Night Traveller, breath into windscreen,

Long lanes warp like radio waves.

White knuckles on the wheel,

Kilometre, kilometre, kilometre.

17

Rachael is studying an Arts and Business degree, but she only added Business because the prospect of inevitable unemployment was stopping her from buying her daily coffee. She has a notebook for sporadic writing ideas, and the last thing she added to it was "yellow afternoon". Groundbreaking.

LYCHEE MAN

by Esther Yap

The day was hot. Metal bodies exhaled into sunken tyres, tyres melted into the bitumen road, and the road sizzled with ancient gum that stretched onto the soles of Nikes that ran along the East Malaysia Highway.

He stood outside the gates and sounded his horn. Once, twice, three times. He didn't dare to attract the wrong kind of attention from behind those high, closed houses. Guavas hung by their windows, untouched.

He ventured one more call, and waited.

The sharp sound carried through the front gardens and pierced the sleepy air vents. Children appeared from the houses and watched him with curious eyes. The world hung from the back of his motorcycle. Toothpicks of cut papaya, mangosteen and pineapple nestled in clear plastic bags knotted with pink string. Soft, warm bread and steaming kaya buns sat in the satchel, snuggled beside white soya milk and black soya sauce that clinked happily in glass bottles.

He remembered children of a generation that hovered around his peddler bike and begged hot bread with bright faces and infallible wonder at the glassy cane sugar, twirled into fat honeycombs on skewers. Now, these children stood behind guarded gates and their absent hands flaked paint from fresh Dulux walls, barricaded against the

unknown and unsterilised.

The engine idled and he called out to them.

“Here, try the fruit.”

They shrieked away into their air-conditioned houses and their hysterical laughter carried over the wooden window slats. Humidity weighted the air as he stood alone.

He turned and left the empty street.

He had noticed, one by one, his fellow sun-faded competition disappearing from the streets. But, as his nieces and nephews kindly explained, there were supermarkets now. Large, wide aisles of exotic meats, tinned caviar and multi-flavoured Pringles.

You can buy *everything* from the supermarkets, they said. He nodded, and wondered if they, too, sold steaming kaya buns.

They brought him out for Japanese, for Italian, for a *cultured* taste, they said.

“We hear they’ve opened a restaurant in the city. Portuguese. You *must* try it.”

He slapped his leg absently and crushed a cluster of bloated mosquitoes.

He brought his wares across the streets to the mouth of the highway; it was an arterial road that pumped and pulsed car after car. He stood alone against the thunder of trucks



Esther is in her final year of living in the Quad computer labs on a weekend. When she isn't thinking about interrogating her Compassion UNSW team or inhaling doughnuts, she is snapchatting her struggle to live as a redeemed sinner and suffering from ambushes by the confounding beauty of God's love for broken and half-baked potatoes like her.

and his stall rocked with the rush of traffic, buffeted by the surge of movement from destination to destination.

Occasionally cars pulled over, demanded carbohydrates, paid and left. Their front-seat children spat pink blood and cried as the sugar cane drove splinters into their untrained tongues.

He saw the tourists as the shiny rental indicated left and parked neatly in the side street. Whites. *Ab-mors*.

Their crisp clothes turned limp as they traversed the fifty metres of humidity to his stall. White Shirt and Floral Blouse turned to instruct:

“Kids, it’s Not Safe. Stay in the car.”

He saw, and understood. He pretended not to care.

Unwanted, dangerous, foreign, the *Ab-mors* approached and he watched them as they placed their leather shoes hesitantly on the pitted road and wearily weaved around wads of chewed sugar cane and spit. They peered at the fruit and seemed disgusted.

“It’s so... irregular. Are there meant to be lumps there?”

He looked at the fruit and saw it as it hung that morning, beaded with dew from his grandfather’s trees in Sarawak. He tried to fault it, and could not. He smiled hopelessly.

Carefully, they chose three containers; each was prodded, examined for fingerprints and tutted

over for dirt.

He charged exorbitantly.

“Sixty Ringgit.”

Favourable currencies converted in their heads and cashed out in his hand, taking the form of clean bills. Fat, content nods slid between White Shirt and Floral Blouse. He held their money as they drove away and, strangely, felt like the one who was left cheated.

The second couple approached from their taxi as the others left, encouraged by the sight of other *Ab-mors* who had bravely ventured out.

First attracted by the novelty of purchasing ethnic cuisine then drawn in by the freshness of his produce, they breathed deeply as if it were possible to inhale the local flavour.

They gasped and exclaimed at the halves of glistening guava and papaya.

“It’s so novel! What do you call this?”

“It’s so authentic! Wait, it is, isn’t it?”

He was pleased at their rapture and gushy ignorance.

“Eighty Ringgit.”

He heard the conversion in their heads and they smiled. Then, they stopped.

“Can we bargain?”

He saw the glossy brochure in her handbag and recognised the loud font of airport travel guides. He shook his head and pretended not

to understand. They tried again, but this time, hesitant. He sensed it and shook his head firmly. The couple withdrew awkwardly, unused to the politics of bartering. They drove away and the soot of their exhaust settled deep into the cracks of his cheap, plastic loafers.

In the humidity of the evening, he dripped cloudy sweat.

He sensed the caffeinated driving eyes that veered off the tarmac and was a distance away when he heard the angry blare of horns that careered into his stall. Headlights driven by microsleep quickly retreated to the highway and the blood of lychees lay over its wheels.

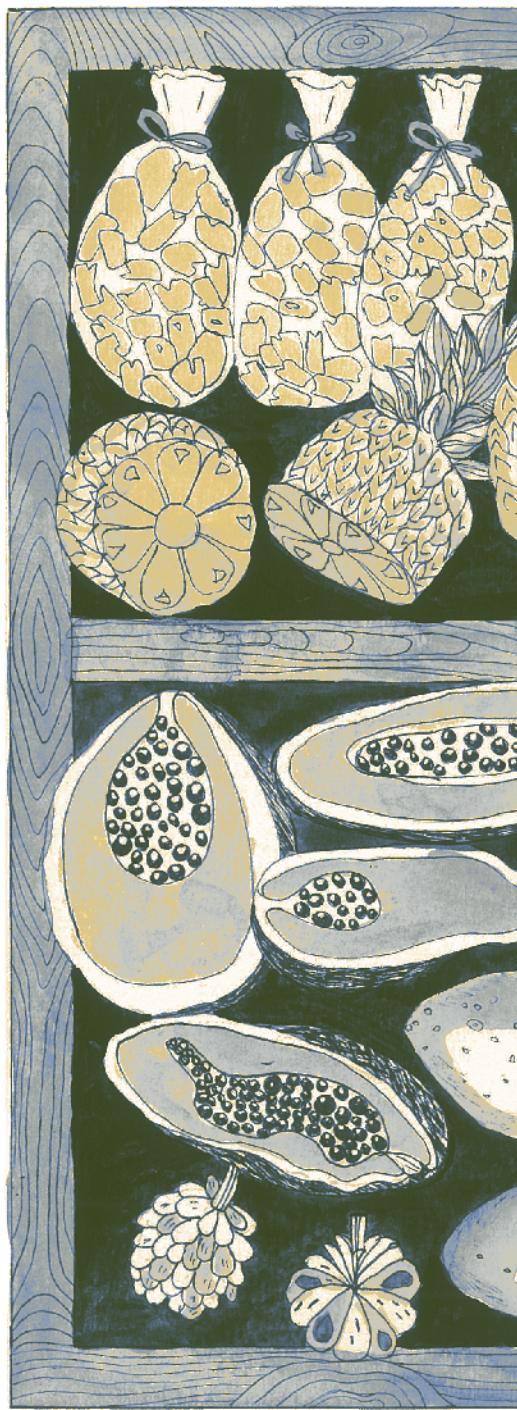
It left behind a man gathering his wares with salty smears on his face and a stall mangled to the ground.

Night fell.

In a finger that bordered the highway, rumbling trucks stopped for a man by the road. Large pans of lychees rested on a spread of yesterday's newspapers and nubby shells lay scattered across the floor. Hands exchanged fruit for the metal coin, and brown fingers spun cool, generous handfuls into twisted paper bags.

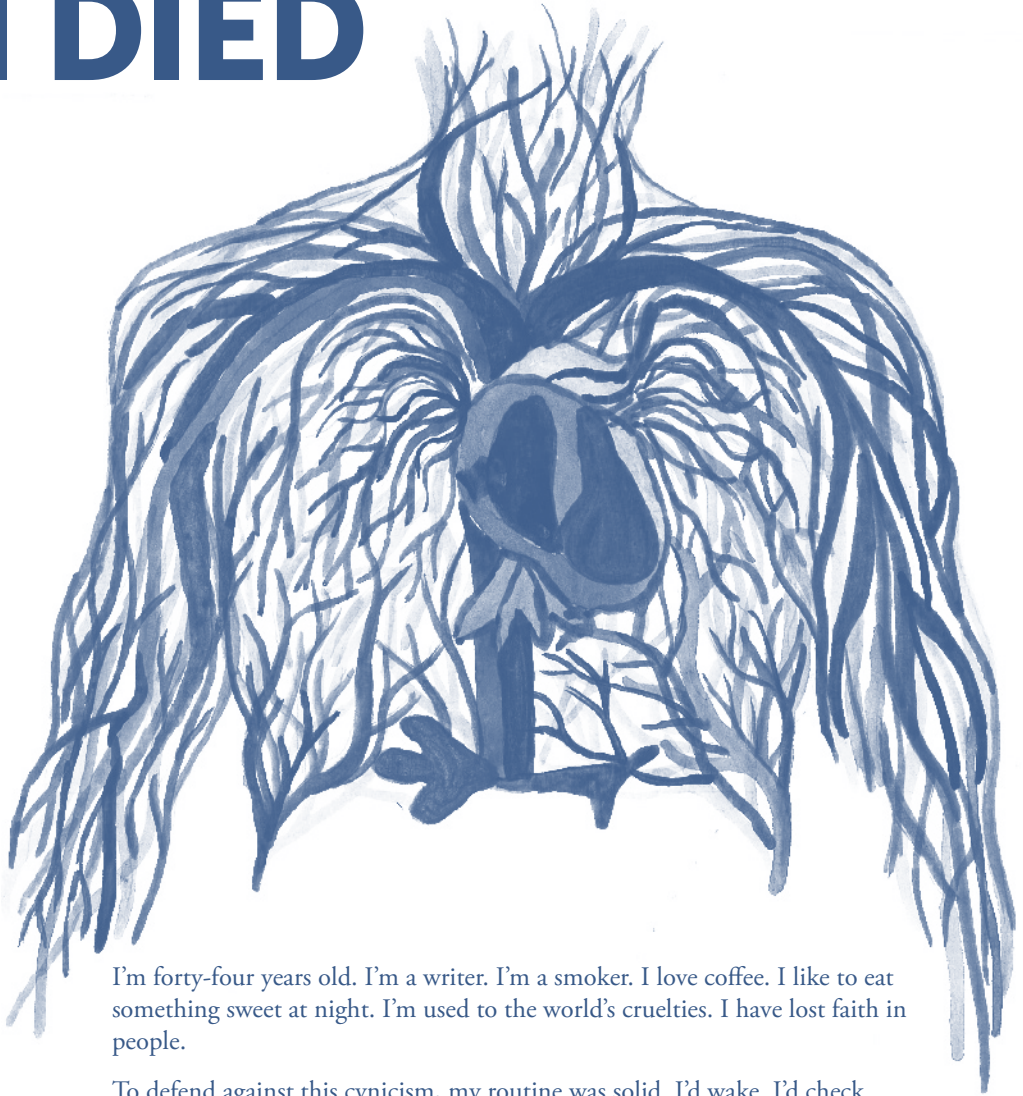
Tired drivers nodded their appreciation and the trucks rumbled onto the highway.

The man sat by the road, and he waited.



THE DAY I DIED

by Stephen Davis



I'm forty-four years old. I'm a writer. I'm a smoker. I love coffee. I like to eat something sweet at night. I'm used to the world's cruelties. I have lost faith in people.

To defend against this cynicism, my routine was solid. I'd wake. I'd check emails, news, and social media. I'd shower. I'd go to the local coffee shop where I'd read the newspaper, do the cryptic crossword, and field innuendo from the owner, George. Cigarettes would punctuate every stage of this routine. Then I'd go home and write.

Last Wednesday, I was having a cigarette outside the coffee shop when I felt a pain in my chest. I thought it was indigestion, so I stubbed out the cigarette, breathed deeply, and walked it off as my gender had told me to.

Soon the ache disappeared. Good. Easy. Life goes on.

