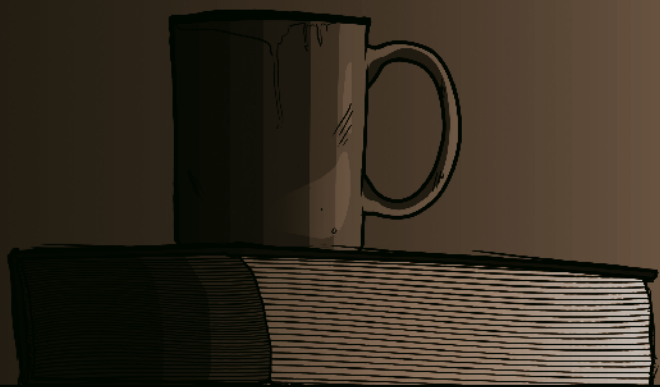


# UnSweetened

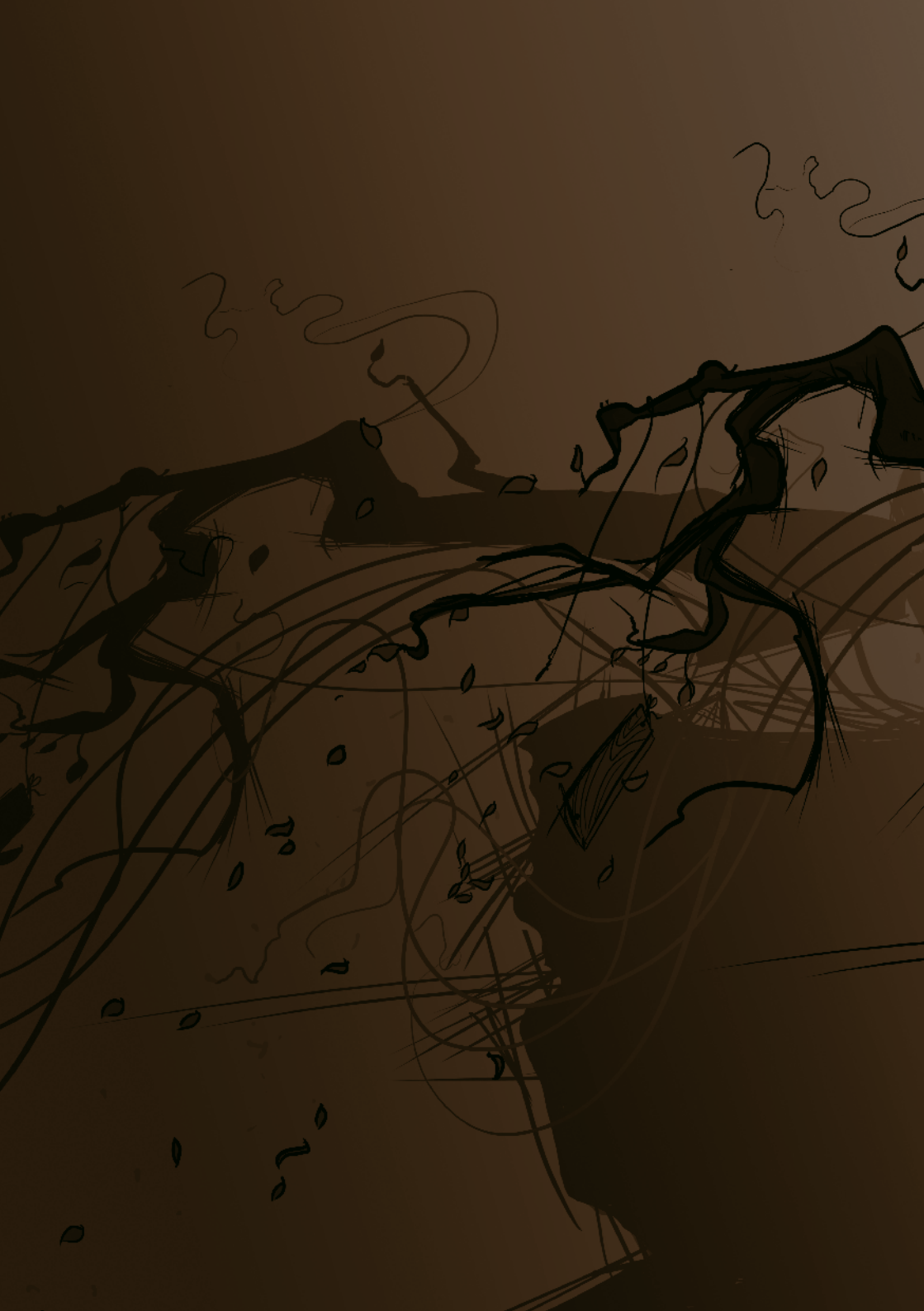
2012







UNSW Student Life



# UNSWEETENED

2012





# Foreword

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Who knows if the spider tells a tale with each sticky permutation of its web? The leap of abstraction engendered by written language seems to me not so different. Each writer in this collection has painstakingly spun their own unique tapestry of symbols to communicate an idea, to inspire a particular feeling.

Phew, that analogy was a bit of a wank. Still with me? I promise there is better writing to come. In the following pages, you will encounter a nasty Madagascan shark and reminisce about toilet-dwelling redbacks. You will take a long, reflective bubble bath, see letters as colours and puzzle over mysterious cuts and bruises. You will travel through Mississippi cotton fields, experience a debilitating psychological syndrome, and more.

Every poem and prose piece inside is commendable, and they stand on the whole as an encouraging display of talent among our peers. The impressive standard of creative writing achieved in this publication has been made possible by an ever-burgeoning number of students at this university brave enough to submit their work for consideration.

*UNSWeetened* is now a venerable 15 years old, and, given its delectable title, continues to be confused with the *Student Cookbook*. Such a mistake is not far from the mark, as the production of this journal was often complex and required many ingredients, but has ultimately been nourishing and is an absolute joy to share! I extend my gratitude to the volunteers, who are students themselves; the editorial team who selected and refined their crop with no small effort, and the designer and illustrator who together crafted this beautiful specimen. I am also indebted to the wonderful people at Arc who lent me their support.

Now we should not only applaud the authors, but turn to the next page. I believe no greater appreciation can be given than to read and contemplate the words within.

Nathan Mifsud  
*UNSWeetened* Coordinator





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# Drama at Tamarama

EMRYS QUIN



Mark, tall and dark, brawn as hard bark, Alaskan and lazy,  
Stands fast as a fat black lab  
(That's Babs),  
Barks at an angry, bandana-clad lad  
(That's Chad).

Chad and Mark stand a car-span apart by Tamarama Park's  
sand and scabby grass,  
Mark talks  
And Chad talks back;  
A crass paragraph spat and rash as Mark and Chad had had a  
small affray last May at a bar by Walsh Bay...

FLASHBACK:

Mark and Chad sway.  
Chad calls Mark's ma an amalgam;  
Part hag, part bag; *all slag*.  
And Mark lacks class, grabs a glass at hand and sparks shards,  
sharp as Gandalf's hat.  
Chad, aghast, clasps at a raw nasal scar – gasps, “Aaah! That  
was harsh!”

Back at Tamarama, Chad has Mark at last (ah, drama)  
And as Chad and Mark act manly and hard -  
Stark and brash as a Spartan phalanx -  
Babs (that's Mark's black lab)  
Pants and walks away  
(Happy and gay as an Alpaca)  
And as Babs' paws crawl by Tamarama Bay, a CRASH and a SPLASH  
grabs and drags Babs away!

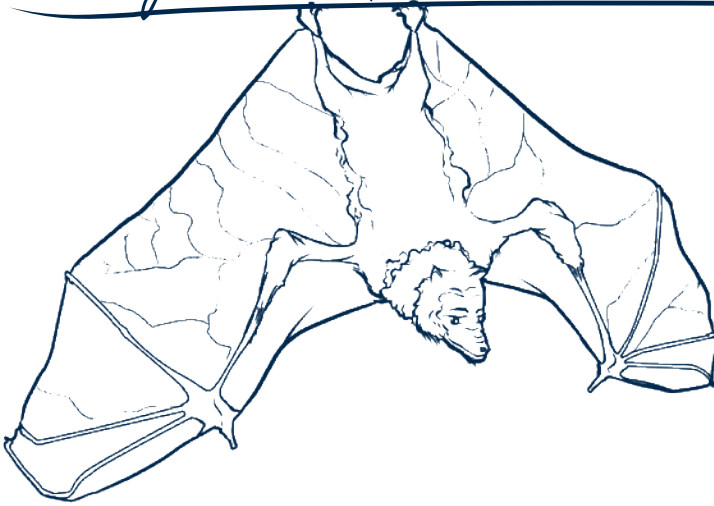
Chad and Mark catch Babs' bays and alarms -  
And last May's affray falls away,  
A flash dash at Tamarama's sands,  
Chad and Mark halt,  
And watch  
As a Madagascan shark marks Babs as a snack and starts an attack -  
"NAAAYYY!" calls Chad, and at a splash - Chad's arms flay and hard  
abs blast Chad Babs' way.  
"What a half-daft prat!" Mark calls at Chad's back,  
As Mark can spy that shark aft!  
Angst attacks, and Mark crawls as a small baby-ball; gasps, gags and bawls  
a sandy malady; says, "Mark's a bad daddy, Babsy!"

Chad, by Babs' flank, snarls half-glad and half-mad, calls  
"TRY AND SNAP AT CHAD YA SHARKY SACK A CRAP!"  
And as that shark attacks,  
Chad spanks that Madagascan shark  
As hard as any man can spank a Madagascan shark.  
Chad grabs Babs, and falls back,  
Mark stands, clasps hands, gasps and calls as sharp as Mark can:  
"CHAD! WHAT A MAN!"