I returned to my seat to tackle four-down in the cryptic crossword: *A song sung by the man (4)*. ‘Hymn,’ I finally realised and I started to scribble the letters into the grid. Halfway through the word, I felt the pain return and the lump in my chest contract. There was pain along the underside of my arms and a tingling lapped towards my neck. I panicked as the right side of my jaw burned.

‘I’m forty-four years old. I’m a writer. I like coffee and I’m going to die in a coffee shop doing a cryptic crossword?’ I thought. It was almost as perfect as my only other near-death experience, when I nearly drowned while filming a water safety commercial.

‘It’s nothing,’ I rationalised, and turned back to the cryptic. I continued to stare at the grid but my concentration had gone. Any lateral reading, deeper consideration of the clues or application of the puzzle’s tropes eluded me. I had lost the thread. I wandered home and sparked more tobacco en route.

Home, my little dog greeted me with delight and hope of a reward. I offered a fatty liver treat before opening a Word document. Then it happened again: the chest pressure, arm tingle, and jaw pain. I was well versed in the importance of creating an active protagonist and so, I acted – I Google-d. All the .edu and .org sites suggested that I was having a heart attack. Dramatically, I was satisfied. Theoretically, I was terrified. Practically, I promptly fell asleep on the leather couch in the lounge.

When I woke, the pain was gone. ‘All part of the day’s fiction,’ I thought. ‘Yesterday it was lovers at the end of the world, today it was an egotist at the end of his.’ I even rationalised – as I smoked another cigarette and ate half a bar of Terry’s Orange Chocolate – that there was no need to even bother my wife, Reema. The evening would just be another evening with a new narrative. It’ll be calm, relaxed, filled with our laughs, and a midnight stroll with the dog.

“I think I’m having a heart attack,” I told my wife the moment I saw her.

Twenty minutes later, I was opposite Dr Stanojikov in his new office – set among the green towering residences close to the airport terminals.

“Your symptoms seem atypical to me, but we might as well do the tests,” he said, as he feverishly typed every detail. “Your heart sounds fine. Your BP’s perfect, temps okay. But I want you to go see a cardiologist tomorrow, sonogram and ECG and blood test from the pathologist, okay?”

‘BLOOD TEST’ was all I heard. I can’t handle blood tests. Even writing the words increases my anxiety and blood sugar level.

“Are you okay?” Dr Stanojikov asked. “You look a little shocked.”

“I’m fine,” I lied, silently blaming him for the way my day had developed.

Reema drove me to the pathologist’s in Bondi Junction and dropped me off as she searched for a park. I had a quick cigarette outside the building. Conscious of discovery and judgment by the medical staff, I located myself spy-like behind a council bin filled with rotting overflow. I smoked quickly like a fourteen-year-old hiding from teachers.

I entered the pathologist’s and took a number. I waited, trying to remain calm.

“Mr Davis?” said a wiry phlebotomist. He was pale, drained of both blood and sympathy. “This way.” I nodded and followed him into a treatment room. “Just lie down.”

“I have to confess, I’m not really good at this kind of thing.”

“Really? It’ll be over before you know it. Two for one?”

“What do you mean?” I was worried that he was suggesting I was actually getting two blood tests this morning.

“Test and ECG.”

“Does the ECG hurt?” I asked.

“The most painful part is ripping the sensors off your chest. Now lie down over there.” I lay down on a bed with a gossamer-like covering. I started a routine of control as he strapped my arm and told me to pump my fist. I wiggled my toes, I breathed deeply, and I started to talk utter shit. He tapped my vein.

“My name is Stephen Davis,” I prattled.

He slid the needle in.

“I have a dog, a cute dog. She’s really sweet. ”

He started pulling out blood.

“My wife’s here too. She’s also cute. She was looking for a park. I think she parked in the shopping centre—”

“Done.” The phlebotomist unstrapped me, put a bud on my vein and told me to hold it. My feet stopped wriggling and, mercifully, I stopped talking.

Ten minutes later, the ECG was finished and I was at reception with Reema,

waiting for release from the pathologist's cardiologist.

"When can I go?" I asked.

"Don't know. Soon. How'd the test go?" Reema replied, as she passed a water bottle to me. After fasting for twelve hours, I drank like a man lost in the desert.

"Fine. I was brave. You would have been proud of me," I lied. She smiled at my ruse.

"Mr Davis?" the phlebotomist said, emerging from his room. "We're going to call you an ambulance and you're going straight to Emergency." That was that. In that single sentence I finally grew up. All humour, lightness, and Superman-sense evaporated. I found my hands covering my face, holding my eyes as I started to cry. Reema put her hand on my shoulder and gently rubbed my skin. The woman at reception offered a tissue. I pulled in the tears and found that I couldn't look at anyone. Instead I looked out the window, watching the Bondi Junction strangers wandering past with shopping bags and sandwiches.

I saw sunlight. Time slowed. Life outside melted into a mood: a piece of music, modern music, atonal with no melody. Though not as crashing as the seventies tertiary postmodern rebels. Rather, I focused on the sounds that filled with whispers and wind, the creaking of doorways and the soft motorised putter of wheelchairs. Thus time became round, as I allowed them to comfort me in tandem with my wife's touch.

Two paramedics with a stretcher entered the pathologist's.

"I feel fine. Really. I don't need that," I said.

"Gotta do. Protocols," said Ted, the more attractive of the two. I nodded and climbed onto the stretcher. A white woollen blanket was put over me.

"This feels like really bad street theatre," I said to one of them as they wheeled me through Bondi Junction toward the ambulance.

"I know what you mean, mate, we'll do another ECG in the ambulance as a second opinion, okay?"

"What was the first opinion?"

"You had a heart attack."

Someone had to say it, I guess.

At Emergency, I was wheeled into a corner and felt that it was all a waste of time. I was fine. Reema sat beside me and was holding my hand.

“So I’m just going to do a blood test, Mr Davis,” a young woman doctor said.

Right. Okay. Another blood test. Two for one. The wiry vampire from pathology was unknowingly prescient. I looked to my wife. She knew my phobia.

“You’re going to see how much of a pussy I am.”

“No. Really?” she said with the kindest cadence of sarcasm.

“I’m going to put a cannula in as well, Mr Davis,” the doctor said.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a small plastic tube that’ll stay in your vein, so if we need, we can draw extra fluid or give medication.”

I wished I hadn’t asked.

“Now, this won’t hurt,” she said. It did hurt. I breathed. I prattled. I wiggled my toes. I clutched at the thought of our car parked somewhere in Bondi Junction.

“That’s going to bruise, ya pussy,” Reema pointed out after the doctor left. Soon, we were playing. She whispered witty observations and I mimed dumb shows that focused on pretending to die.

“Stop it,” she said, as I comically carked it for the third time.

“Inappropriate?” I asked.

“A little.”

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“Mr Davis?” I looked up at the doctor, a smile still on my face. “The cardiologist has reviewed your blood and you’ve had a heart attack. We’re going to rush you on for an angiogram and maybe a stent, okay?”

I stopped smiling. I looked to Reema. She looked back. ‘I love her,’ I thought. ‘I don’t want to die and never see that look again.’ Hands wheeled me away. I took one final glance behind me. My wife stood there watching, holding a plastic bag with my shoes in it. She’d leave soon. I wanted to leave with her. She had my shoes. How was I going to walk out without my shoes?

We arrived outside the procedure room and Dr Reddy Vagna appeared by my side.

“So, we’re going to do an angiogram,” he said in a strong London accent. “We’re going to go in your wrist, pump you with ink and see what’s happening. If there are blocks, we’ll put in a stent. You’ll be awake for the procedure but you’ll have a local.”

“Can I have drugs?” I asked.

“Yes, you can have drugs,” he replied with a smile.

“Climb in here, put your arm here, we’re just going to remove your underwear,” said a South American nurse with a hearing-aid. It was like the world’s worst seduction. “I’m just going to shave your groin, Mr Davis, in case we can’t go through your wrist,” she concluded a little too loudly. I shrugged.

Dr Reddy Vagna entered like a matinee star and said he was giving me a drug that would take the edge off. “It’s a form of Rohypnol.”

‘Great,’ I thought. ‘This can only end with me in court being asked by the prosecutor to show him where on the doll he touched me.’ I felt the prick in the wrist. After a few moments I asked, “Can I have some more? I don’t think the drugs are working.”

“Is the edge taken off?”

“Yes, but can I still have some more?” Dr Reddy Vagna nodded. The edge became flat and my panorama became wide and fascinating. I explored.

The theatre staff started to bustle. The dread flat greys that welcomed me now popped with interest like a hospital drama. The brown swab on my wrist dripped while above me, the ten or so television screens crackled into life like an absurd appliance store window.

“Now, this might be a little warm,” Dr Reddy Vagna said. A hot flow of ink lapped its way through my veins. It was odd but also comforting. The myriad television screens glowed as the map of my arteries pulsed into view.

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“What’s that? Is that my heart? Where are you from? Am I asking too many questions?”

“Not at all – turn your head to the left,” Dr Reddy Vagna said. The bulky white X-ray camera mechanically shuffled over my chest; its large back motor was gently nudging my head. I got the rhythm of the machine and danced with its movements. Knowing that I was watching my own arterial pathways, I kept my focus on the screens. I saw the stainless steel stent weave its way from the radial incision in my wrist and motor toward my left anterior descending, but was distanced by many hours of television conditioning and narrative detachment.

“Okay, Stephen. We’ve put a stent in the critically blocked artery and in six weeks you’ll have to come back for a secondary stent in another critically blocked artery.”

“Okay,” I replied, looking at what now seemed to be his glowing evangelical

head. "Do you think I could have you do it again?" I asked, confusing this English Wizard for something more pious.

"It would be an honour, Stephen," Dr Reddy Vagna said. He leant into me with just the right amount of intimacy. "Now, you cannot smoke again or you'll be back here in five years with a major heart attack. Do you understand?" I realised his gesture of closeness had this hidden agenda.

"Not even a sneaky one at a party?"

"I'm being serious, Stephen."

"Okay," I replied. My last ever cigarette, frantically sucked down outside the pathologist's that morning, was not even enjoyed.

Moments after, Dr Reddy Vagna was gone, and the silent staff that had buzzed around during the procedure returned to their normal chatter. The modesty patch was removed from my recently shaved groin; I lay there naked and chilled. I eavesdropped on the staff as they discussed social matters and renovations. As their talk descended toward reality television highlights, I started to become self-conscious.

"Do you think I could put my underpants back on?" I asked, as a male nurse was getting far too enthusiastic about an act he had seen on *Australia's Got Talent*.

"Of course."

Finally, I was clothed and wheeled out of the operating theatre. Towards Recovery, I got one final glimpse of Dr Reddy Vagna discussing the procedure with his colleagues.

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"It all went perfectly. See you in six weeks." He smiled reassuringly at me.

Reema greeted me in the ward. I pretended once more to be dead, thinking it would remind us both of the playful routine we shared in Emergency. My act unfortunately was too convincing, and her worried expression quickly snapped me into a more responsible place.

"Sorry," I said, as I was rolled onto the bed by Lisa, the Head Nurse. "Should this look like this?" I asked lifting my wrist with the radial incision.

"Goodness," Lisa said, looking at the hematoma the size of a principality. "No it shouldn't. I'll get the doctor."

"Ice, and get ice," said Reema.

A young doctor, whom I learnt came from Toowoomba, appeared at my bedside. I continued to ask too many questions, while Lisa placed ice

under the swollen twin that had decided to make an appearance in my life. I discovered that the young doctor was once a nurse and had recently graduated as a doctor. She kept pressure on my wrist and I noticed that Lisa seemed sceptical of the young expert. Perhaps it was the seeming arrogance of the young scholar that annoyed her, or maybe it was the stress that dimpled the young doctor's cheeks that made her wary. Ultimately, I think it was the young doctor's lack of confidence that created doubt in the Head Nurse's mind. Oddly, it reminded me of my own slow decision-making processes: just watch me after spilling a drink on the new coffee table.

"Are you having any pain, Stephen?" asked Lisa, unaware of my sympathy for her.

"Not really. A little. Maybe."

"Do you want morphine?"

"Actually, I am feeling a little pain," I lied. A shot was promptly placed into my stomach and the cocktail combined with the Rohypnol created one of the best parties I had ever attended.

A few hours later, Reema was asked to leave. I would be spending my first night in the hospital alone. On her way out, Lisa pulled her into a hug.

"You are a lovely couple," she said.

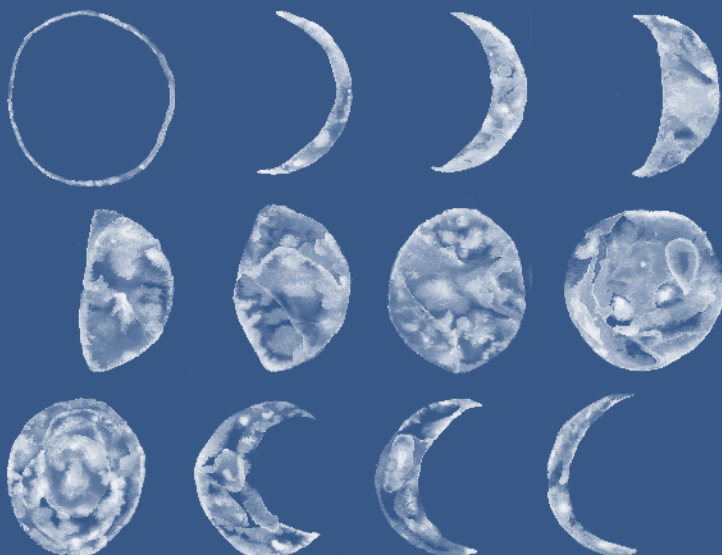
As I lay in bed beneath the mumble of *Foyle's War*, I realised that though the last two days had been shocking, it was one where love had proved itself fundamental. I had started as usual, closeted away over a coffee and a crossword. By the end, small gestures: the insecurity of the young doctor from Toowoomba, the charisma of Dr Reddy Vagna, the manliness of the paramedics, and the soulful care of my wife, the funniest woman ever, who not only made sure my shoes were safe but that my heart would be okay too. It cancelled out all ugliness.

A new narrative had emerged and with this, the world was tilted back into balance.

MOON REFRAINS

by Michelle Wang

Runner-up Undergrad Poetry



Night-swathed brownstone,
Windchime, fifth-period Wednesdays.
Transparent grid, glass-paned.

30

Misty moon, smiling moon
Whites pasted up
onto October's blood moon
Vermilion crusted gold leaf tipping out of the sky
Dissolving into damp thickets, picket fences;

Half moon, grey moon
falling through the wind gazelle footed
the chase the chase the chase
"Touch my hair"
right then, soaring, on the salt on my hips
and my lips
and yours;

Golden moon, tipsy moon
wet wysteria secondhand smoke fingers,
trailing Tolstoy, Joyce, Rousseau's
spines; gentle solitude
perfumed by the unknowing knowing
of things
in the big old house;

Day moon, gone moon
breakfast under wrinkly lavender whorls,
misty edged.
Corners of lukewarm watermelon, passed around
in murmurs, hazy communion.
Both of you in a photo, sealed,
certified,
a sure thing;

Fake moon, hung moon
clumsy whispers and skin on skin,
miniatures of "how are you" and
"you're kind of weird"
but not
stolen looks or
other synapses in an uncertain collection.

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Crater-cradled in December, dying,
Smoky eyed scrutinising
generic chandelier,
pores rinsed wrung hung to dry
new.

Michelle is a being who enjoys the Japanese practice of Boketto: staring into space with a vacant mind. Otherwise she is probably thinking about stuff like why all root vegetables are so damn tasty whilst in a constant gravitational pull towards stripes. In the remaining minutes of this hectic life she is a second year Arts/Law student.



I.

I will know when you have died, because;

The sky will blush at midday – pomegranate emptiness floods Ouranos like blood in a swimming pool and darkens to a cold grape juice night with stars that weep – *rain without clouds* – and all because? – While some older man – chest hair peaking from his floral shirt – packs vegetables into his car and slams the boot and catches a glimpse of the bruised ceiling of his world and runs not for his life but his phone where he searches pasts texts for one not returned and hits call and who knows who answers but he tells them he’s sorry – for all of it – While a boy is eying the sweaty vendor of the fruit market – slides an apple into his pocket – the vendor cries out and the boy runs – the apple bounces and rolls into the gutter water and sits there – but the vendor never saw the boy, whose mother lies somewhere in a warm room strewn with blankets – a little grey man moving on top of her moving on top of her moving on top of her – Still – and rolls over and she smiles that practiced smile – not that it’s false, this one was even a little fun – had a way with his fingers – but otherwise, anyway, she gives him a moment and cleans him up and sees him out – While somewhere a matching little grey woman pushes pencils and pens and zooms around spreadsheets like that rattle in a spray can – *not fast enough they say* – can’t even feel her ring any more. And a day worker smokes away his break on the concrete stairs behind the loading bay – twists the cig into the step till it stops bleeding fumes and looks up at the menstrual noon – While his son – school collar a white noose unbuttoned and hidden beneath a little blue tie – sits on the toilet crying because there’s no more paper and no-one to pass him another roll and class has already started and he’ll be in *sooo* much trouble when they find out and he just and he just and he just *can’t* – While his friend sits in class trying to follow the story – the teacher reads a new chapter each day – but instead glances at the empty seat next to him – a siren cuts the sentence and signals the school to shift into lockdown – *bizarre weather conditions* – While the news man

sits chin up eyes forward straight back feet square shoulders square jaw square, makeup pooling with sweat as he – *we urge you stay indoors and remain calm while we await further information* – And a big man – rainbow kippah a spilled jewel box – stares helpless at the pieces of his shop window tossed across the white linoleum – pushes his glasses back up his nose – hooded men piling tins of this and that into baskets or trolleys or just folded arms and running out through the shop front and into the crimson daytime where the streets are barren and the windows home to countless eyes murmuring to each other – *what's happening Mum?* – A girl sits alone in the park, leafing through a slender paperback, not oblivious to the world around her, just not caring. Her hood about her face and her hair cascading out of it – but she's not you. She sits with her legs crossed – you're elsewhere. I can tell by the red reflections dancing on the water that you are *Elsewhere*.

II.

When did that atrament worm crawl into your ear – wrap around your spine like Dransfield's parasite – endoskeletal succubi peeling away the warmth of your charcoal heart and wearing it like stolen skin – made a kingdom out of your grey matter – drowned smiles sob from the salty mote – spires prick at the backs of your eyes – a civilization of lost things weeping behind your retina – colouring the light of the world black and the right of the world wrong and nothing here is perfect here but all you've ever seen – all it *lets* you see – are the fine cracks in the porcelain surface of everyday existence. When did it start chewing your thoughts for you – seizing every fragment of friendship and beauty and art and poetry and people and all the things a heart could hope to love – and predigesting them – absorbing the essential nutrients – hope – warmth – and spitting you a second hand experience, devoid of sustenance. When did your shadow make you *its* shadow – wrap string around your wrists and ankles – suspend you above the void – guide every movement of your grinding bones – brown skin – till your muscles went stale – atrophied

– rotted away and you hung like a murdered marionette? And when did it cut your strings – let you sink through the scream storm strata – salt rain and silent shivering – feedback pierced poison eyes peering giant from the throat of leering maws – white molars – grey gum flesh sky rips storm shudders – the inaudible gunfire between the teeth of strangers speaking – and somewhere in it all you're caught – a leaf in a maelstrom – a mouse under the cat's paw – a girl in her bedroom.

III.

They rise each morning from a bathtub of bright, sinuous threads of thought – falling away like snake skin in the time it takes eyelids to pull apart – and now walk about the cement glass colony with eyes down shoulders down heart tucked into bed by red blankets – no longer caring for this mornings' solar haemorrhage. The scarlet sun has found its apex, but the colony is hard at work: There's a round Asian man – bowl cut and bellied – calls everyone 'boss' – who won a certificate for stacking pillows so tight they'd push back on your fingertips – and takes delight in packing shelves with startling efficacy, I'm still not sure why – and a man who spent ten days in the mountains with only his silence for company – not talking to a soul – or perhaps that's exactly to whom he spoke – a girl all giggles and fun who has – on account of some peculiarity of mind, been prescribed more pills in her life than meals – an older woman tall as a thumb – clutching papers – books – pens to her chest and on the march – the young students hate her but she'll make them learn – even today, she'll do her duty – to two brothers made of stone and laughter – buildings in leather – one's body crossed with scars like stratified shark gills and the other chuckles and smiles – until he doesn't, but their story isn't mine to tell. There's a girl who sleeps her life away in a bed bought by her mother – You dream under sails – and a refugee who can't catch a wink lest the world break through his window with zip cords and machine guns – screaming red light is all that breaks through today. The fumes are dancing on the horizon – ephemeral ethereal blood



ballet – A small figure – hood bowed – sits at the edge – legs suspended a forever above the sound of waves – hands in pockets – retrieves a phone and taps with little fingers and slides it back in and stays put – still – then rocks forth – back, then forth – back, then forth... back. Stands. Walks away. In Dunningham Reserve there's a pair of blue thongs among the daisies – not a metre from the precipice – beyond the safety rail and wearing last night's rain in glass baubles – looking out to smooth sea and clouds. I presume they're no longer needed.

IV.

I send you messages – lay out lines – texts – calls – letters – bottles in the sea – white sky writing aeroplane pathogen – alphabet dusted urban landscape caught in the safety net I pretend to cast – pretend I can catch you – pretend I can catch rain – not spill a drop of you – pretend it has anything to do with me at all. I pace the night like the pavement is your chest – street skin stretched over subterranean ribcage – every footstep I make – tuned hum of thunder drum – is a heartbeat I have no right to force you to take. I am Moses pressed to a cellphone – dial number – downtuned cicada processed speaker call – mechanoid heartbeat imitation – asphyxiation approximation – *Hi this is my mobile* – The air catches the echo of city voices now abstract – the shadows of things strangers have said and forgotten – the light-burnt eyesight after images of drunk chatter long after it's leaked away – trapped in the stillness like insects in amber and pressed into my inner ear is every voice under the stars but yours and I see you with your head in some Perspex box – a plastic bag or sitting in the back of someone's car – or some small room – a cupboard – a fridge – the shelves scattered on the floor with spilt milk and potatoes and tinned corn and no meat – never meat – and wherever I see you, always that dreaded canister – green hose – invisible helium stealing away the breaths (I wish you would take) that hang about your head like apostles – that fall like angels from your lungs.

V.

I will know when you have died because:

The red wine drunk sun has slipped beyond the horizon of memory – swallowed – replaced by a new slew of stars – street lights – traffic lights – green – orange – and fluorescent red lit shop front – number only, no name – brand names and illuminated logos – fractal reflections and phone screen star field – shattered glass and the crunch underfoot as the nocturnes come out to play and the sky diamonds fall – celestial bodies sinking through the stratosphere just to touch our cheeks – wet – toes – wet – illuminated baubles on the eyelashes of a stranger – soaked through the fruit vendor's shirt – the girl's hood – soaked through the refugee's curtains and the teacher's books – the student's collar and the brother's smile – the news man's makeup and the lone man's soul – soaked through the thongs in Dunningham reserve – soaked through the marionette strings – soaked through Moses and his cell phone – soaked through the Perspex box. Gutter water runs the bitumen away – drags the rat to sea – sky cloudless – still as deep water where the realization strikes it – that we are simply sparks seizing the chance to dance against the inferno furnace of the universe – tiny white hot flares extinguished in the fall – dwarfed by all – the flame lick galaxies and smoke nebula coagulating – and if some god peering into the heat were to wipe the sweat from their brow and close their eyes just for a second – the pinhole light-burnt eyesight afterimage piercing their void like memory made visible, would be you.



Lewis-Alan Trathen is an English Lit. student and occasional spoken word performer. During his studies, he has developed a distrust towards line breaks and an infatuation with the voice of Paul Dawson. Lewis-Alan is easily recognised on campus by his long, golden hair. He encourages you to say hello, but secretly hopes you get the wrong person.

BRUISES

we've had our fair share of small tragedies:
the stroke, a sister left a continent away,
distance and quick knives and failing organs,
lost loves and light.
meaning leaking out of our words,
broken fathers,
burnt homes;
an arrow to the eye,
(as per the old curses)
(but now it's just paper cuts).
the bloodline surges forward,
like flowing molten lava,
the slowest victory.

small tragedies, only
a cobble or two
in my left shoe.

for

small tragedies bloom
only if you let them.

Eric is studying Software Engineering and how to stop shouting at technology. Of his major loves, writing comes in at a cool fifth place, behind such items as being overly competitive at the board game Articulate, tennis, and beautiful cinematography, whilst being before eating watermelon, the letter 'j', and clouds.

FREEDOM

by Erica Longhurst

The only time I ever carried a gun and was really encouraged to use it was when I was in Endeavour Hills. Back then I carried a naïve sense of justice in my ballistic vest – it smouldered inside my heart, and was soon to be extinguished when I realised that the navy blue uniform that I wore actually smothered the person I was inside. I was a person who ate vegetarian sausages with a fork and without a knife; who shuddered at the thought of hitting a duck with my panel van; who cried when I saw a child miss out on ice-cream at the shopping centre. But I still wore that universal uniform that was a blockade on my emotions.