# Making Sense of It

---

EMILY KING



## *Part 1: The Bat*

It all started when they found the mummified bat. It was a flying fox. For some mysterious reason it had defied logic, bacteria, flies and maggots, even the humid summers to resist decay. Instead, it had dried into a kind of wind-scented jerky. They found it a week after they moved in, hanging in the bushes as if still alive. The bat was poised with its wings hitched up and ready to spread, about to take flight into the next world.

They immediately decided it would make a nice decoration.

After the usual bickering - "Not inside, Rob!" and "Not there, no, no - put it here, yes, under there, so it won't get wet" - it was hung in the eaves of the porch near the front door.

There was a storm that night. Wind reached tantalising fingers into the spaces between bricks and doorframes, shaking the cradled house as one would a dead body. The bat swung madly on its perch from the eaves, water running between the ribs, down the curved neck and frothing at the tiny fangs. By morning, a spider had made a tiny web in the refuge between the bat's wings.

She worried, of course, that it would soak up the water, thaw out and... rot? Somehow it was hard not to wonder if it wouldn't just come alive again. To her, the mummified bat was not dead.

The storm did not affect it. In time, she would see that nothing could. Wind made her nervous; it dislodged the bat's rigor mortis claws from the wood, and it fell, flightless to the tiles below. The mummified bat's thin bones and brittle flesh remained unharmed, unchanged. It stayed the same as the day they first found it for the next three years.

One morning, when the light hit her eyes, she rolled over.

“Rob. Rob.”

He turned to her quickly, eyes wide open and scary.

“Don’t do that,” she said.

“I couldn’t sleep.”

She closed her eyes, took a breath and asked him, “Again?”

“*Oui*, I can’t stop dreaming about... it,” he grumbled.

She sighed and he pulled her close. They looked down the bed towards the window. The shadow of the bat was on the curtain, and echoed again on the blanket somewhere near her left toe. The hairs of the maroon wool curled out from the shadow. The rises and falls of cloth formed mountain ranges from the shape of their bodies.

Hot breath on her neck, Rob’s hand pushed away her hair. She must look a mess, she thought. She moved her toes, watching the shadow of the bat jump, fly, across the woollen blanket.

“You’re so sexy when you just wake up, Susan,” Rob murmured in her ear.

“Not now,” she said, “I only just woke up.”

He tried the puppy eyes on her before jumping under the blankets, moving like a mole between her legs. She kicked him as a cold hand touched her thigh. The bat was on the blankets that covered his back.

“You don’t need to... oooh.”

He flipped the blankets over his shoulders and looked up at her. She stared at him and then conceded, “You may continue”.

She kept those maroon fibres unfurling like tongues in mind, the shadow of the bat slick and shiny like sex.

Then the images changed. Things from the corners of her vision slipped into centre stage. It was orange, but not orange like the fruit, but like a giant cloud, a mushroom cloud, a rind, the soft underside of a breast, the light through the bat’s wings. The colour had texture, corrugations of dark green, a burst of first light, a squiggle of mild pink underneath like an umbilical cord that held her in place. It wasn’t that she saw orange, but she *felt* orange, orange was in her, she herself was the colour orange. Her eyes were wide open, she could hear her own dull pants of joy, but every sight, touch and feeling was orange.

Then her orgasm ended and the colours were over.

Always, after sex, she tried to explain.

“It’s usually yellow,” she would tell him.

He looked at her with the same mystified expression as when he’d first pulled the mummified bat out of the bushes.

## *Part II: We All Clap Hands Together*

It all started with the song. They made us stand up. Jaime was next to me. Hands on head, hands on shoulders, hands on knees, bend over, touch my toes. Again. We all clap hands together! We all clap hands together! Clap! Clap! CLAP!

“Ben, can you tell me why you hit your friend?”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

I looked up. Dark green flickered as the doctor rustled some papers. I put my hands over my ears again, I could still hear a little but the colours were not as strong.

This is what other people see.

Once, Daddy was watching a TV show. From the other room, I heard a sound that was a calming colour. So I went to see what was making that sound-colour, and the blue onscreen was wrong. The whales made the sound of the colour of my hands, but the screen was blue... I hit Daddy then.

I learned later that whales use sonar. They make a sound and it bounces back, and from that they can see shapes of what is ahead. Bats do it too. I am like a whale, I am like a bat. Sounds mean colours and shapes for me.

The doctor carefully took my hand away from my ear.

“Ben, did Jaime hurt you?” the man asked. “Is that why you hit him?”

It doesn't hurt, when I see colours, when I hear sound.

I wasn't trying to be difficult. It's just hard to make the sound only people understand.

Clap! Clap! CLAP! We all clap hands together!

The school nurse said I blacked out. It wasn't black. Not to me, not when I could see the bursts of beige and sharp whites with every clap.

I got very cross with people back then. Very cross, the kind of cross Daddy gets after he gets off the phone with Grandma, muttering in French. These days most of my knowledge of my dad's language is swear words, a whole rainbow of them. Daddy calls Grandma a bitch. Mummy told me that this is a bad word, and I should not use it. But I like the word 'bitch'. B is my favourite. It is orange, and because my name is Ben, my name is good. Except for the 'n'.

I looked at my hands and say “B, B. Ben. Bitch”. I thought of more words. “Banana,” and I cringe as the yellow of 'n' lingers as long as the sound does.

They taught me how to spell my name on the first day of school. Things like the alphabet were so hard to learn.

Jaime had spent ages croaking out his ordinary green and teal name, when he turned to my crayon massacre of a name tag.

“G-g-ger... ge-ooo-ra-lan?” he said, trying to sound out my surname.

I shuddered. “It's *Guerlain*; it's purple with a yellow end,” I told him impatiently.

Jaime didn't get it. Nobody gets it. The only person who got close was Mummy. When I told her about my name being mostly orange, she looked at me funny and said, “Of course, you're orange – I knew it.”

Then she took me to the doctor. The doctor looked at me funny too. But on the day I hit Jaime because his claps were wrong, the doctor didn't look at me.

When Jaime cups his hands it's not a clap, it's more of a 'parp', which makes a horrible colour, and I punched him before my not-black blackout.

“I need you to talk to me, Ben.”

People say I talk in a bad way. It's not my fault they only hear sounds, they only see colours. I find it difficult when talking, if I make a sound that has a bad colour, I have to stop.

Make a new sound. Different sound... a fresh sound (fresh doesn't have 'n' in it).

I chanted more 'b' words: "baby, Bob, boy, bite, below, belt..." and paused, trying to think of more. I didn't know as many back then. But there is one word that always comforts me, "Bat. Bat. Bat bat-bat-bat, bat..."

There is a bat on our front porch, hanging before the door. I asked when it had died. *Just before you were born.* It leers down and twists back and forth on its squeaky little claws in the wind. I would close my eyes and let the sound take over, the claws on wood lapping at the corners of my eyes, vivid red splashed with blue.

"Bat... Bat... Bat..." I would say back then, letting the sparks of orange cross my vision as I stood facing the street with my eyes closed. Squeak, squeak, went the claws. "Bat... bat..." I would murmur. It was my first word.

"Ben, please stop. You need to talk to me," the doctor said.

I looked up. "Jaime clapped bad. Bad clap. It was a bad colour, so I hit him to make him stop."

Oh, you have no idea how soothing 'bad' was. Every time I say 'bad' it rolls like orange smoke away from me. Away like poison.

The doctor nodded, glanced down at his desk and said, "Ben, you have what's called synaesthesia."

Turns out, we *don't* all clap hands together.

### *Part III: The Night Market*

It all started with the bomb at Paddy's Pub. Girls with a single crease of worry on their smooth skin took the wounded, brushing blood and crispy skin from their uniforms and faces. Rice pieces fell like tears from their third eye.

A young French tourist sat on a piece of rubble, rubbing his charred shirt. Next to him, a travel companion named Lukas was sniffing, hands shaking as he held the gauze to the burn on his arm. It seemed cold, as the first light touched the sky between buildings that squatted, smoking onto the road.

A few pedang kaki lima were wandering the streets, yelling out the sales of noodles with a monotonous "Mie! Mie! Mie!" It sounded no different than the sirens.

An official wandered between them, occasionally snapping *permissi* as slightly wounded people got in his way.

"How you?" the official asked Robert, then turned to Lukas, "You need doctor?"

Robert lifted his head. The official adjusted his paunchy belly above his belt. Robert held his head and looked at Lukas.

"No," Robert told the official.

"Do you know where my brother is?" Lukas said to the official. The official turned back.

"No." The official stepped over the Swedish girl sleeping next to Lukas.

"Please, his name is—"

The official cut him off, "Many hurt. Many dead. Hospitals full. Go to Rumah Sakit Sanglah."

Lukas stood up. "Let's find a taxi."

"We won't find one here," Robert reminded him. They began to step through the crowd. Nobody seemed sure whether to stop them. A film crew took a step towards them, so Robert hurried Lukas along. They passed several stores full of pirated DVDs, a warung smelling strongly of chilli and noodles, and a woman shook beaded bracelets and topeng masks at them.

"Our room," Robert said as they stood looking for a taxi. "We have to be out by ten."

"I have to..." Lukas covered his face, and Robert realised the young man was crying. "My brother."

"I'll go to the hotel. I'll take our bags."

"Stay in Kuta?"

Robert looked around, it wasn't even seven in the morning and the streets were clanging with the impertinent 'peep peep' of horns.

"Everyone has come to Kuta," he said. "Everyone has come to the bomb," he paused, then touched the gauze on his friend's arm. "It's not safe here, Lukas. I'll go on. I'll take our bags... we meet in Ubud."

Lukas's eyes washed back and forth, unseeing, like a creature that has lived too long in a cave. "Oui," he replied softly.

Later, Robert found himself deflating underneath a fan in the reception. Water tinkled, a CD of gamelan played softly, and beside the pool a bird muttered, "Selamat pagi, apa kabar. Hahahahaha!"