Back then, a hype pervaded the Endeavour Hills Police Force that submerged my navy blue police apparel in what seemed to be a constant pattern of uncertainty; *The Age* plastered images and slogans of ISIS hate: ‘Our culture; beheaded’ and ‘Do you really know your immigrant neighbour?’ It was cruel, it was vindictive, it reminded me of: **The Reds under the Bed.**

But it was exhilarating on the level of intoxication for the Police Force. I watched as Captain Callaghan pointed to the suspect hotspots across Melbourne. It was 2014; back then we had the infrastructure and technology to discover the hiding spots of all those who had either hoisted up the Islamic State flag at one point in their life, or who had their Visa cancelled, or who had simply stomped on the wrong side of the police force – the side that wanted to punch back.

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The situation at Endeavour Hill was proof to Australia that we were taking this issue seriously here in Victoria more than anything else. The media sized up the issue and concluded that it was bigger than anything we had ever faced in Australia, “A National Emergency”. And so, two years forward, I was sitting in Feyton Park Parramatta, waiting for something to happen – ready to protect the ideals of My Australia. My Australia was a multicultural land, one of free speech and the right to practise one’s own religion. But this current reality that I had to navigate was different; it was seen as encroaching on the individuality of a land of freedoms by introducing restrictions.

The trees were groaning with pigeons, their watery poop periodically splattering the unlucky picnickers in the park below. They were morbid birds, cooing away their time until lunchtime arrived, when they would hobble

down onto the ground like old gossiping women and snag a sandwich crust. They didn't approach me and beg for food. I was dressed in casual clothing, blue jeans and a Nike shirt from Taiwan. But perhaps I exuded an invisible force of nonchalance; of the behaviour of an adamant police officer. Or was it because I had no food? Either one.

This was the Parramatta Police Force procedure to hunt out identified terrorist suspects. These travellers who had arrived from Iran with their dreams bundled in their turbans – we didn't know what those dreams were, did we? And so we assumed the worst.

I crossed my legs and revealed a bright orange tag sliced across the musty green park bench:

الحرية

“Sergeant Mercy!” The arrow of my name shot through the balmy Monday morning. I remained nostalgic about Melbourne; everything there was bloody good back then, except for the shitty weather. The warm Sydney weather: that was what I appreciated in Sydney. My transfer had been unexpected, but I suppose that my level-headedness in an issue of great cultural tension had been appreciated.

“Mercy!” A voice appeared behind the park bench. I turned around to see my partner, Sergeant Tu. Tu was a man of great agitation; he always forgot to submerge his gun in the bottom cuffing of his trousers, and so everyone could see his gun clearly hanging out of his cargo pants.

“Undercover, man! And bloody hell, don't call me that name,” I hissed angrily.

Tu sat himself down carefully, taking care not to crumple his cargo trousers. One thing I noticed about the Chinese was that they always took great care to look after their clothing. On my first duty with him, I had made the mistake of prodding him in the arm and joking, “Did you make this Nike shirt?” It was horrible, I know. He looked at me angrily, and shot back heatedly, “I'm Chinese!” From then on, we never talked about what was beyond our duty then and there.

We had come here to monitor 44 Feyton Park Road; a little hidey hole of a place that was crushed between Woolworths and the local bottle shop. Across

the road from us, and behind where we sat, was a small Chinese acupuncture centre. I held back my joke about whether his family working in there – it wasn't really culturally insensitive, was it?

A family of about six – a mother and a father and four children under twelve – were under monitor as terror suspects. They lived in this box that watched pigeons cooing day and night from the park outside. The heartening aroma of Persian pilaf weaved its way through the park. Living on a staple diet of corned beef and potatoes, it smelt wonderful – I wondered how I could recognise it, and then I remembered. I had smelt the same wondrous scent last Wednesday when I had walked past the Parramatta curry restaurant on my way to work.

Tu pressed the palms of his hands deeper into the seat, and leaned back. His voice began to crackle over the cooing of the pigeons, the aroma of the rice, “Look!”

I followed the direction of his pointing hand. There, on the balcony of the flat at 44 Feyton Park Road, clung two little hands over the top of the railings. Slowly, slowly, the little mite pushed himself upwards, and two dark eyes smiled over the railing. The little boy was perched on a vacuum cleaner, desperate to leap beyond the parameters of the balcony and say hello.

40 Soon later, his older sister, her uncovered hair glistening in the sun said: “Little bro, come on inside and get some brekkie. Mama's taking us to the footy tomorrow.” She saw us watching, and gave an embarrassed smile, almost curving her mouth to say hello, as she tried to pick up her brother and carry him back inside. He resisted. She gave a little puff of irritation, and hurried back inside.

Tu gave a little wave, his face broke into a grin. I thought back to a time outside of my arthritic fifty-something-year-old body, when I was as old as that little boy, and I had numbly faced the ‘terror’ of the Cold War – it meant nothing really to a kid back then, it was some scare tactic, fertilised by the government and pruned and shaped by the media. What did it mean to him? That his parents might watch the television a bit more, innocent people, wary of things that they needn't be, as they were more likely to be liberal like the rest of them.

I tried to put a name to the grinning eyes and little fingers. Tu kept on smiling, miming being pooped on by a pigeon, and was ecstatic when the little face began to chuckle. Name, Name. No. Maybe I couldn't assume what

the little boy, or his Irani family were like from sitting on this old park bench on a cold Monday morning, when his father was probably preparing to earn a day's wage to feed his family, pay his ridiculous rent, and keep them all smiling like the little boy.

The mother and father finally came out onto the balcony. Together, they picked up their son, and pretended to play gently tug-a-war with the little boy. From even 30 metres away, I could sense loss in the way that they pressed their son's body to their arms, and lovingly ushered their three other children inside. A lost child? A memory that we could never know?

The little boy giggled in delight, and the father said, "I have the tickets on the kitchen bench. You take them to the footy in the morning – and then I will leave work early and take them to PCYC, they have a new fun centre open..." his voice trailed off. "I bet they will be busy at the hospital tonight." She agreed with a smile, and together, carried the little boy inside.

"Come on, Tu. I bet you my next pay slip that these folks aren't terrorists."

الحرية Freedom

Erica pinches herself every day when she realises that she is studying Med. She wishes that her landlord would allow her to have a pet turtle in her apartment, and loves long bushwalks. Erica would never say no to a long black coffee flavoured with deep philosophical conversation, and she really enjoys bike riding.

DETERMINIST

SOFT

by Matthew Bugden

Like
the two or three strands of pasta that get
caught
in the colander –

you are the leftovers.

What happened to the men
they called angels –
as white as
Icelandic cauliflowers –
were they ruined by our sun?
Did they just keep
moving on?

Those sad toddler-men
sitting
on the autism spectrum,
alone in their rooms.
Their stomachs, empty,
make a noise like a bowling ball
rolling.
Their mothers won't let them eat
dinner
until they have invented the machines
to solve everything
or end it all.

And on a muted TV screen
at a bar somewhere
a six-foot-eight, twenty-two-year-old
boy
ties the championship game with a free throw.
He's made his last five in a row
but an old man at the bar
still crosses himself
in the hope that he makes
the next one
too.

NO MAN'S LAND

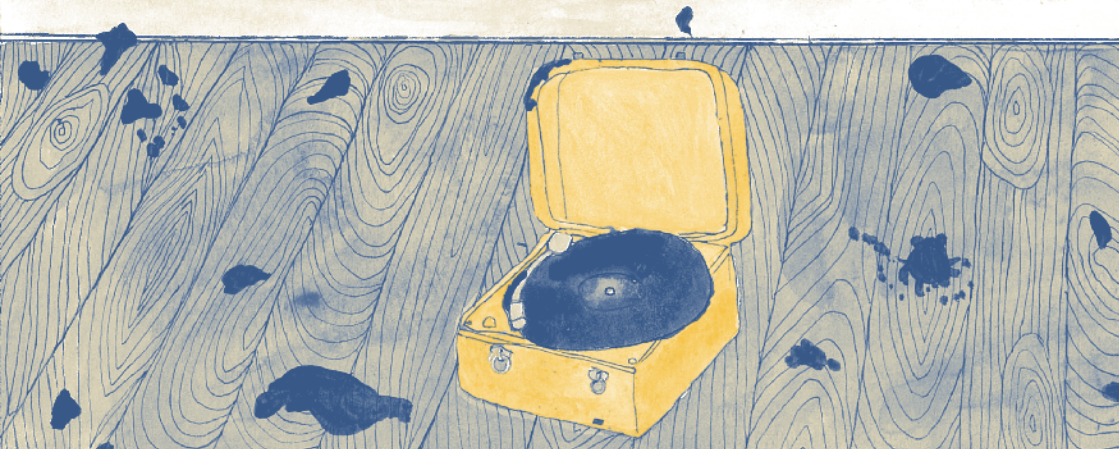
by D'Arcy Blaxell

His personal Picasso project had borne no fruit – citrus, especially, is known for its silence – and he'd made little progress trying to paint the walls of his apartment the colour of B-flat. Like Pablo himself, he'd have been walking to work with wet hair were he not too busy planting geraniums on the arsehole of history while the turntable spun its candlewax collage. He'd been to art school – sort of – which is to say he was there early as fuck the first Friday, but continued with the consistency of Thursday's Rogan Josh on Saturday morning. Unfortunately, his first and last lectures were proving little help in tuning the auditory orbit of his habitat. The walls had seen so many coats that the particular chromatic chrome they currently carried was causing the room to shrink – so much so that each coat needed less and less paint – and finally, in his torrid tone deaf loneliness, he enlisted the best listener he'd ever had the pleasure of talking at.

She.

She was an island species, darker than she was tall, with the rare rocky smile of a small lighthouse. Together they'd erected rainbows, she his self-amused muse, his foxy moron; he her slightly-too-graphic designer. He'd not seen nor heard from her for months, their last falling out falling days before his sudden inspiration and all but forgotten in that very adolescent excitement of ideas. It wasn't that she called him a philistine – no, they were both equally unenlightened. What peeved him was her insistence on wearing sunnies in the darkness. And though they seemed to share little more than that blackout (and the occasional candle of saliva) they were close for a while in

43



the very analogue way that zero is close to one. Yet she came when he called and he and his half-caste cast away passed the days at half mast, sleeping in the morning and mourning in the evening, humming shades their palettes couldn't quite produce. They found C, saw it, tried to drop it a couple of semitones, but her hands had the hue of boredom. Her claps sounded blue, the applause was always muted, and B-flat was as elusive as ever. He hurled paint and abuse at the walls in equal measure but the paint was water based and he spat when he swore and he ended up painting the floor.

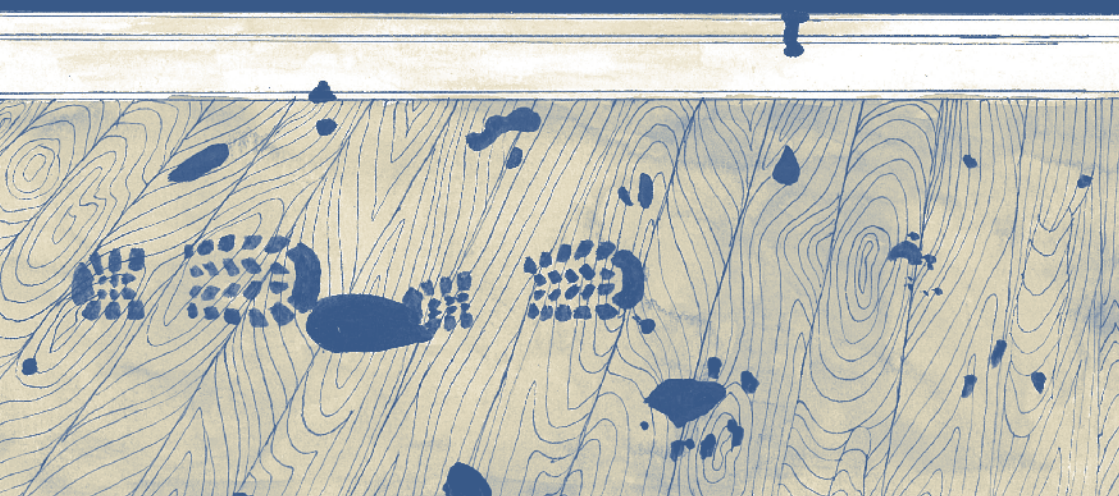
C-sharp.

They spent the days stingily, each far too aware of their worth, and the sky remained defiantly minor key. They made little progress, but progress they made. The highlight of Wednesday, a feature wall in the frequency of her foibles; Thursday's efforts covering the cornices with a resonant red reminder of the architecture of their rainbows. Yet B-flat was nowhere to be found, covering from the fury of their search, a safely nestled needle in the haystack of every record, found only by that needle that was bound to broadcast only its sound and leave its visuals only in his visions. Eyes closed, it was easy, but to project those scales on the scale of the real world was a task neither had the aptitude for.

They learnt to alternate days. She brought her own amplifier and adopted digital for the first time, he belatedly began to build his own brushes, firstly from the finest untouched follicles of the former ones, then the dog got a haircut, then he did, and still no luck. Still the walls closed in, the slowly encroaching confines of colour, until the ladder was surplus and the surface of the ceiling was a mere tippy toe away. Michelangelo would've been jealous.

44

And still they laboured away, together again, then not, finger-painting when



brushes were found wanting, turning to toes when fingers invariably failed. Besides, by now each wall was easily within reach. They sat on the floor, back to back, creating colours for their feet to wear on their futile forays; each had an opposite wall to work with but either could only mirror the other. They ate breakfast in bed, it was luxury – there was only a bed. That's where they ate dinner, mixed paint for the morning and whistled away their weekends while they worked in what had slowly become little more than a box.

Shortly, 'room' became a misnomer; there was barely space for the both of them and their palette, and even the records were replaced with portable audio. They crawled through the door hanging heavily on its hinges and hardly noticed the dwindling illumination of the postage stamp still masquerading as a window. Jackets tore and tattered on the tired tremble of her treble, raised red fibres ripped on the razor wire adorning the fine line between cellmates and soulmates. No man's land – and no man landed harder. Each day they huddled closer, clothes unnecessary for they together had more coats than they could ever hope to wear. Eventually, as both knew but neither noticed, both suspected but neither spoke, they became stuck.

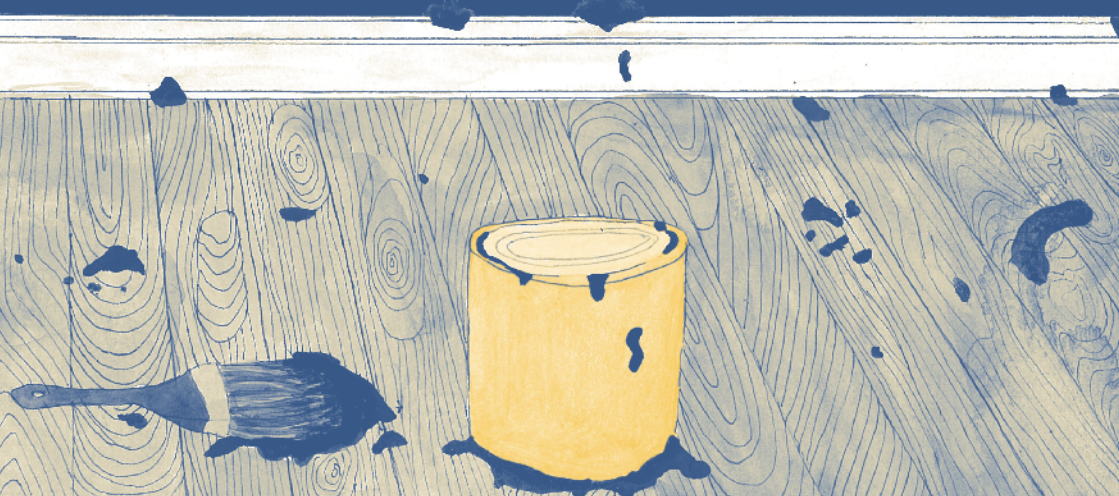
So there they stayed. The food dwindled, the candles exhausted themselves and music lost its power as batteries became ballast. But they had enough paint to last a lifetime – and they still had fingers to dip. So there they stayed.

And he never wanted to see another sound.

No.

He was quite content listening to colour.

D'Arcy is doing an Arts degree and generally going nowhere. Now he's in a magazine; published writer. Cool. Ready & willing to sell out.



FINDING LETITIA

by Joshua Kirsh

Letitia took her first step into her new school, hair fluttering in the dull wind behind her. It moved like a shampoo commercial. It was a sandy-brown, almost blonde colour.

Wrestling it back behind her ears, she took long small, neat strides to the front office to collect her schedule. Her blue green blue-green eyes were wide, taking in the numbers and names on the doors around her.

The school secretary was a quiet, mousy looking woman. She ran off a copy of Letitia's timetable without a word or even a smile and smiled gently at her. It made her feel a bit more at ease. She took a cursory glance at the paper in front of her - English Lit. That would be interesting.

46 There was a bit of time before that, though, so Letitia decided to sit outside on the bleachers wait in the library, reading her well-worn copy of Hilary Mantel Zadie Smith a collection of stories by H. P. Lovecraft Phillip K. Dick. Letitia loved science fiction; she was engrossed by stories about worlds so similar to ours but so much broader or fantastic in scope. She lived for the escapism of allowing herself passage into foreign lands THE SECRET LAB! PULL THE LEVER, KRONK! dystopic worlds; they helped remind her of how lucky she was even when her whole world felt like a prison mousetrap.

You see, Letitia was very pretty; she didn't know it, but she had a gentle, soft beauty. Her smooth, pale skin shone in a really humble way and most boys who met her were captivated by her. She had never had much luck in love, though. For Letitia was not like

"If you finish that sentence I will actually leave. I will leave, and I will not come back."

"What now?" Christopher complained. "All I was going to say is that she's not like other—"

"And what, exactly," Celia challenged, "is wrong with being like other girls?" She let out a sigh. "Telling girls that it's an ideal to aspire to being 'not like other girls' only leads to divisiveness and mistrust."

"I know, I know, there's a special place in hell for women who don't help women." Christopher rolled his eyes.

Celia snatched the sheet of paper with his now brutalised opening passage, and scanned it over. "It's not enough to quote Madeleine Albright, smartass. Feminism is about supporting the idea that a) no girl is, by definition, like other girls, and b) that no girl should be ashamed of being a girl. By saying that liking science fiction makes her unlike other girls, you're reinforcing the negative stereotype that—"

"For heaven's sake, Celia, I know that women can read science fiction! What if it were genre parody? Taking your *Bella Swan*, your *Katniss Everdeen*, and saying – look at them. We read about them in every single story, we know them, we admire them. How can we justify continually portraying them as counter-culture when they're the new mainstream?" He knew he was reaching, but at that point, he felt desperate.

"If it didn't work for *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*—"

"—which it absolutely did, take back that blasphemy—"

"—then it certainly won't work for you. You're not Tina Fey." She raised an eyebrow. "Do you think you're better than Tina Fey?"

He gave her a pointed look, and then flopped down onto his bed with a defeated sigh. "Would it be so terrible if I wrote something other people actually wanted to read?" She lay down next to him, and they turned to face each other. "Maybe I'm tired of writing about down and out gays who have very cynical worldviews and end up alone but discover a sense of purpose."

Celia just looked at him. "So does he have a winning smile, or dreamy eyes?" There was no condescension in her gaze; a touch of pity, maybe, but no condescension.

"No," Christopher said, sullenly. "He has both."

Celia took his hand in hers, entwining their fingers. "Writing stories about weak female characters is not going to help, you know."

He sighed. "No, I don't suppose it is."

"Status report, Ensign!" Captain Letitia Marypath bellowed, as the ship's stabilisers failed to keep the artificial gravity steady. She began to feel sick stood firm at the helm, eyes fixed on the stars directly ahead through the viewport.

"Engines are critical, Captain!" the officer replied. "The evasive manoeuvres were unsuccessful!"

"Make another attempt at hailing them," Letitia the Captain ordered. The computer made two short beeps, signifying no response. Captain Marypath remained steadfast at her post, but the mounting pressure of the situation was making it impossible difficult. She knew that her many years of battle training should have prepared her for this situation, but she was continually left feeling helpless out of her depth unsure of her abilities.

She had gone down this road before and sworn could not see success in ever going down it again. She knew there was an obligation to attempt diplomatic overtures, and she knew the processes, she just lacked the confidence didn't want to fail couldn't start the dialogue.

There was no other option. Her life, and the lives of each member of her crew, depended on firing back.

But The decision was taken out of her hands when the ship shook one last time, and then ~~calmed~~ came to a halt. She turned to look at the ensign, who had no explanation. Then the alert sounded.

"Captain, we've been boarded!"

"Security teams," she responded, "set phasers to

“—stunning,” Celia was saying.

Christopher hummed in reply, vacantly. “Yes, I’m sure.” He had been staring across the beach for a few minutes, watching him saunter out of the water and onto the sand. Those dreamy eyes glistened in the summer sun; that winning smile was pointed far off, warming someone else. He rolled over onto his back. “Does writing at the beach make me a bit pathetic?”

Celia continued to stare up at the sky. “He’s not even looking, so it probably doesn’t even matter.”

“Mean,” Christopher snorted. “Fair, but mean.” He tucked the pen and notebook away in his bag.

“Finally given up on the ongoing saga that is Lucretia?”

Christopher snorted. “It’s Letitia, and no, but I don’t think she’s Captain-of-a-starship material. That’s not to say that women can’t be captains of starships, #Hillary2016, sure, it’s just...” He trailed off, tired of disturbing the softness of the afternoon. They gazed up at the sun listlessly. Somewhere along the beach, a boy with dreamy eyes and a winning smile sat down on a towel and watched them for a few moments, before shaking his head and walking off.

“I feel really close to the character now,” Christopher observed, quietly. “Like there’s this voice in the back of my head that I know is her. I just don’t know what it is that she wants to be yet.”

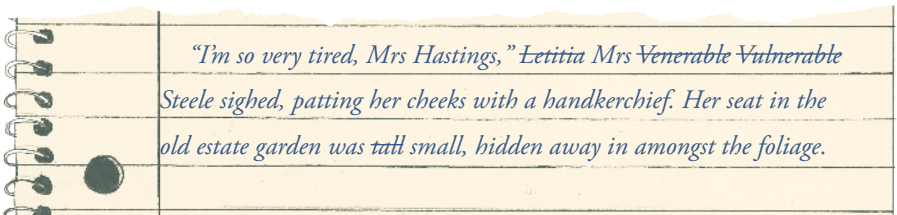
Celia hummed in reply.

“Don’t stop,” she told him. “Never give up.”

“Hold my head high and reach the top?”

Celia nodded, with a small laugh. “If she’s there, she’s there. You know you can’t force it.” She turned onto her side, facing him with a smile. “And the longer it takes you to get there, the more time you can pretend you’re not thinking about how much you want to—”

“I am resting,” he said, placing a hand on top of her mouth. “Let me rest.”



"When did I become so tired?"

Mrs Hastings collected the tea pot set from the table and nodded broadly.

"If I knew, Mrs Steele," she replied, "you would too. so would you." The maid held herself tall, but paused before leaving for the kitchen. "Shall I send Mrs Ms Miss Baker through, ma'am? She has been waiting for some time now."

"I suppose," Mrs Steele said. "But only for a brief moment. I fear my nerves might not be sufficiently calibrated for the taxing chore immense pleasure of the girl's company." She daubed her forehead with the handkerchief, before setting it down on the table. "I have My nerves have become so delicate, Mrs Hastings."

"As you say, ma'am," Mrs Hastings replied, and scuttled left.

Mrs Steele's eyes panned around the garden, taking in the verdant green scape around her. She sighed heavily and adjusted the folds of her long burgundy dress, composing herself.

50

"Mrs Steele?" a timid voice ventured from the doorway.

"Mrs Steele?"

Mrs The lady in question sighed once more. "By the petunias, dear."

Miss Baker's stride was confident hesitant. She stood and waited before the seat opposite her hostess. "I'm glad you have the time to see me this afternoon."

"It would appear that I do, Miss Baker," came the reply. "I don't believe you should waste it standing there like a waiting." Miss Baker sat down, slowly promptly. "I do apologise that there are no refreshments – I just finished my tea."

"No apology necessary, ma'am," Miss Baker replied. "Please, call me Anna."

	<i>Mrs Steele stared back at her, impassive.</i>
	<i>"I was wondering if—"</i>
	<i>"You will not be marrying Mr Darcy Eastwick, Miss Baker," Mrs Steele told her abruptly, staring her down with an air of malice calmly.</i>
	<i>"There are arrangements events already set in motion, and whilst we are aware of the nature of what you should have to offer to such—"</i>
	<i>"I'm aware that he's having sexual relations with your son, Mrs Steele," Miss Baker said, evenly. "I'm aware, and it doesn't concern me."</i>
	<i>Mrs Steele stared at her, appearing unfazed. "Tell this lie to another soul, you wretched girl, and I'll make sure that you're never seen out in this town again."</i>
	<i>"Don't threaten me, Mrs—"</i>
	<i>"I don't make threats, Anna Baker, I make</i>

"—promises you can't keep," Christopher replied, a false grin colouring his tone. His grip on the phone was tight. "We're becoming ships passing in the night." He laughed, just once. "Okay," he said, and nodded. "Okay. Sure. Yeah."