Robert lay on the bed and closed his eyes. He hadn't slept since... since when? The thunder of the bomb replacing the bass of the music, the bodies thrown into a premature lover's embrace under orange-hot pieces of rubble. Blood on his lips; he didn't know whether it was his or not. It must be someone else, he was barely hurt. Barely hurt? Through the wood of the hut, he heard the bird chuckle and say, "Apa kabar?"

It was dark by the time he awoke. His mouth dry, his stomach unsteady, he got dressed and left the room, passing the pool as he headed back to reception. The bird wolf-whistled and yelled, "Apa kabar! Hahahahaha!" It jumped up and down on its perch, its black feathers smooth as leather wings, the yellow ring of flesh on its neck wobbling.

"What is it saying?" Robert asked.

"It says, 'Good morning, how are you', and it laughs," the man replied.

There was a rice paddy beside the pool, and from between the rushes the 'shirp-shirp' of bugs and frogs covered the sound of the street. It was too peaceful, too calm. Robert found himself asking the man where the busiest, craziest place would be.

"Apa kabar?" yelled the bird. *How are you?*

The man fixed the batik scarf on his head while he looked at Robert, then glanced at the clock and said, "See that man by that car?", then leaned onto the counter towards Robert and said "His name is Wayang. Fifty thousand rupiah will take you to the Gianyar night markets. Best food!" The man clapped a hand onto Robert's. The young Frenchman jumped, and thought he saw the receptionist's eyes give him a pitying smile.

"Apa kabar?" *How are you?* "Hahahahaha!"



A fire twirler stood at the entrance to the night markets. The rumble. The rubble. Robert crouched on the sidewalk, not going further. The crowd stood by, their skin the shade of fake tans; sweat and tears reflecting the fluorescent fires.

In the night market a small crowd stood at a pedagang kaki lima's cart. As always, the local people sounded angry as they happily nattered in their native tongue. Two German tourists were making sounds of horror. Robert found himself closer.

"Fruit bat!" the woman next to him cried in English, her accent like so many of the people in Paddy's Pub.

The dish was an indescribable lump, a wing curled around like a banana leaf. "Big bat," he muttered.

The woman turned to him. "It's a *fruit bat*." The seller rolled the dish so that the bat floated on its back, a milky cooked eye staring up. "They don't use sound to find their way," she told him, "not like other bats. They see. And they smell."

Robert held his nose, "Yes, they smell."

The woman laughed. He looked at her, eyes widening before he realised he'd made a joke. He allowed himself a chuckle.

"Are you here alone?" she asked.

Robert nodded.

"I'm Susan. Is this your first time here?"

"I'm Robert... yes."

"Why don't you come along?"

Late that night Robert told her to hush, sneaking through reception. "Hahahaha!" the bird said softly as they skirted around its cage.

Then his phone rang. The bird jumped madly, repeating the ringtone.

"Lukas?" Robert said, as Susan hunched over into silent giggling.

A breeze swept up, wet and cool from the rice paddy. It was so quiet that Susan could hear the words on the phone. Robert was glad that she did not speak French. "Christopher... they've flown him to Darwin... Australia," Lukas said. "I'm at the airport. There's a flight at eight... can you get here by five?"

Susan was looking at him, her head tilted slightly to one side.

"Oui," Robert said, snapping the phone shut.

Susan paused, then touched his shoulder. "You were at the bombings," she said.

"Apa kabar?" the bird whispered. *How are you?*

Robert looked at the ground. "How far is your hotel?"

"Just down the road, next to the Monkey Forest."

"Oh." For some reason her proximity surprised him. Then he shook his head, reminding himself that they were on the main tourist road in Ubud. Her hand trailed down from his shoulder to his hand, and he gripped it tightly. He stared at their hands.

"I can come with you," she said.

*Part IV: The Boy*

It all ended with my death. These things happen, I suppose. One day you're flapping about in the heavens, the next you're on the earth. Funny, that.

I won't tell you how it happened. I may look like I have hard skin, but I'm still tender about the whole thing. At least it was quick: I was still trying to escape when I died.

Death's not like they say. There are no mangoes on the moon. At first it was nothing, which I was okay with. But after time – months, days, years, it means nothing now – part of me lived. But not in me. I could hear shapes. A tiny ratty bat told me about this once, said that most bats hear blocks of trees and human nests in time and space.

What I see isn't as simple. It's so colourful, like all the fruit I've ever seen.

Something else was using my eyes. A little boy.

Soon I began to learn that some colours meant... people. They don't contact each other like bats do. A lot less shouting, on average. Not as much fruit. I began to realise that they were a family – but nothing like what I knew.

I just have to make sense of it.

Emily is a 19-year-old student studying journalism to fuel a passion for writing she has had since she was young. She honed her craft writing fan fiction. Emily's focus is now on writing original work. This is the first time her fiction has been published.

# Test my Faith, or the Barmah forest trip

---

ALEJANDRO PANES

I wait on the veranda of unawareness.  
People, plans and projects  
still exist.

Didgeridoos blow fever through my ears,  
I sweat dark dreams.  
Barmah trees amuse themselves with my fears.



My confidence leaks through rusty sieves;  
five-ton helmet on my head,  
energy snatched by jungle thieves.

Reality narrowed to a couple of rooms.  
The dam collapses,  
old fights and regrets flood my thoughts.

Swollen elbows; swollen knees.  
Brand new set of grandpa bones,  
night-time Iliad pees.

Arranged marriage with Miss Pain,  
she hasn't planned to leave my bed,  
screwed my happiness away.

I've been buried seven days;  
soon the sun will shine again,  
far from home but strong in faith.



Alejandro is a Spanish journalism student that landed in UNSW last year on an exchange program. During the summer break he travelled around Australia gathering material that is reflected in his poetry. He has lived in Panama and Senegal and finds writing poetry in foreign languages very curious.

# Yankee Pizarro

---

DOMINIC BOWD

Yankee Pizarro -  
iridescent;  
radiating the arteries  
of America.

A vesicle! Supramolecular!  
The sleeping behemoth -  
static, unholy.

Jack Pine, Yellow Birch, Bigtooth Aspen -  
subdued, felled, charcoaled.  
Oh, once so sentient;  
once dim as Scottish moors,  
and yet thick as pubic  
beards - once tousled  
and beautiful.

Forests vast  
and pious, bountiful  
and leviathan, hearty  
and charismatic -  
tho not in your eyes,  
Young Jeffersonian, freeman  
of the prairie -  
celestial vagrant of Occident.

Darkwoods, medicinal as they're  
felled - Cedar, Dogwood,  
Bitternut Hickory - burned to  
recompense famished  
merchants; coked for the  
tyrants of  
capital.



Yellow Buckeye, White Pine,  
Red Cedar –  
burnt to pay  
homage  
to Old World hermits.

Burnt by the yeomen of brackish  
capes and chalky knolls, they  
for whom heavenly idols  
bequeathed this raw earth.

O' olde Sycamore –  
pregnant with the spirits of  
the Redmen, black  
alcoholic curled beneath your  
lanky limbs crying petroleum tears, this  
is your America old man,  
for it is written.

This is your America, this the true  
manifest destiny, hackneyed  
Negro, eyes of shale.

Yes, Yankee Pizarro,  
brazen railwayman of Lima,  
weaving the will of  
America, entangled now  
for eternity in the politik  
of many vex'd  
motherlands, rubrically marked  
for cremation.



Dominic is in his fourth and final year of a Science/Arts degree. His interest in both the natural world and American history coalesced to build this piece – an ode not only to the once impervious, verdant and majestic forests of North America, but also the spirited and autonomic personalities that peopled its landscapes.

# Duck, Duck, Goose

---

KRYSTAL SUTHERLAND

The first time Elias Fairgrieve tried to kill himself he was 12 years old and, having accidentally rolled the family tractor into a ditch, decided death was a lesser form of punishment than the wrath of his father. While his parents were in town, he scoured the house for every form of medication and intoxicant he could find – sleeping pills, alcohol, chemical solvents, even horse tranquillisers – swallowed them all, and walked calmly into the bush to wait for his death.

After his little sister found him, unfortunately alive, he spent three months in hospital, and was more severely beaten by his father for attempting suicide than he would have been for destroying the machinery, which he was eventually beaten for anyway.

That was the same week his older brother, Gary, took a bite of a slightly undercooked duck drumstick as he sat by the bank of a billabong after a long day picking tomatoes and began to have hallucinations of terrible things. The Baby Jesus appeared to him in a basket at his feet, pale and aflame and watched over by an angel with a silver sword, and told him he would lead the world from a desert of darkness and into its next great age; that people would one day know him as The Lord. Gary stopped talking after that, and would remain in strange postures, immobile, as he listened to the voices whispering in his head.

Until the day they died, Gary's parents would argue that an infection from the duck – *Salmonella* maybe, or perhaps *E. coli* – had swelled his brain, damaged it irreparably, and that schizophrenia was entirely contagious and obviously transmitted by the consumption of contaminated bird meat.

On the way to visit her now two hospitalised sons, Nell Fairgrieve ploughed her four-wheel drive at highway speed into an oncoming semi-trailer on a single lane bridge. After dying four times over the course of seven hours, doctors finally revived her enough that she could spit out, through a mouthful of clots the size of chicken's eggs, that her daughter had been in the vehicle with her.

They found Clementine, the youngest child and only girl, in the metal mess of the bonnet, her twisted body inhabiting the space usually reserved for the engine. When they pulled her out she was toothless, her jaw broken in seventeen places and a Y-shaped score splitting her top and bottom lips in three directions. Her arms were broken, her legs were broken, her ribs were broken, and she would pick splinters of glass from the scarred, sloughing remains of her skin as they rose to the surface for the next 40 years.