Celia finally caught his eye, eyebrows raised.

"Sure, bye. Okay. Yes. Bye. You – bye." He took the phone away from his ear, and stared at it for a moment. He resumed his post by the sink, slid the washing-up gloves on his hands and picked up a plate without comment.

Celia dutifully began to dry the dishes in his wake. She set one down on the drying rack and turned to look at her friend. "We don't have to talk about it, if..."

"I'm just trying to find the words," he replied, eyes trained to the soapy water. "Talk to me about something else. Talk to me about *Grace and Frankie*."

"Underwhelming but develops over the course of the season," she replied. "But you already knew that. Women of colour in *Agent Carter*?"

"Too faceted an issue," he said. "Representation versus encroachment of

political agenda onto an already rather historically accurate narrative.” He shrugged, and moved on to cutlery.

“Don’t you want faceted? Won’t that distract you?” she asked, dipping a dishcloth into a wet glass. “Oh, I know. Lavinia. How’s that story going?”

“I think I’ve given up,” he replies, “on Letitia.” Celia rolls her eyes. “I tried her as Violet Venable, tried out Tennessee Williams’ whole murderous, scheming mother persona because I thought it might be easier to interface with – what with the whole plot revolving around the absent gay son – but I think it kind of fell on its own sword.”

Celia laughed for a moment, and Christopher’s face contorted into one of confusion before he registered his own double entendre. “I wish you had intended that,” she said, teasing.

“Me too,” he replied, setting down the glass he had been rinsing. “Do you think he does? Intend to, I mean.”

Celia looked away, avoiding direct eye contact. “He’s very sweet, and he’s very principled. You know I approve of that.” She paused, hoping to avoid offering an opinion, but Christopher simply waited for her to continue. “I don’t think he wants what you want. I don’t think he’s looking for what you’re looking for. I think he means well, sometimes, but I hear the way he talks to you,” she said, softly and matter-of-fact. She finally turned to look at him. “There are so many guys who want what you have to offer, who deserve what you have to offer. And I don’t think any of them are him.”

“I wish I didn’t think you were right,” he replied, after a moment. “I really wish I could disagree.”

Letitia was used to making mistakes, to saying the wrong thing.

Letitia found herself

Letitia

I

“I think I love you,” I said, abruptly. He stopped laughing suddenly, looking up at me from the floor. “You treat me with kid gloves and you’re never around when I need you but you always know the right thing to say.”

“Took you long enough.” He takes my hand, and smiles up at

me from his seat on the floor. "I suppose if we're making grand declarations, I love you too."

"You were always so kind to me," I explained. "I blame mainstream social conventions. We've equated kindness with flirting to the point that we view them as the same thing."

"You didn't imagine it," he replied, rising up to sit next to me. "I promise, you didn't imagine it."

"I didn't plan this, you know," I said, laughing awkwardly. "You don't get to plan this sort of thing, I suppose. It just happens."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," he told me, his smile wide and understanding and his eyes sparkling with that kindness all over again, drawing me into an embrace without even draping his arms around me, just by holding me in his warmth. "I always regretted having to cancel on you, but I promise I won't do that ever again. I promise. I'll take care of you."

"I know you're not comfortable with this sort of thing. But I can't go on like this," I say, pleading with him to understand. "I can't pretend that I don't want more. It's pathetic, and I'm pathetic, and you're..."

I trailed off looking at him, just staring at me. "You're not pathetic. I've never thought that about you, I promise." If I could have willed him to be kind, just one more time, I would have.

"This was stupid, I should go. Just forget about it." I stood to leave, but his hand came down on my arm.

Our eyes met, and I sat back down, waiting. "What if I don't want to forget about it?"

I waited for him to say something, anything. He just looked at me, his face stone-cold and unreadable.

"Stay."

"You left," Christopher murmured, softly. The wind howled around him as he loosened his bowtie and sunk down to the ground, his back against the

wall. "You left and I had to deal with it."

"I couldn't handle it," came the reply. "Couldn't handle you." The words were slightly slurred, tumbling out of neatly formed lips like dominoes.

Christopher patted the ground next to him haphazardly. "I don't want you to sit here, but I really want you to sit here. This might be the last chance we have to... sit here."

The body that lands next to him is warm, the head resting on his shoulder is heavy, and the hair he cards through his fingers is soft. "You should want to lose me more."

"I do a lot of things that I shouldn't," Christopher replied, sighing. "You are consistently one of them."

"A thing that you do?" the reply was giggled, and it made Christopher huff and laugh at the same time.

"You wish," he said, and laughed again, still carding his fingers through that soft, soft hair. "What are we doing?" he asked, quietly.

"Talking. Resting. Hiding from judgmental people."

"You know what I mean."

A long, heavy sigh. Put upon, and a response to expectations that are too high. "Right now, whatever you want us to be doing. If you want me to be your friend, I'll be your friend."

54

"That's just it, though, I don't want to be your friend. I want... I want a lot of things."

The head against his shoulder nodded. "I don't really want to talk about this right now."

"Okay," Christopher replied. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Stories. Tell me about your stories."

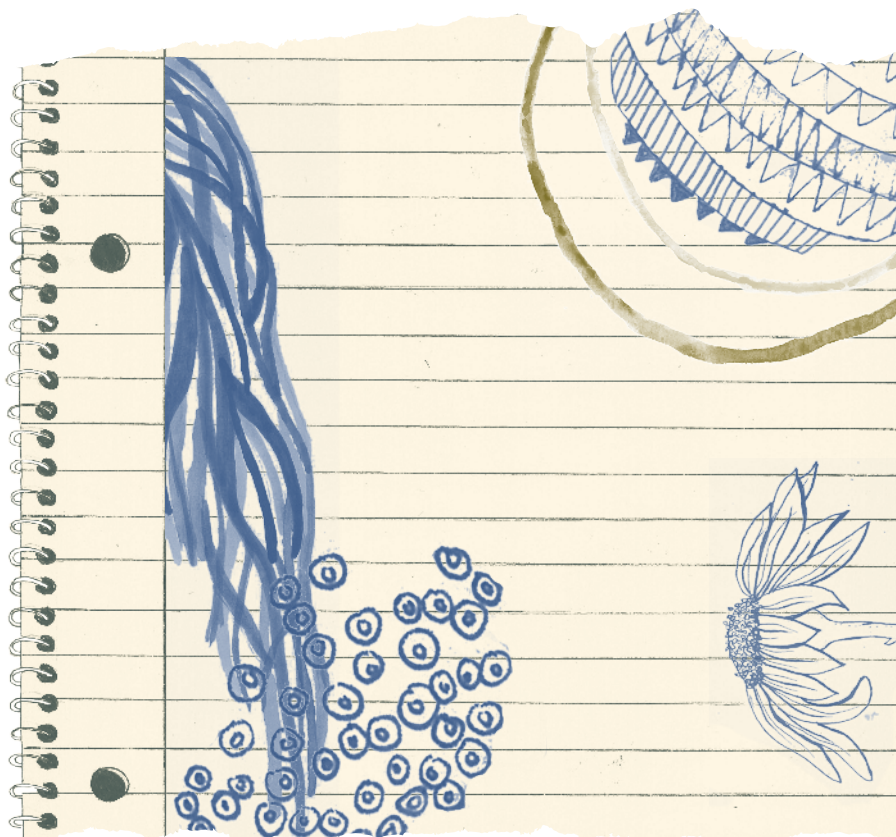
Christopher smiled, placing a gentle kiss atop the forehead. "I'm writing a story about a boy who fell in love by accident. But he fell in love with another boy who hasn't a clue, and he has to pretend like he doesn't feel what he feels. And he spends a lot of time writing about other people, trying to work out who he is. The worst part is that he keeps getting sucked back into

working things out with this boy, who probably doesn't really want him, but keeps feeding him just the right amount of affection to make him come back. And there's a scene at the end where they're at the school dance, and the protagonist runs outside to escape from all the pressure he feels, all the heteronormativity, and the bullshit—”

“Christopher, please.”

“But it has to be about empowerment. His last decision needs to be to have the courage to love himself more than he loves someone who is never going to love him right. That's how the story has to end. With him saying, out loud, ‘I can't wait for you, because you aren't right for me.’”

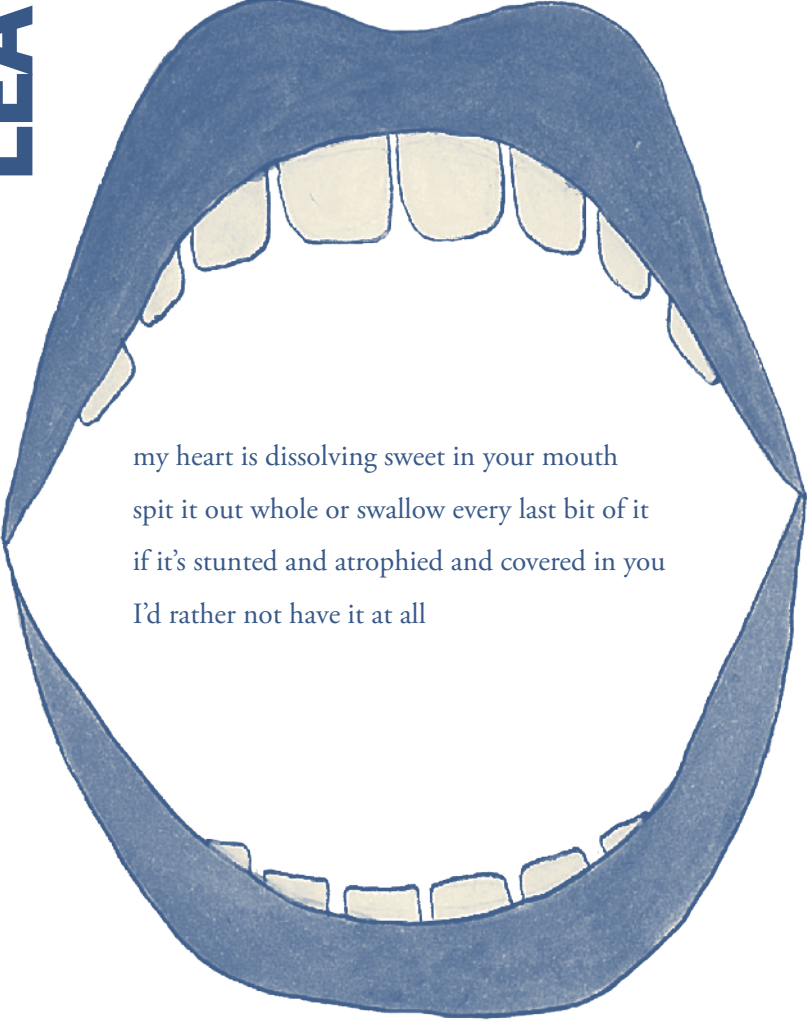
Josh is a first year Arts student, and he does not like interpretive dance, piña coladas, or getting caught in the rain. When he has story ideas, he sometimes claps his hands together obnoxiously, or jumps around in a circle shrieking. When the idea is really good, he does both.



TAKE MY HEART TOO

by Zi Ying Su

WHEN YOU
LEAVE,



my heart is dissolving sweet in your mouth
spit it out whole or swallow every last bit of it
if it's stunted and atrophied and covered in you
I'd rather not have it at all

56

Zi Ying loves God and cats: one is the sovereign ruler of the universe, and the other is a domesticated feline species. She thinks humans are tolerable, too.

AN OLD FASHIONED

by Laura Kenny

Upon a little jolt of humour,

No chance involved,

No glamour dance,

We're clinging to the vapour thin,

And aftershave sharp glimpse

Of dark. Tumbling

Tumbling too truncated to be cute

Toward a story for my sisters'

Amusement. A hackneyed hope of ours

To just go on a dalliance

As if the dark were some duress

As if impulse got the best

Of both our puckish whims.

Please forget I didn't drink

That in the half-light I will sink

Like Aphrodite to the brink

Of over-thinking over nothing

But an apple.

I see you in the shadows,

Looking out for signals of the day,

I know you when your eyelids bow

Towards the hollow dim light way.

I see me on the highway,

Counting out the miles in words to say,

I see you staring at my door,

Mouthing the curve of Helen's name.

Laura is pretending to study a Journalism/Law degree while she deals with the big things – writing poetry, watching stand-up, and perfecting her go-to karaoke set. She is open minded – about everything except Joni Mitchell – Joni Mitchell is life.