And so that was how, in the dry season of 1962 on a cattle property in Queensland, Donald Fairgrieve found himself quite alone in his house, his children and wife hospitalised some four hours drive away. It was not, in his opinion, the worst disaster the property had endured. Two years earlier his best stockman had taken a feral steer's horn through the temple and out the other side of his skull. The beast, distraught and confused, had bucked and trotted and dragged the limp corpse through the dust, its anvil head twisted sideways with the weight of the man's body, for a full 20 minutes before the others managed to calm the animal enough to dislodge him. They shot the bull that night and ate it, and buried the stockman by the same billabong that was soon to start producing schizophrenic ducks. The man, whose name Donald had never learned, had been a hard worker and, come mustering time, the impact of his death would certainly be felt more than the loss of a woman and three children.

It was five days after Nell's accident that things in the house began to move by themselves. The dining table shifted four inches to the left, the cabinets in the kitchen were always open, even after Donald had closed them, and the lights would sometimes flicker when he entered a room. Doors kept slamming even when there was no wind, teacups kept appearing on the table when there was no one to drink from them, and taps began running despite there being nobody about to turn them on.

Although he believed in neither time travel nor life after death, Donald nevertheless knew with strange certainty that his own ghost had travelled back from the future to haunt him and promptly took to sleeping in the stables above the horses. And that is why, when the stockmen began to arrive two Tuesdays later, they were given free reign of the Fairgrieve family home. Allowed to sleep in the children's beds and cook their meals in the wood-panelled kitchen, and warm their fingers by the fireplace when the evening's frost set in. Donald sat huddled in sheepskins, shivering, watching from a small square window as his ghost wandered up and down the main hall of the house, no doubt looking for him.

"Stupid bastard!" he said to himself, chuckling at the spectre's idiocy, before remembering it was, in fact, his ghost, at which point he dropped the sheepskins, stormed inside, took the wraith by the neck and yelled, "I am out in the damn stables, you fool! Show some bloody initiative! Are you a Fairgrieve or aren't you?"

It was certainly not the first time a Fairgrieve had been haunted by their own ghost. Donald's father, Orval Fairgrieve, had had his ungodly soul tail him since his 17th birthday when it awoke him from a dream with a whispered phrase that would follow him until the day he died.

Some years later, Donald would be roused from sleep by the heavy thud of metal against sandstone and leave his bedroom to find Orval razing an interior wall with a sledgehammer, his mother and sisters huddled in a corner of the cottage, their dusty faces tracked with tears. Orval, upon seeing his only son, put down the hammer, wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve and said, "Donald, back to bed. I will put you down." At which point he crossed the dust- and stone-strewn floor, found his grandfather's flintlock revolver at the bottom of a trunk by the fireplace and led Donald back to his room.

"Get in," his father said, pointing to Donald's bed, and Donald, despite the wetness from his union suit that trickled a trail of piss all the way from the demolished wall, obeyed him.

Orval held the gun in his left hand as he pulled his son's green blanket to his chin, the child shaking and crying quietly beneath it. Through his tears, Donald could see the breeze creeping in through the open window, the empty cots of his little sisters, the one-eyed rocking horse he hated, slightly swaying back and forth in the darkness. Though he was only six, he was suddenly full of the knowledge that he was about to die, even if he did not entirely understand what that meant. He had seen his father shoot the gun only once before, at a dingo that had dug its way into the chicken coop, and he associated the scent of gunpowder and the thunderclap of the flintlock mechanism with the dingo's sudden lack of movement. Donald remembered the hole in the animal's gut, its wet, hollow breathing as its ribs strained up and down beneath its fur, its black, pleading eyes following him as a dark stain spread across the ground. In himself, at that moment, he found the cardinal knowledge that all children eventually stumble upon and are terrified by thereafter for the rest of their days: living things are mortal, and mortal things can cease to exist.

But Donald, in this particular instance, was wrong.

Orval had no intention of harming his child, only of delivering him a message, the very same message he had heard over and over in his own head for many years. He knew that he should shoot the boy and be done with it. Shoot the girls too, just to be safe. But Orval was a coward and he hoped the children would understand and one day find it in their hearts to forgive him his weakness.

So Orval simply said, "It's in the blood." Then he put the flintlock revolver in his mouth and pulled the trigger and painted his brains across Donald's bedroom wall.

It would have ended there, had it not been for Donald's determination to turn out differently to his father. But it did not. The blood carried, as it always did. The ghosts followed, as they had for generations. No, it was certainly not the first Fairgrieve family haunting. Nor would it be the last.

At the age of 40, following two more failed suicide attempts and a dramatic escape from a high security mental institution (to which he had been condemned after holding a steak knife to the throat of his wife), Elias Fairgrieve would eventually meet his demise after spying *his* ghost in his daughter's bedroom window. In a drunken effort to vanquish it, he stumbled forward and put his hand through the glass. The blood pumped in arcs from his severed ulnar artery, with every beat of his failing heart smelling so strongly of bourbon that a stray cat – thin-ribbed, wild with hunger – picked up the scent of death and sugar, stole in through the broken window, lapped three mouthfuls of blood from the carpet with its sandpaper tongue, and swiftly died of alcohol poisoning.

\* \* \*

After a restless night, a night without sleep spent watching his dead-eyed spectre roam the homestead halls, Donald and the stockmen finally set out for the muster at dawn. A massive sun rose from the bowels of distant mountains and slew low across the sky all day, burning them through their cotton and leather. They rode hard and fast across the land athirst, the trees and long grass turned the colour of gunmetal, sloughing away with the



breeze. Rivers sluiced through the property, and man-made dams curdled the last remains of the summer deluge, sowing small patches of greenery still bright with the verdant, yellow-green of things that bloom in the desert. It was here the men stopped to rest the horses, to drink water, and to sleep in the shade of coolabah trees.

My grandfather – for that is what Donald Fairgrieve was, and his son Elias my father, and I the little girl whose bedroom became his tomb – could not rest. He had the stench of afterlife on him, of the supernatural, and it was rousing from the ancient land a host of creatures and spectres normally reserved for the telling of fairy stories.

When the thought arose in him to scrub the ghostly perfume from his flesh, he found the freshwater creek by which they had camped in a roiling boil, its glassy surface bubbling with the breath of a bunyip that had caught his scent. It climbed from the creek to sun itself on a rock, its head snaking low across the water as a forked tongue slipped between its teeth, tasting the air for what it could not see.

That night he found no rest either, for camped beneath the stars he could hear, in terrifying detail, the snort and scream of drop bears fighting in the trees about the clearing; their long, throaty screeching at once like a pig's squeal and a demon's growl. The sound crawled up inside his spine and filled his lungs and almost brought his heart to a dead stop with fear.

\* \* \*

The stockmen came across the herd the next morning, fat red Brahmans with humped backs lashed in black and sleeves of loose skin hanging from their necks. Over everything hung an invisible fume, a medley of the heavy, sweet scent of manure, the salt, sweat and grease of the riders, and the red soil that rose in the savannah wind blowing from the west and coating the backs of the men's throats with the taste of the outback.

Behind them, invisible to all eyes but my grandfather's, trailed a procession of odd things, of yowies darting between the bone-bleached boughs of trees, their white hair hanging to their knees and their footprints pointing backward. Lyrebirds in the grass understory of the eucalypt woodlands sang a terrible funeral dirge in Donald's name, and there, in the centre, riding bareback atop the colt from old Regret, was my grandfather's ghost, plump and rosy cheeked and with a full head of black hair, which only served to worry Donald further for it looked so close in age to himself.

What happened next I cannot say with certainty, for I never heard the story from my grandfather firsthand, and the pieces I know are mere fragments of a truth that no longer exists. In the Kimberley I heard tell of a tale in which Donald flew from his horse, in his hand a shotgun that had been struck by lightning and which he fired at the peculiar cavalcade, catching his ghost squarely in the gut. Thus he became the first man since antiquity to acquire immortality for he had slain his own death, and I did not have the heart to tell his admirers he had been dead for some years by the time I spoke to them.

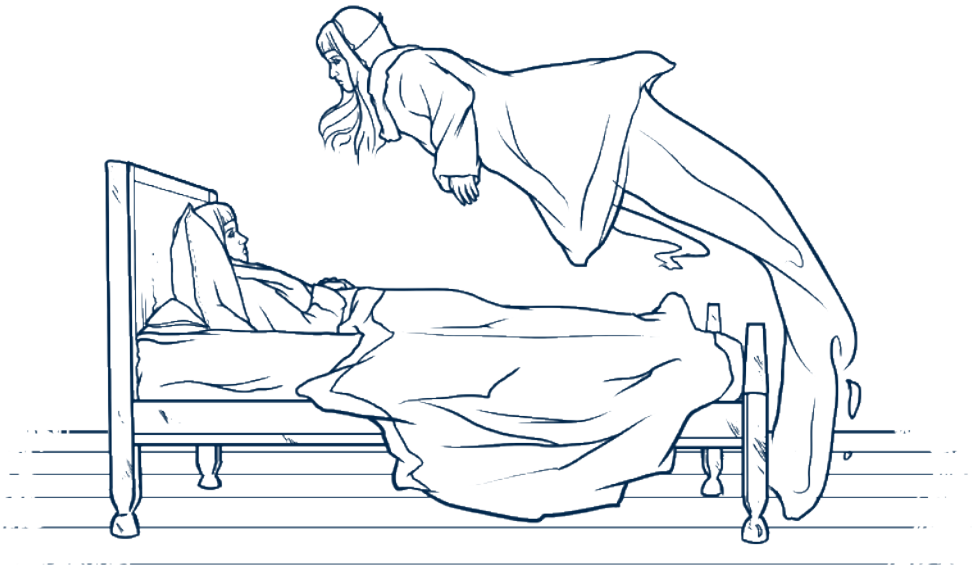
In Arnham Land they speak of my grandfather's delirium, of how the stockmen brought him to a medicine man on neighbouring land who crushed bone and bush plum and ochre to burn over a howling flame, covered Donald with healing stones and wrapped him in

paper bark for three days while the magic of the old land fought his ghostly affliction.

How he vanquished his ghost, I do not know for sure. What I do know is that he died, quite suddenly, at the age of 84, from the emphysema he had managed to hide from my grandmother, Nell, and the rest of the family for the better part of a decade. He died alone, as he would have wanted, crabbing on a muddy river that appears on no maps, his face the colour of a blueberry as he struggled to gasp in those final few breaths. He retained a full head of black hair until the day he died, and appeared so much younger than his years that people would mistake him to be his wife's son.

I wish I had known the story as a child, that I had asked Donald his secret when he was still alive, how he had become the first Fairgrieve in four generations not to take their own life. More than that, I wish that the pale, dead woman standing at the end of my bed every night did not look so much like me, exactly like me, that she did not whisper the same phrase over and over and over again.

“It’s in the blood,” she reminds me. “It’s in the blood.”



Krystal studies English and Creative Writing and can often be found lurking in old bookstores, her favourite place in the world. She aspires to be a full-time novelist so she can wear pyjamas all day and not have to leave the house.

He was fucked up on Xanax, stumbling as he walked, mumbling about the brutality of the Palestinian conflict. It was violently hot and I felt I should hold on to him, keep him balanced so he didn't fall, but the thought of my skin coming into contact with his sweaty hands, sweaty hair, or sweaty t-shirt disgusted me. My brow had dampened beneath my fringe, where sweat had gathered from the heat, and I wiped it with the back of my hand.

We came to an intersection and he stopped talking, leaned against the telephone pole, squinting heavily. I asked him how much further was left, if he wanted to go back – it was so hot. He shook his head with an intense vigour and apologised for dragging me along. I told him it was alright, that he'd given me two pills and I owed him one. There were no cars driving past, this city was deadbeat, pathetically underpopulated, vacant and unintriguing. He put his arm across my shoulders as we were crossing the street, and I felt obliged to wrap mine around his waist: forceful contact with a damp, sweaty waist. I wondered whether walking this way meant anything to him, or was he leaning on me for support so he didn't collapse from the heat or drugs.

I began to feel dazed, my mind removed from its place within my head, elevated above us. It was as though I was watching us walk down the street from a vantage point somewhere in the sky. The glare of the sun only made our mental images more graphic. We started to believe them. We walked together, holding onto one another, but it was like we were alone. It was so bright that all I could see were luminous spots of colour floating around the street, decorating my line of sight as they glowed. I shook my head, closed my eyes real tight and opened them again. The road looked normal. We were walking past a cemetery.

I made him stop so I could take a photograph of the graves. He asked me why and I told him I liked cemeteries. He didn't reply. I smiled at him and we continued to walk, but this time with our arms by our sides.

It seemed as though time was lingering without advancement, that we had defeated the continuum and were strolling in some space that had been sucked out of any constraints. We walked for so long. I wondered what he was thinking. He was drug-fucked and on a hike to a bottle shop in extreme heat, suffering for some booze. He apologised again for having misunderstood the distance to the bottle shop, that he didn't think it was so far away, that he felt sheepish. He grinned. I told him it was okay, and asked if he wanted to go back, and I put my arm around his waist again. He nodded, held on to me (but not too tightly) and we crossed to the traffic island in the middle of the quiet street.

We stood on the concrete block in the middle of the street, silently agreeing to hail a cab back to the hotel, when we noticed the bottle shop across the road. The state we were in, we would have walked past it, oblivious and tired. But we defeated the anxiety pills and whiskey and found the store. We walked back across the road and he bought us some beer.

The paper bag strained under the weight of the sparkling piss we'd just bought, so we set it down on the ground for a bit, to rest, to sit there while we waited for a cab. I was almost blinded by a desire to reach into the bag, retrieve one of the heavy glass bottles, press it against my face, my chest, my body, to defeat the weather and ease the sticky warmth of my skin, but I didn't.

He was standing on the edge, so close to the road, where cars could speed past, sweeping him away with their rapid oblivion. Not that there was anyone driving past. We sat on the gutter and wondered whether we should open our longnecks, neither of us wanting to appear a desperate alcoholic. But it wasn't even about that, it was about easing the dry scratchiness of our throats, the slight cottonmouth we'd somehow paid no attention to until now. My tongue suffered with every swallow, and I don't know why I kept swallowing, there was no saliva to get rid of, nothing, it was a functionless act robotically repeated out of habit, and it hurt.

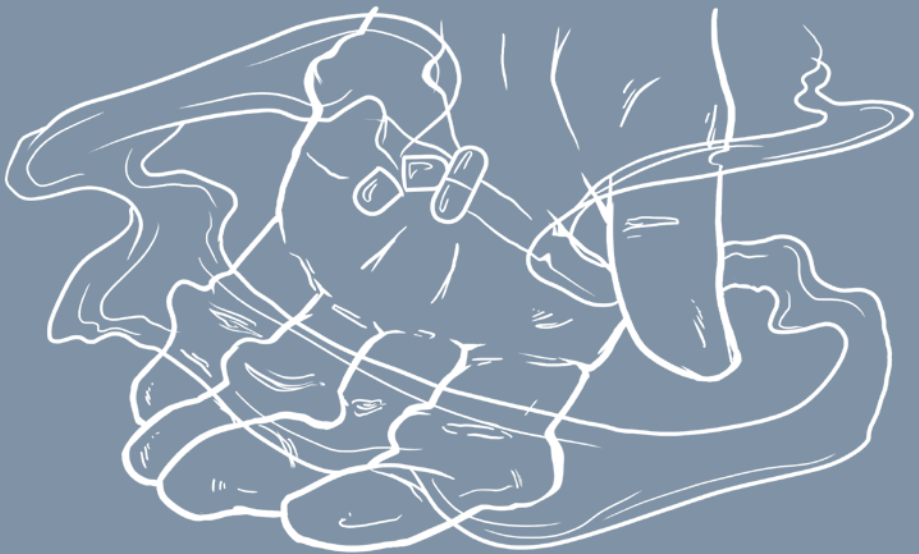
From here the sun could be seen loosely releasing its dominance over the landscape, silently slipping behind the sporadic splatter of buildings that towered over the city. I tried to stare at it for as long as I could, and when I looked away all I could see was darkness everywhere. I thought about forcing my body up, pretending I wasn't in pain, pretending I was in total control of my muscles, that I wasn't immersed in a complete state of luxurious relaxation from the meds, and walking back instead of sitting here in the gutter like a junkie, drinking beer out of a longneck in a paper bag.

I turned to him to ask if we should fuck off and start walking back, that in retrospect it really wasn't that far, that it only seemed far at the time because we had underestimated the distance; but he was looking at me with a delicate smile, his eyes glistening where the sun reflected off them, his face glowing from the stickiness, his hair greased and stuck to his forehead awkwardly. He emanated a childlike sweetness. I thought that this was a pleasant moment, that there was no rush to hurry back, and I shifted closer to him, laying my head on his shoulder.

The asphalt was beginning to cool as it softly scratched against my palms, and I could feel my neck and spine crying out from pain, gently numbing under the pressure of the position I sat in. I really wanted to move, shift my position, sit more comfortably, but I didn't want to move away from him, from this moment, from this place. I thought about how in a few seconds, minutes, hours, this moment would have disappeared, that I would be somewhere else, thinking something different, no longer absorbed within this strangely melancholic bliss; it made me sad. I almost wished for a cab to never arrive, for us to sit here until the brightness wavered, softened, disappeared completely and it was night time and we were still sitting waiting for someone to come transport us away from this place and this moment.

He shifted suddenly, got up, grabbed the paper bag that was now folded and torn and began to wave down a cab that was turning the corner. My mind, as usual, got carried away. I wanted so much to freeze time in a moment of absolute happiness, for it to become my eternity, my entire existence from start to finish, and although I had anticipated and accepted it moments earlier, I still felt disappointed that we had to go back. Why did we have to go back?

I wanted to grab him by his damp t-shirt, carelessly, even if he dropped our beer and it fell to the asphalt, breaking upon impact and splattering its frothy bitterness all over our shoes and legs. I wanted us to defeat advancement, to defeat constructs and routine, to dictate our own start, our own end, our own day and night. He opened the back door of the cab, handed me the beer, slid into the middle, took the beer back off me and patted the dirty seat beside him. I got inside, wanting to slam the door with unwarranted anger, but I closed it softly and asked him for a bottle opener so I could have my beer, right now, in the taxi.



Fay once took a walk in Adelaide. It was hot as hell, the longest walk of her life. This is an unrelated story. If Fay's mother is reading this, she loves you, and she doesn't abuse Xanax. Yes, Fay's dad, she loves you too.

# The Day I Missed the AstroTurf

SARAH MACLEOD

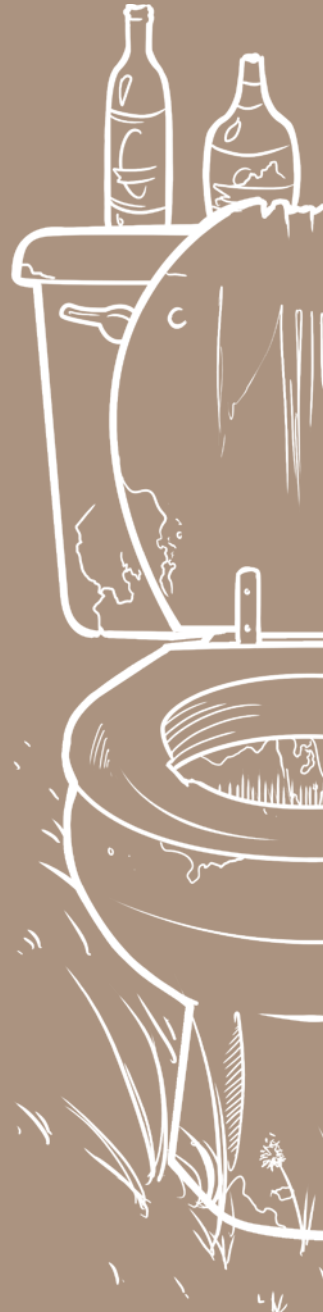
I saw part of my history for sale.  
The carpet we melted  
with kerosene lit fires  
in my flatmate's pot.  
All ripped up.