BLUR

by Madeleine Ackerman

File, New Blank Document. The white of all that space, open faced and glaring. And that tempestuous flashing cursor! That dripping tap, those nails galloping impatiently at reception, the brown light swaying *come-hither* before an Anglerfish's patient mouth agape.

I don't write things in diaries because I've constructed a version of myself that I don't want to disbelieve. Worse still I might realise that I'm bad at it, or that I don't like it (and I can't have that), so instead I write sporadically. Words hidden deep in the belly of machines, documents that rarely get saved and so never really were. The cursor's fleeting memory poses no threat, more goldfish than great white, already back to blinking dumbly.

When I do, I write to music, in the hope that with my eyes closed and with my ears full it will all pour forth, tumbling, forced down and out through these hollow fingers trembling just close enough to the keyboard. A marionette maestro, I am submissive to a thick and rolling rhythm, and lovers erupt (or is that soft-drinks?) as I lay down for my muse.

58

I want to write words that stay (stay. No, stay!) Always slipping from the tip of my tongue, lost to spit and the insatiable sentence. I want to write words that last longer than the second it takes to read them, say something other than sound, immortal in its echo across eternities and textbooks and the curling of my toes as I feel the colours in my eyes deepen, stretch. I remember smiling when I wrote: "There's a ghost in my shoe and it's tapping my toes to the tune of a French pop-song; Boo-la-la-la! Boo-la-la!" (I may have a way to go).

And then there's the thought I do not allow myself to have; that perhaps I have no thoughts to have. I haven't. That perhaps I am the static. All that scrolling, that scrolling, that scrolling has eroded the red flesh plant beds sprouting black barbs below my unblinking eyes, so heavy. Sometimes when I wake up I feel as though my temples are magnetized toward one another, squeezing my brain into an hourglass shape. It's wet in some places and slowly scaling over in others, like my lash line. One day, I think the pressure from my temples in love (so longing!) will prove too much and what's left of my mind will burst violently from the wet and yielding soft bits; ooze,

sneaking languidly with a wink through cracks in the scabby bits, and I'll drown inside of my own head.

No, it's not that. I am not the only one quivering in nightmare rooms, clutching my knees with my fist in my mouth as I quietly lose my mind. We've all got plenty to say (and to no-one in particular if they'd stop staring from the corners of their faces). It is just this, in fact; I am not an I worth writing. I cannot attend to my own predicaments with any kind of sustained gravity (masturbation and self pity are less painful). I am a coward. I want to ruin someone's life. I cried when I read *Song of Myself* and I don't know why, but most likely because I didn't write it first.

And so, with my muse still sleeping (as apparently I am not one to whom muses speak), these atoms still itching, I am left instead to write someone better. The me not me, I write instead of She.

She has the loveliest thoughts. Or at least I think she does. I've never thunk her thoughts (of course), but she makes them seem thinkless, somehow, the way she speaks them. Not thoughtless in the literal sense of the word, just exactly how she sees the world; right then, in her truths. Her easy smile melts into all the flavours of pink in her face as she throws her head back to drink sunshine, and you can just tell that she loves in the little moments. Those tiny pieces of each day that make your soul smile so big it bursts out of your face in barks and snorts. I imagine she has a flower name, like Rosie or Lily or Fleur. Her name would be safe in my mouth. I'd speak it differently.

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Or does she like steak words? Big thick fat chewy juicy fleshy hot swirly drippy mouth words; the thud of a thick velvet cloak shrugged off onto a blood red timber floor, so impeccably polished that you can almost make out the intricacies of the white lace detail between her rolling hips as she tip-toes, stripped bare, into the next room.

Perhaps she writes poetry and collects charms around her wrists and neck, trinkets and memories from where the pretty girls grow. Is all eternal, Is all talk, Is all lustful and longing and lovely and lonely, all smoke and mimicry, Is all repeated musings of the much wiser, talented, modest, worthy, beautiful, drunk. Is the only girl in the world twisting her hair through the varying densities of time, and we know time.

She most likely needs to be saved. She can feel her synapses firing, see their

fluorescent electricity as it extends itself into her fingers. Her flexing, wanting fingers. Every idea is the best one she's ever had as deep crimson beats hot against blue casings, stretching and shrinking all the tiny vessels of her giant self.

She looks at me, dark hair hung with baby's breath (then auburn, shoulder length and heavy, throbbed out in cosmic waves; now flaxen, white spirals hung loose about her elf ears, teasing her naked neck), complexion as fine as the paper she is printed on (slick mahogany; velvet umber), and I feel my throat close: I think I hate her. I've read countless pages made pedestals for silhouette pixies pulling plumes of grey smoke back behind perfect rows of creamy teeth bared, the doe-eyed antithesis of these women roaring. I see them pale and thin wristed, bathing in champagne with limp swan-necks bent backwards and soft throats exposed to the sky. I see their hot-temperes whispering in ashes as they swing hips by the handful back and forth across the tongues of men flexing silently in their shirtsleeves. In dreams and shadows and nightmares, I cannot touch them. My Grandmother, however, could snap an apple in half with her bare hands until she was seventy-six. When her husband died of bowel cancer he said he was relieved and left her with nothing, so she started knocking door-to-door, selling real estate. Her nails were thick and she chopped the heads off snakes using a shovel and she didn't know who I was when she died. I loved her more than anything, but I guess there is no poetry in that.

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My apologies; I digress and she is pouting, bottom lip swollen in warning of the tantrum broiling beneath. I am waltzing, 1 2 3, with her chalked outline. She taps her foot and glares at me, hungry. Perhaps I am being too cautious. There are only so many things I have to say and further more a finite number of ways in which to say them. She is not limited as I am; she is-all, be-all and end-all (after all), and what if therein lies the answer to my problem? She blinks in slow motion as time begins to swell, inhaling, smiles with one side of her mouth and I am blinded by the laser rainbow show exploded from the jewel between her teeth.

I suck back, harder now, and draw her into my chest. My hands begin to dance despite myself, writing us up and into her thoughts (so thinkless!). There is heat and darkness and a wind that roars but doesn't move, one by one then all at once then nothing. She opens her eyes with mine to a kaleidoscope world as our irises meld, through green and gold and amber, blue. For a moment I can see the shape my breath takes on the wind, watch

it bulge and twist in a lavender ghost world. I feel my yellow flesh yawn between cracking ribs, watch the brilliant violaceous patchwork dance behind my skin darken and lighten, warping with the pressure and release of every thick kiss from my sucking heart.

For that moment I am everywhere and in the same breath she pulls herself from me, exhaled in ecstasy, and begins to design herself upwards; bare toes stretching, pink mouth full of hot air roast turkey on Sundays watches lightning storms through stained glass windows, and the one boy in high school who never loved her back (although she's open to experimenting). She seems to know this place and, feverish with her flesh and bone self, screams forth straight into the stomach of the madness before us, soft feet pedaling fog inches from the ground.

Yes, she is all floating and desirous and divine, lighter than the tail end of a dream chased on waking, but I still can't help thinking that she seems to be pulled on by something other. Most likely it is simply that she knows this place so well and I am just feeling paranoid because everyone is staring at me. A stranger here (despite the quiet voice I cannot place and she cannot seem to hear), I follow.

The clinking of glasses seems almost to be just another voice amongst the crowd, a high-pitched tinkling, tambourine giggle peppered throughout the dancing discourse. Bodies move as though through water (she watches, heavy lidded, as one woman's hair coils independently about her head, a swirling crown of slow-motion serpentine flames), back and forth and through one another with the ease of a single, pulsating nervous system. The air is a nebula of swirling musks rippling, thrumming with the vibrations of goose-pimpled flesh. Girls with bodies like rolling lava lamps dipped in sequins, blind men with numb tongues drooling wantonly onto the silk ties bought for them by their wives at Christmas. Deeper and deeper into the psychosis of the room colours curve faster, further, become redder, until all that guides the beating bodies on (she pirouettes) is their skin stuck to the meat thing in front of them and the hunt for any kind of numbness.

The scene begins to bleed, blotted like ink on wet paper as smiles start slipping from the faces of shadows, slithering scared into a deeper darkness. She does not seem to notice, and as she passes the smoking profile of a woman who hasn't realized her hair is on fire (too busy gnashing those lion teeth), someone whispers her name. She pauses.

I don't understand; she doesn't have a name? She is the cat's mother. Someone swallows in my chest.

Again she hears it, pulled to the other side of the room and up the stairs, against my will. I can't feel my fingers.

And then she sees it. The air curdles in my throat, blood like cream. How could I have been so stupid? Running straight at me with your heart on fire (all of this time), I rolled my head back and squeezed my eyes shut. Hot sick scorches the roof of my mouth, bringing me to me knees. I hear giggling.

You.

I never considered writing you, not even for a second. You seemed so unwriteable, but here you are (that she-witch!), and I am a fool.

I've heard it said not to write about love (tut-tut! My Professor's hands whizz about his head pushed down into his shoulders, a loaded spring), *très* tabou! But don't they also say (if I may be so bold) to write what you know? A romance whispered in dark corners, notes torn from ancient scrolls passed palm-to-palm on busy streets? Anything, my exasperated muse? (Say something!)

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Desperate, and for want of words so much bigger that say far more unsayable things, I write this; I write You (of you, with you, for you), running back down the stairs in the hope that it is not too late.

You teach my tongue to speak languages unwritten, fluent in the spaces between words growing wider every time you reach into my mouth and down through my feet, unfolding. To experience you with all five senses and still seeking to understand them in terms of one another (and worst of all in terms of myself), flitting back and forth between sight and scent and sound; your smell the pink blooming on the apples of my cheeks, your taste the impatient heat rabid beneath my shivering skin: it drives me to madness. You're this flesh and blood thing that I can't comprehend, but maybe if I could see inside you it would make sense, and (oh!) how I'd love to live behind those eyes. Climb up your rib cage and cling to your collarbones, into the sweet and steaming pink of your mouth I'd curl up behind your teeth and fall asleep to gusts of you whispering magic.

I want to be where you are but you're always there first; even if I swallowed you whole it wouldn't be enough. Instead, confined begrudgingly to a life outside of you as I am, I make sense with what I can. I admit I hear no blues-throated warbling harps that throw me off the moon, nor fill my mouth with plump red grapes. See no fat-fingered cherubs blowing cool kisses through heart-shaped lips as they dive into the wide mouth of a blushing sunset. I see you, and that is more. So whilst your words are still being written on some intangible plane and falling vastly short of the running, screaming, burning dying soaring – the infinity of you – I will say quite plainly and with all that I have: I am absolutely and on my knees in love with you. Beyond that word so small (love love love love love) I can do nothing but fold up these foolish bones and lay them at your feet.

Breathless, I watch the fiendish light behind your teeth flicker as you look at her, not hearing me (I think back now to when I read you these pages, ripped from myself, and said nothing). No, please! There must exist some combination of words.

You watch, tasting all the melting flavours of pink in her face as they pool in the tiny creases that ripple outwards from her easy smile, spellbound as she tosses from her hair the smell of jasmine blossoms and the colours of dusk and all of the things I wish I'd said. (I am at the knees of your gorgeous soul! Your divinity, your insanity!) You see her steak words and tinkling bracelets; Is all burning in the hot light of this night, Is all glass half-empty, half-full, Is all the curve of her pen on paper, stroke left right to the rhythm of her core, conscious of invisible paparazzi in the hope that this is permanent. (My voice hoarse; burn with me! I want to caress the bare neck of your sweet heart, feel the soft heat of your lips barely moving!) You see her outside of herself and she is infinite for the simple fact that she can live there, in you. A place I cannot touch.

So blind and so foolish I have been, I am sick with myself. Selfishly I'd dream of you in multicolour as she was still waiting to be written. I'd think of you between breaths, in sleep, even without thinking of you at all, unconsciously grinning googly at strangers on trains. She'd sit behind my ears and watch your light, neurons firing forth hypnotic, mouthing alongside me as I sang you sweet. She collected memories of you to fall asleep on, rising and falling gently on a pillow of your fingers in my mouth and the way you say green. Others she'd braid and wear around her wrists and neck, moments I'd long thought forgotten. She hoarded my sapphire and diamond thoughts of you

together in secret piles so big that I swore I was going insane. And then, lurking silently through grey matter, she found you, deep in the recesses of my mind where I kept you safe.

She's every word I've ever read, every woman I've ever envied, every emotion I've never made sense of; I never stood a chance. Even by the stretches of my wildest dreaming, thrown out filament by filament like a spider's web over every sweeping forever universe, pulled back to the same space somewhere deep inside and golden, I cannot write myself as good enough for you. I know not the world of the Romantics, Wordsworth and Keats; I know sick and smog and fucking. You stand so tall, and my words fall short. But stay with me, my darling. I can't say why, can't breathe. Just stay.