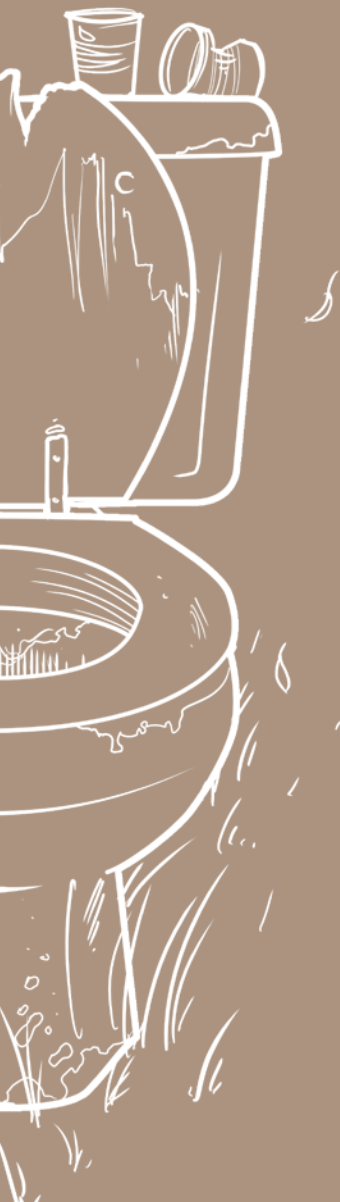
The bin juice is probably  
no longer creeping  
toward bold bare feet  
and no longer hiding  
between their bare toes.

The shower mould  
omnipresent and constant  
no longer fills the air  
lovingly with its spores.  
Colonising more.

The Russian Mafia Guy  
who appeared one day  
in our garage and claimed  
the outdoor toilet, is no longer  
just there, with the redbacks.

And those outdoor toilet redbacks  
likely all swept away.  
My bare arse  
misses them.  
It misses them all.





The parties and strangers  
and instant friends  
snorting vodka and  
eating weed and flushing  
phones.

Now ghosts in the walls.  
The weird flatmates,  
the guy who spoke to knives,  
the unknown stranger  
on our bills (sucker!).  
Gone, like the astroturf.

It's all ripped up for normal  
people  
who have contracts  
and bills who live  
normal lives and don't  
need dares for fun.

I found normality.  
I eat and earn and don't  
collect street signs (much).  
But sometimes  
I just miss the astroturf.

Sarah digs poetry. It started with *The Cat in The Hat* and was fuelled by her English high school teacher. Then one day she decided to write herself. Ta-da!

# The Bathtub

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SARAH FERNANDES

You pull at the long, hairy entrails of the bathtub drain and think *this will be worth it*, even though you're not really sure. You wonder vaguely if all of these old bathroom products will do something to your eczema. Stale blue bubble bath, circa nine years ago. A holiday when you and your sister could fit in the bath together, but were too old and modest to take your swimmers off. Rose-scented bath crystals. You never see your godmother now, not since you stopped going to church. You wonder if she's realised if she ever knew how much you always hated her presents. But maybe you've become too judgmental and cynical, because look – these are cascading so nicely into the bathtub.

You turn the hot tap on full and listen to the dull thunder of the water. The bubbles are foaming up on one side and not the other. How do they do it on film where the bubbles so accurately cover a beautiful woman, leaving it all up to the imagination except for her perfect wet hair covering her supple breasts? You wish sometimes you had pale skin and green eyes and long luscious red hair. You wonder if maybe he would like you more that way. You wonder if you would like yourself more that way.

You take off your clothes as the water continues to rise and instantly fall victim to goose bumps, despite the heater being on and the door closed. It is the middle of winter, your reason. You hunch over in embarrassment because you see yourself in the mirror. Not that you detest your body, but there's something detaching about seeing yourself in the flesh. It's so raw and hopeless. You contemplate taking a swing of your birthday tequila, but decide from past experience that drinking alone isn't a good idea. *It's okay*, you think to yourself, because the bath will calm you down. You don't need to be dependent on alcohol. You don't need to be dependent on alcohol. You don't.

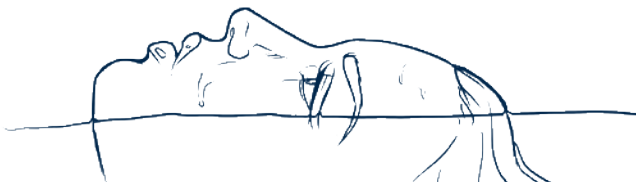
You slowly remove your necklace, the one with the real diamond in it, and for a moment feel both sexy and intelligent. Maybe if your legs were shaved, you'd have liked someone to be there, just to bear witness to your self-desire. The steam clouds the mirror. You don't normally wear fancy jewellery, but this is special. You finger the small diamond set into the bottom of the number '18' and wonder if in 50 years' time that you'll still have this necklace, that you'll still have those friends that gave it to you, that you'll still be alive.

You turn the tap off with some difficulty and notice the eerie silence of your empty house. The sickly rose flower scent of the murky water rises and engulfs you. You probably went too far with that scented crystals bullshit. One foot at a time, you step into the bath. Pain shoots up your poorly circulated legs as your deathly cold feet make contact with the near-boiling water. You grimace and tell yourself to push through. The difference in temperature between your legs and the rest of your body makes you feel like you're going to contract hypothermia or pneumonia or some other vaguely temperature-related illness. You remember your mother's story of almost passing out when she got into the bath once because of this same temperature change. You wonder why you have a similar haircut to your mother.



You discover soon that you have grown. You cannot immerse yourself completely in the bathtub. Even if you fold yourself up like a straw, it is impossible to fit your entire body into this smallish porcelain tub of water. There is always a knee poking out or a right shoulder exposed. Old memories of having a bath feel like lies. Right now, you are lying with your back totally immersed, your legs folded at the knee and resting against the side of the bath tub. The water cups your face along your jaw line to your ears. You calm yourself and focus on your breathing, and how as you breathe in, you float up a little from the air in your lungs. You like hearing the sound of your heart beat underwater. It makes you feel alive. Your legs are beginning to get cold but you reason that lying like this will help with the back pain you've developed from hunching over your laptop. *I am relaxed*, you tell yourself. *I have distanced myself from all forms of communication and electronic devices. This is me, relaxing. Look at me everyone, I am relaxing.* You think about how you might post this to Twitter and make it sound interesting, and like you have a life outside of updating Twitter. It is a Saturday night and all your favourite people are out without you. *I am relaxed.* You become conscious of the fact that you can't hear. You begin to panic that someone will break in without you realising. Nobody wants to be burgled naked. You breathe out, and feel your body sink ever so slightly. You begin to worry that you might drown in this shallow bathwater, like in that documentary you watched with your father about Ray Charles. You don't want your parents to come home and find you naked and asphyxiated. You had imagined yourself dead at this age before, but had envisaged it a little more poetically. For a brief moment, you contemplate if maybe an accidental drowning would hurt them less and sit up. Your head spins and your legs warm.

All the bubbles are gone now. You are left sitting in a pool of expired bath chemical and your own dirt. You examine your fingers underneath the dull water. You are hungry and your skin has turned pruney. The water has become lukewarm. You stand up and step out and towel yourself off without thinking much, only making sure you don't drip water on the book you brought with you but didn't read. Your legs are slightly stiff from all the folding and contorting. You've forgotten to bring a change of clothes, so instead you wrap yourself tightly in your towel and go and sit in your pre-heated bedroom, sitting in silence with your eyes closed so you have nothing to tell time by except for the dripping of your hair and the drying of your exposed skin, and your breathing, which you seem unable to stop focusing on, and you think about him for a little while, and what your mother would've been like as a child, and you try to sit straight, and someone rings the doorbell and you realise you forgot to empty the bath.

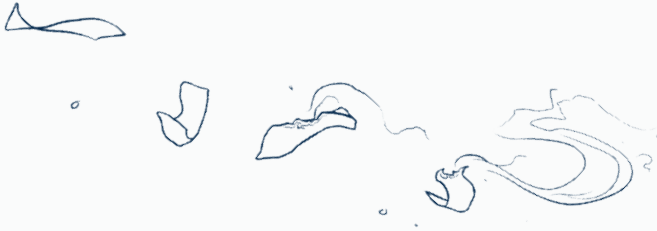


Sarah is a first year Science/Arts student whose hobbies include 'people-watching' and 'pretending not to be people-watching'. She is embarrassed that this story is semi-autobiographical.

# Shandong Blues

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NOAH ZUGLIAS



She was 17, according to the Chinese calendar, almost two years older than they'd call her back at home. Not yet an adult here, but definitely not beneath the role of labour and responsibility now expected of her.

Her father and mother hadn't said anything to each other for days since arriving in Shandong, despite the three of them having to sleep in one bed.

"Your father's as unreasonable as can be," her mother once cryptically informed her, in an icy tone to match the winter weather outside.

She longed to understand what her father meant every time he said, "You must never forget your roots, Louisa", or "Home is the most important thing. You cannot ever forsake your home." His face was a grave map of lines and topography.

She dared not answer her father back when he was in one of his serious moods. She remembered the only time she'd ever seen her father cry. He was embracing and kissing an old man, his uncle, their tears mixing on each other's faces – the tanned, weathered face of a peasant against soft city skin. Only five at the time, this was Louisa's first visit to China, to see her father's relatives. Her father and the man were saying some sort of a goodbye. Her great-uncle smiled at Louisa through his glazed face, cherishing her like he did all grandchildren. Her father cried uncontrollably, great wracking sobs shaking his large frame. Dry-eyed, she watched her father's violent heartbreak as he waved away his uncle's car.

"Why are you crying, Daddy?"

Her father gave her a watery smile. Everything seemed to confuse her, the mad warping of pain and pleasure in her father's face. "Great uncle is going away forever. I'll never see him again."

She somehow understood later that this was a long-awaited reunion as well as a final farewell.

Ten years later, she sat in the back of a well-heated BMW, her 20-something cousin at the wheel, a Taiwanese mix CD playing. She was in the middle of the backseat, separating her silent mother and father, a little squashed by the latter. They were driving along white fields, blankets of snow and dense crumbly roads, yellowed by village clay. Before getting out, Louisa fitted herself out in her woollen beanie and gloves and drew the zipper of her white parka up to her mouth, lips chapped and dry. From there, they fought against the coastal wind, whistling and hurtling against them as they trudged down to the village cemetery.

In Australia, cemeteries were always well-groomed official places, bordered off by a high fence and an entrance gate. Here, she absentmindedly stepped on the grave of an unknown ancestor, old twigs of incense snapping beneath her boots. The place had no visible border, but was a dormant forest, the trees stunted little things, frozen by the snow. A grave was marked here and there by a prominent mound of yellow dirt and, if modern enough, a plank of engraved wood or heavy stone. Through the hundreds of Zhangs and Lis, her father and cousin led them to Louisa's own grandfather and great-grandfather. Her grandfather's mound was marked in stone, while her great-grandfather's was signified by wood. She could barely make out the inscriptions, carved, she was told, by another relative.

They dumped books of yellow tissue paper, a special funeral paper, onto the graves and lit them. Instead of burning like she expected them to, they smoked quickly and easily. The forest was too cluttered and the wind too biting for them to kowtow properly, so they each made do with a little bow, hands pressed together as in Western prayer.

They left after a few moments, something unspoken moving between her father and her cousin. The trek back to the car was conducted in silence except for her father, who spoke quietly, a radiance in his eyes unlike any that she'd ever seen back at home. He told her about his father, his father's father, and his several uncles, who were like second fathers to him. Told her how the average family back in those days had around six or more children and how one's family was one's life. There was always something to do, someone to help, to care for, and to care about you. *Funny*, Louisa thought, *Dad's almost never spiritual at home.*

Perhaps visiting ancestors' graves wasn't so much a matter of spirituality, but one of love and longing. As an only child, Louisa was born accustomed to the everyday social silence and lonesomeness that came with her idea of family. She bit her lip against the cold and miniscule sense of emptiness that sunk into her as they piled back into the BMW.

This wasn't home for her, she told herself. No, home was warmth and scorching weather, sandwiches and hot showers, electricity and Internet. Home was far away, but still there. But what about her father? Would he harbour the desire to be buried in Shandong, China, with the rest of his ancestors in their overgrown forest graveyard? Or would he be content with decaying underground amidst a colony of strangers, all equally as dead and alone?

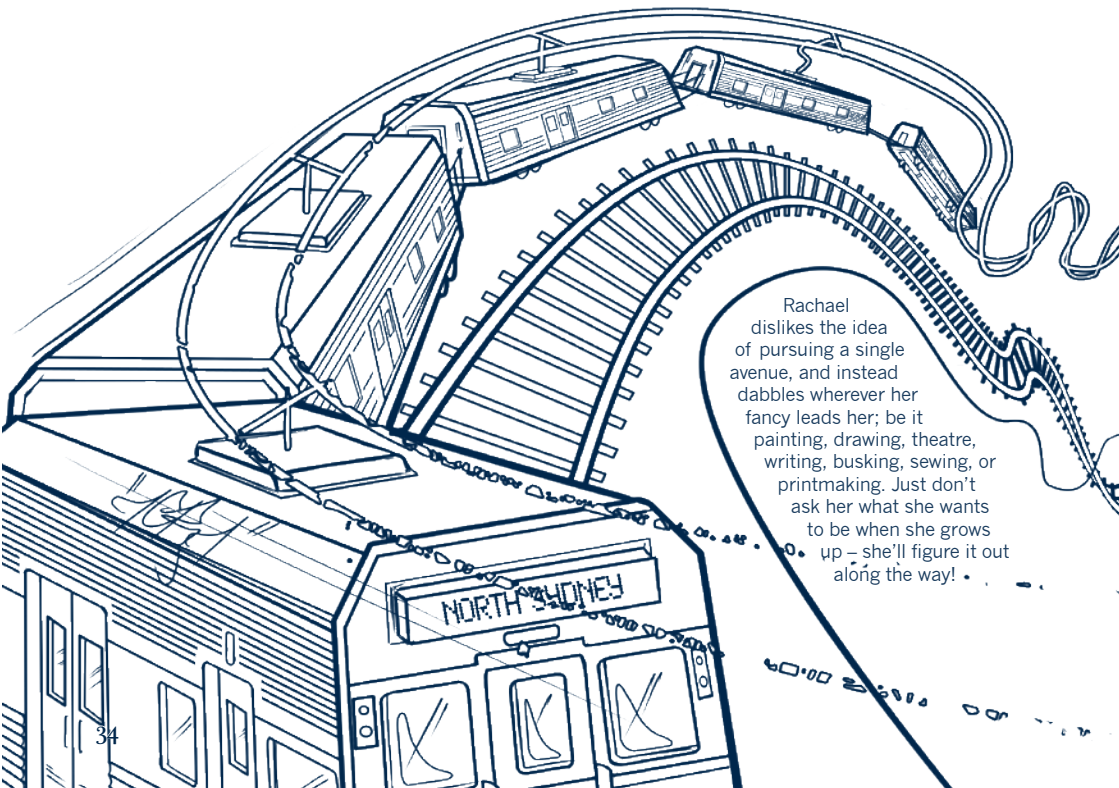
Her father had not entered the car. He was standing outside, facing the crashing sea, eyes scanning the horizon. For a moment, Louisa saw a teenage boy, gangly and tanned and naïve about the world. He wore grey scars on the backs of his knuckles from salty fish hooks, and squinted as though reading fine print from a smudged newspaper. And then he was her father again, an ageing, soul-broken man, unwilling to go forwards yet unable to go back.

"Medicine is my legal wife, literature my mistress." Despite the undertone of adultery, Noah, like Chekhov, is able to maintain a happy balance between the two in his second year of Medicine. His favourite novel is *The Colour Purple* and favourite writers include Alice Walker, Amy Tan, Margaret Atwood and Roald Dahl.

# Please Stand Behind the Yellow Line

RACHAEL HELMORE

Please stand behind the yellow line  
And everything will turn out fine  
No need to jump when trains fly past  
Nervous eyes, your patience sparse  
No need to stand, just chill and sit  
Train is coming, wait for it.  
It'll be dark when you leave the station  
Orion's Belt, Constellation  
Sirius, Southern Cross, Lone Star  
Your bearings gone; but there you are -  
First stumbling, but far from blind  
You've just no line to stand behind.



Rachael dislikes the idea of pursuing a single avenue, and instead dabbles wherever her fancy leads her; be it painting, drawing, theatre, writing, busking, sewing, or printmaking. Just don't ask her what she wants to be when she grows up - she'll figure it out along the way!

# Regret

DINUKSHA DE SILVA

In a house built with the bodies that have  
Called it home, I sit on my selfish seat  
And sniff the scent of sixty years of life  
And death as it wafts down the halls.

Draped over the windows, your ragged skin  
Keeps out the sun for me. Part of you,  
Ever present to remind me  
When I forget that I am in mourning.

For you and your half a life. Wasted.  
In my dreams he comes with a scythe, but  
My shuddering heart still beats black and slow.

I put my hand on the chopping board,  
Waiting for someone to bring a knife,  
To slice and serve me to the guests –  
But it's just me in this rotting house.

I am cursed with the memory  
Of those who gave themselves for me.  
Still, I feel not gratitude but the  
Uneasy weight of souls on my shoulders.

My fault that this chair grates against me  
Like a stack of bones. Yet I pile it  
Higher in the hope that your sacrifice  
Will be forgotten amongst the dead.

I gaze into the eyes of the ageless  
Vulture beside me, waiting patiently  
As it has done for generations,  
Not knowing that this will be the last.



Dinuksha is a third year medical student being published in *UNSWeetened* for the third time. He used to have a penchant for writing dark poems, and this is one he dug up from a couple of years ago.

# *Rage (Against the Dying of the Light)*

HANNAH WALKER

*Sydney, 1906*

*November 12*

The day was hot, like melted fairy floss. Jimmy crammed into a doorway with his siblings. He was nine.

His elder brother, Tom, held a cigarette in his hand that he had bargained from Porky Robins down the street. He placed it between his lips with all the swagger of a 12-year-old, inhaled and passed the cigarette on to Mags.

Mags was 11, in plaits with a soup stain down her front. She accepted the glowing roll of paper with a giggle of nervous delight, dragged quickly and handed it to Jimmy's grubby fingers.

Jimmy sucked on the cigarette the way Tom had shown him, watching idly as Mags picked at a loose thread in her stockings and Tom kept a lookout for their parents, safe in his role as the undisputed master of the pavement. The burn scar on Tom's hand was a permanent testament to his success in keeping that position, after a disagreement with Alex Yule involving matchsticks.

Colin, preoccupied with a passing beetle until then, prodded Jimmy in the back, eyes wide with anticipation. "Lemme have a go."

"You can't have any, Col, you're too little," Mags snapped as Tom snatched the cigarette from Jimmy.

Tom's greasy hair fell messily into his eyes, and he pushed it out of the way as if it had done him a great personal wrong. Of course, Jimmy had more of a right to the cigarette, so he wrestled it back. For that, Tom pinched his arm, quick and nasty.

"Ouch!" A red mark bloomed on Jimmy's skin, smarting.

Tom pointed a finger between Jimmy's eyes. "Bang," he whispered, his smile curling in the light.

"What?" Jimmy turned around, glancing down the street. Mags's knees stiffened and pressed into his back.

Alex Yule was the nastiest, most evil kid on Barker Street. You could see it in the way he stuffed his fists in his pockets, the way the scabs on his knees never quite healed over. Even the freckles on his nose were menacing. Particularly since Alex Yule was currently standing right in front of them.