She moves towards you, the party frozen, and licks her pointed tongue across your teeth (those china teacups that clink in your sleep, grinded together in dreaming). You shiver down through your feet and the space between us gives birth to galaxies. My wet eyelashes clump together, cool on the burning meat of my cheeks, framing the room with sharp black spikes (cracks flower in lightning storms across the walls, plaster dust shudders from the roof and pupils dilate in the faces of the throng downstairs). Undone, I clench my eyes so tight they ooze white jelly, pull my ears and mouth towards my nose, and howl.

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Groggy, I lift my head dipped in lead up from my chest and out of the water. My ears ring softly, eavesdropping on shadows in some other dimension, still pinning; a song swan sighed in microphone feedback. I can feel my tongue too big in my mouth, ballooning like a toad about to bellow. The rest of me numb, somewhere else, or just given up.

My fingers are silent, my muse gone.

The cursor winks at me, flashing. Flashing. Flashing. Flashing.

Madeleine is studying an Arts degree in Creative Writing and English, with her fingers crossed that no-one notices she still has no idea when to use the possessive apostrophe. She spends most of her time making tea and forgetting to drink it, watching baby sloth videos, and being afraid of the internet. Oh, and procrastinating. She's really, really good at procrastina...

by Nathan Mifsud

Winner Postgrad Poetry



on the surface

calm waves lap timber
underfoot, white crests
resurrected ad infinitum
slow dance on a pivot—
disturbed shallow gills
of ten beasts subaquatic

bird shit flecked benches
like blown pixels, tourist
snapshots, camera-totin'
day-trippers, sprawled
families milling shoreside

intermittent wafts of sea
salt, hot chips, and trash,
thick, sun-ripened stench
punctured by drone pipe

gelato cones, swallowed
down bin-dipped beaks,
savage against the pavers
coated in an alu-foil glare

suffuse rays lend warmth
to soft cheeks, bare arms
outspread, hair, lips, and
legs, all bodies in motion

each swell of humanity
in harmonious concert
with vast matter beside:
ocean sigh counterpoint
to the rumble of voices

BELGRADE, SUNRISE TO SUNSET (SUMMER)

Winner Undergrad Poetry

by Sophie Somerville

When we pulled in
dawn had drawn a thin veil
of smog and sleep-shadows
over our shoulders.
The water tasted like petroleum.

Out of the aching world
screeched scrap-metal trams.
Orthodox domes and
pekaras rolled open their doors
and we walked.

Somewhere in the afterlife
smug Austro-Hungarians
snuffed cigars
and sighed at the smog stains
carved like shadows on their stones.

A few communists
sheltered in their now-ripened glory,
their apartments throbbing
like rancid fruit;
water fountains trickling
that thick petroleum water.

The city writhes and lives
(like us)
entwined in fifty-year-old trolleybus wires
and streamers of graffiti
that twist and coil around roundabouts and bridges
and beat to the hearts of the locals,
sipping coffee in the tired copper sun.

We walked until we ached, too, our joints singing
like the trams as they wobble around corners.

We sat
as sunset sank
deep within the crevices,
the shady nightclubs
and crumbling offices
and with a gush of dewy night
we awoke,
left,
slept.

SNAKE CARCASS

She remembers her earliest dream and her earliest memory entangled in one another, inseparable in form, just floating through her brain. She remembers a humid, summer's day – when looking out towards the horizon, everything was a blur, moving restlessly. She remembers her face right near the window, standing on tip-toes looking outside, down below, on the ground.

There is a rather long snake – the same thickness as a garden hose – moving only slightly, its tail end flickering with an occasional, sporadic burst of energy. It's right in front of the window, near the pot-plants on the white, weedy gravel, etching its marks on the ground. Her dad is cutting up the snake with the shovel. Slowly, he lifts a piece of the snake onto the shovel then walks over to the aluminium house fence, tossing the snake part over. He keeps repeating this action over and over until the snake is finally gone and no longer completing the dance of death. For her, the memory is so exact: the scales of the eastern brown snake, the texture of the gravel, the figure of her dad. She can replay the scene easily in her mind.

And yet this memory is still entangled in a dream. Again, the snake is in her backyard, a similar-sized snake but much darker, verging on pitch black. This time the snake is definitely alive and swiftly moving towards her. She is standing near a roughly painted, green metal gate that shuts slowly and makes a squeaking sound. The gate refuses to open and the snake is coming towards her. The snake is trapped, just like her – it must bite her for release. She tries to climb over the fence and almost succeeds, before she tumbles head-first onto the burr-covered ground and the snake manages to bite her on the top of the head. And yet, she is still alive. Not in any pain. But of course, of course, they say it's all a dream. And again this moment is just as real for her as her memories as a three-year-old. A snake is a fascinating sight. Even when a snake is dead, it continues to move, to mindlessly move and carve out its existence for a little while longer.

And it was the same for her, trying to live out her existence for a little while longer. She didn't want her memories to die and she didn't want her dreams to die. And perhaps they weren't dying. Maybe she was holding onto them for a little while longer, merging the trains of thought together.

“Katrina, Katrina, wake up.”

Her sister was near her bedside, whispering. Katrina was slowly opening her eyes, feeling the early morning sun through the blinds.



“I’m here. I can’t move.”

She wanted to state the obvious, carve out her reality once more.

“Do you remember the snakes?”

“What snakes?” Her sister seemed confused.

“You know, the snake near the green gate, I was screaming for Dad to come.”

“No, no, I don’t remember that. I remember when we were playing tennis and there was a dead snake nearby. The dog barked at it. The snake was slowly dying. It was moving. We kept poking it with a stick.”

A smile crept across Katrina’s face.

“It was a carcass. A moving carcass. Even in death it keeps moving. You could cut the snake in many pieces and it would still keep moving.”

Her sister was getting anxious, shifting about in her seat.

“Why are we talking about snakes? Are you thirsty? I can get you some water?”

“Yes, water.” She began to feel a bit dazed. “Don’t you remember Dad cutting up the snakes?”

“Just rest, Sis. Yeah, I guess I remember. Mum will be coming soon.”

But she didn't want to rest. Her existence inside a hospital with its white walls, medical signage, clutter of people walking round, and dutiful visitors – it was a constant reminder of where she was. One couldn't rest without submitting to being sick, to needing to be cared for. The constant rests paralysed her mind, entangled her memories and dreams.

“But I'm sick of resting.”

“But you have to rest.”

“Don't say it's because I'm sick.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Say you remember the snakes.”

“I remember the snakes.”

“More than that. Remember how they die?”

“Look, here's your water. You can have breakfast soon.”

70 “Why can't I just go ahead and take the cannula out? I'd be happier without the sting. Without the treatment.”

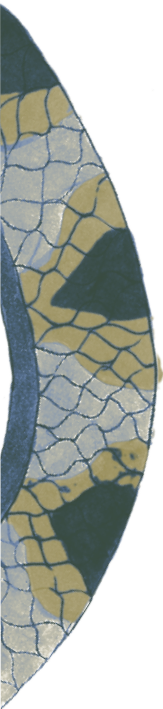
“You know why. Please. Don't talk like this.”

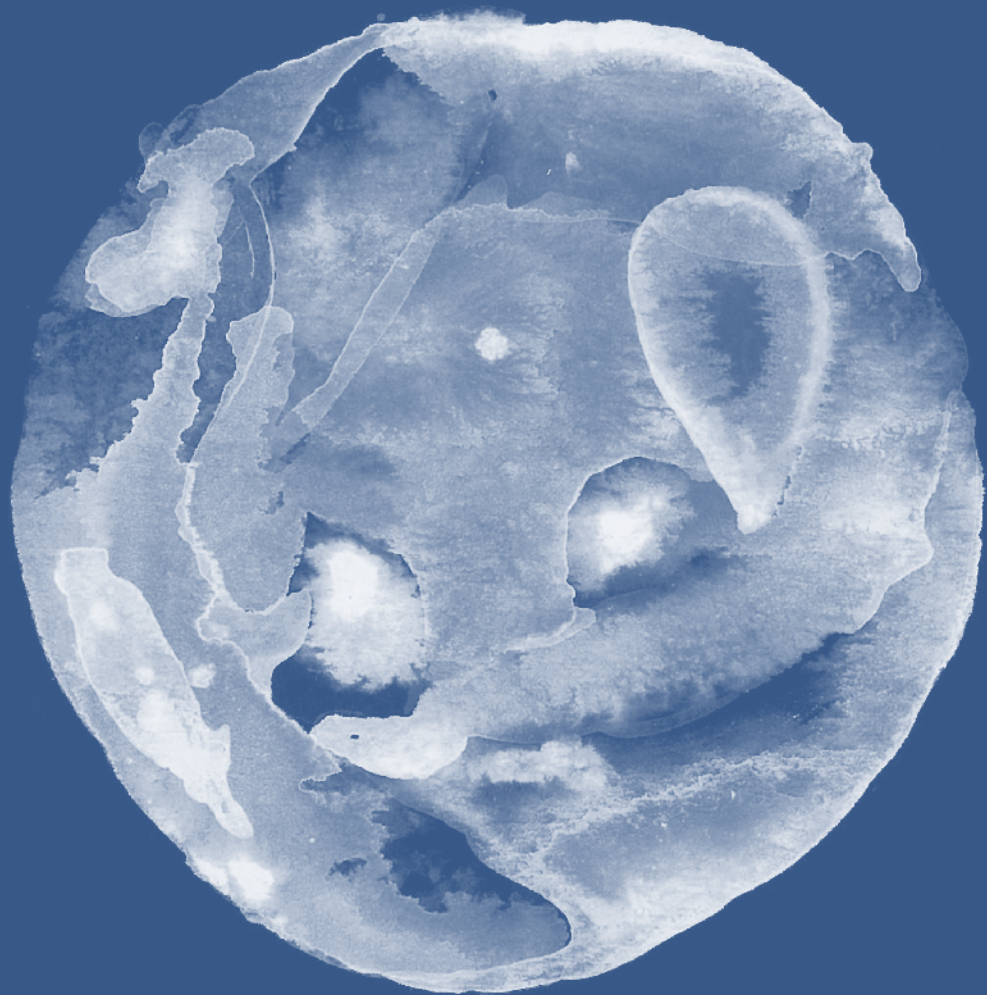
“Well, morphine has its effects.” She stepped out of her bed. “I'm going to the bathroom.”

She was dazed but she still had her moments of movement.

Olivia Inwood is a second year student studying a Bachelor of Fine Arts/Arts degree. She grew up on a farm near Forbes, NSW. Her writing is often a reflection of the various landscapes she has encountered or imagined throughout her life. When she is not writing or creating something, she is probably drinking coffee in a café she discovered during her wanderings through Sydney.









ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

UNSWeetened 2015 Team

Coordinator and Editor-in-Chief

Sarah Fernandes

Editors

Annie Brockenhuus-Schack

Tina Giannoulis

Cameron McPhedran

Marisse Sonido

Design

Cameron Cripps-Kennedy

Illustration

Madeleine Whitfeld

An annual fixture of the UNSW literary community since 1998, UNSWWeetened is a student-run publication that celebrates the diversity of creative writing found on campus. It features poetry and prose from both undergraduate and postgraduate students. You can send your works to UNSWWeetened throughout the year – all pieces of work submitted before the end of Semester One, 2016 will be considered for publication, so start writing!

This project would not be made possible without the committed assistance of its volunteers, whose hard work and dedication have brought this publication to life.

To learn more about UNSWWeetened or to get involved in next year's edition, visit: arc.unsw.edu.au/unsweetened

With Thanks To

Judges

Patrick Lenton

Author

Anne Brewster

Associate Professor – Creative Writing, UNSW

Emily Doherty

Senior Bookseller, UNSW Bookshop

UNSW Bookshop

Louise Maloney

Prize Donors

UNSW Bookshop

NSW Writers' Centre

Meanjin Quarterly

The Westerly Magazine

Lip Magazine

Seizure Magazine

Golden Age Cinema and Bar

Hayden Orpheum Picture Palace

Arc @ UNSW

Eric Souksai

Clubs & Volunteering Coordinator

Ryan Carceller

Senior Graphic Designer

Caroline Page

Marketing and Publications Manager

Sharon Dowsett

Marketing Production Coordinator

Kathryn O'Connell

Business Development Manager

Laura Kenny

UNSWeetened Coordinator 2014

UNSWeetened 2015
ISSN 1441-1415

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UNSWeetened is published by Arc @ UNSW Limited.

For more information about Arc's programs, please contact:

Eric Souksai

Clubs & Volunteering Coordinator

Arc @ UNSW Limited

PO Box 173

Kingsford NSW

Australia 2032

e.souksai@arc.unsw.edu.au

arc.unsw.edu.au/publications



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