Alex narrowed his eyes at Tom, fists slowly emerging from their battered pockets. He pointed his hand at Tom and Jimmy like a gun. Jimmy tried to look Alex in the eyes and got a crooked neck.

*Bang.* The challenge was out.

The Barker Street War was the fiercest in living memory, or at least that's what Barker Street's children swore to their friends. Every day kids would battle in the streets over the right to kick a football and chew gum on a stairwell. Tom had spun tales about this war to Jimmy and Colin, and now Jimmy was eager to do his part and carve out his own notch in Barker Street history.

Children emerged from every doorway like flies attracted to rotten meat. There was no better Saturday entertainment than a fistfight, and a fight between Tom Gardner and Alex Yule was always worth the possible crossfire. In all corners, kids were shouting the challenge: "Bang, bang! Bang!" Alex's boot connected with another boy's back, and Jimmy felt his heart race as the fistfight descended into a free for all.

Jimmy didn't have size to his advantage; he needed a weapon. A stick was as good as any. "Bang!" Down went Jimmy's opponent, clutching his shin. Tom swung a fist at Alex Yule; he missed and was punished with a gorgeous backhander. Another boy tackled Alex as Tom lay with his face in the dirt. Mags screamed and Colin started to cry.

But of course Colin would cry, he was such a baby, and Mags was a girl so it was natural for her to scream. Jimmy had a reputation to maintain. The Gardner boys were known for their fighting prowess, and he was damned if he was going to be the one to break it. Wielding his stick as if Excalibur had fallen to Ned Kelly, he swung it at another boy. It caught the boy across the temple and he crumpled to the ground, felled.

Jimmy howled in triumph.

*Somewhere in France, 1917  
November 10*

It was cold: cold like nothing else. Jimmy crammed into a trench with his platoon. He was 20.

The air was heavy with the stench of decomposing corpses, clinging to every surface. It had become normal almost, along with the blood and the mud and the crazy. The reek choked men in their sleep, curled about their sickly faces and sunk into their pores until they breathed the poison back into the air. It was inescapable. A soldier once said that as long as you could still smell that stench, you knew you were still alive. Jimmy had sworn in response and grunted that death must be a blessing and a half.

He shifted, moving his gun through the muck onto his other shoulder. The steel was heavy against his chest. Dawn bled over the horizon and next to him Cecil Barnes muttered in his half-sleep, something about water and home. Cecil's head lolled onto Jimmy's shoulder and Jimmy shoved him back, jerking him awake.

"Fuck," Cecil whispered. "I'm still here."

Jimmy glanced over at him and spoke for the first time in days. “Dreamt you were back on the farm, did you? Tough luck.”

“Yeah.” Cecil sighed heavily, the sore at his mouth ripping with the effort. “There was a roarin’ fire and potatoes as big as me head. Fucking beautiful, it was.”

“Too right.”

Cecil pulled at a loose thread in his trousers. “I got a girl, back in Ballarat.”

“Do you?”

“Yep. Name’s Erin. Cooks up a storm, she can. When I get back, I’m gonna marry her, and she can feed me all day long. Ain’t never gonna eat something with maggots again.”

Jimmy groaned at the mention of maggots. They were easy enough to overlook when the enemy trenches could hear your stomach grumbling, but a reminder was never welcome, not when his last meal was almost all maggot. Had it been a Tuesday? Did that mean today was Thursday? He could never keep track.

“Well, have you got a girl, then?” Cecil’s cracked voice startled him.

“Huh? Oh. Yeah, I do.” If you counted a stolen kiss behind the storage shed of the neighbour’s backyard. Sweet Emmy Castle. He could hardly remember her now except that she had a frangipani flower in her hair and a stain on her blue dress (*ice-cream? Yes, they had shared a vanilla ice cream in the scorching summer heat*). There was another memory: her hair shimmering in the sunshine as she played the piano, laughing as her fingers danced on the yellowing keys. She had smiled when he asked the name of the melody she played; she called it the *Moonlight Sonata*. She’d told him the composer’s name as well, but he couldn’t pronounce it and it didn’t stick. Some foreigner.

There was a grunt and a squelch as Jimmy’s brother Tom landed beside them in the mud. At an ancient 24, Tom had wanted to join up as soon as war was announced, and was the uncontested champion at blowing Jerries into the middle of next week.

“So...” he said. “Everyone sitting pretty? No one gotten all kinds of dead?”

Cecil gave a noncommittal huff.

“Not as far as I know,” Jimmy shrugged. “Last I saw, Private Harris didn’t have long.”

“Leg wound?”

“Yeah. Got all funny. Reckon it’s infected.”

Tom leant back against the plankings, shifting his helmet to a more comfortable position over his nose. A louse the size of a small gadfly crept along his temple, tracing along cracks of dirt and sweat that coated them all like a second skin that could never scrub off, no matter how many lice bathes the army forced them into. All that scrubbing, and never clean. Most of them never bothered now, if they had ever bothered before.

Cecil wiped a hand across his mouth, wincing as his lips cracked. Cecil’s face was a red, weeping minefield after stray, friendly fire tore part of his lower lip away. At first Jimmy tried not to look too close, but Cecil was a friend and you looked your friends in the eye, even when scars and scabs ripped their features. Cecil adjusted the leather helmet strap under his chin, eyes downcast. Rain left a sheen across his face like a veil.





“Sometimes I think I’m gonna die here,” he said, returning to pick at loose threads again.

Tom answered before Jimmy could get a word in. “Don’t be stupid. Think like that and you’ll end up dead, you know it. S’like a curse, it is. You’re livin’ and breathin’ and screamin’, which is more than those poor bastards from the 57th can say after that shell hit ‘em.” Tom braced himself and then swung back onto his legs, fingers tightening on his service rifle. The childhood burn scar on the back of his hand stood out among the new ones like a torn white flag. “Reckon I should go look at Harris. Good man, Harris. Be a shame if he carked it.”

Tom’s boots knocked Jimmy’s ankle as he clambered over them, and when Tom stepped forward in the trench he sank, water pooling at his shins.

Jimmy was checking his pockets for ammo when they heard it – that piercing whine like a whistle – and his face slammed down into that cold wet ground.

Pain ripped through his shoulders. Eyes, back, lips, hands. Head: still attached to a neck. Jimmy’s features began to reassert themselves. Legs. Where were his legs? He shook and swallowed down the panic as his knees moved. Everything seemed intact.

Skill meant nothing in the closest thing to hell, it was cursed, unjust luck that saved him. Beside him Cecil Barnes was keening in agony while he gripped his shoulder, crimson pouring between white knuckles. Further down, a gunner twitched and bucked while the flesh melted from his face, bursting and shrivelling in a bloody firework, filling the air with the smell of barbecue. Harris’s leg had been blasted away completely now and Tom.

Jimmy saw a burn on a hand that lay half submerged in a puddle. This was a scar older than shells and bullets and razor wire. Tom lay curled under the sacking, undamaged – until Jimmy realised there was no head.

*Sydney, 1929*

*December 5*

The day was hot, like when they burned newspaper in the grates. Jimmy sat alone in his kitchen with a cup of tea. He was 32.

His wife, Emma was tense, desperately trying to get celebrations ready for little Sam’s 10th birthday (*nine years younger than Private Harris had been, screaming in some hospital, his leg sawn off at the hip*). He couldn’t quite remember when Emmy Castle became Emma Gardner, only that it was somewhere around the time that Mags became Margaret Cheltenham and he became Mr James Gardner, manager of Gardner’s Groceries and head of the Gardner family (*now that Tom lay dead under the soil, the parts that were left of him rotting, only bones*).

His present for Sam lay hidden in Jimmy’s bedroom closet: a handy pocketknife Jimmy had used to carve sticks into something resembling human figures when he was a child. Sam had always taken after his father. Emma had fussed over him when he was born, feeding him caramel and honey bears from the lolly shop (*Tom used to steal lollies for Mags when they were children, she always did have a sweet tooth*). She had stopped fussing when the girls were born, preferring to take Alice and Ada for walks past the post office. Emma liked to look at the postcards of Paris, a place she had never seen (*Paris after the war, people cheering in the streets, girls*

with mouths so red they seemed to bleed onto the cobblestones, Cecil Barnes *parlez-vous* like nobody's business). He used to walk with Emma before the shop became too busy, and he watched as her lips parted upon seeing her reflection in the windows, and she raised a hand to pull her hair behind her ear.

Jimmy could never understand why Emma stopped stuffing Sam with lollies and why her cheeks flushed with joy every time the girls came home from school. When he had asked her she bent her head and continued peeling the potatoes, with her lips pressed together.

"Is Sam a lot like you?" she asked, drawing her knife across the vegetable. "Your sister Margaret said he was. Said little Sam reminded her a lot of you when you were a boy... and of your brother." Her head bowed lower and the hand holding the knife paused. She rested one hand on the tabletop, and with the other tried again to push a stray curl behind her ear. Her curls always bothered her now, even after she hacked off her plaits in the new fashion.

"Well?" she continued with her back to him. "Do you think Margaret's right? Is Sam like you?"

Jimmy considered his answer before shrugging. "Yeah, I guess. I think he's like me, before the war, I mean."

Emma still had her back to him, but when she wiped a hand across her face Jimmy could've sworn he could hear her breathing, disturbing the silence of the kitchen. "Yes, well, Sam won't have to fight in a war, thank goodness."

"Yeah."

Emma whipped around so fast her hair got caught across her face.

"Oh for God's sake Jimmy, please say more than just 'yeah'! I can't take this silence..."

There was nothing he could say to that, so Jimmy studied the nicks in the kitchen table instead, tapping his fingers on his knee. Emma pressed her lips together and returned to the potatoes, slicing the knife across them in violent slashes that sent peels flying across the bench. He watched their flight as they fell in gentle circles, falling like ash, like burnt guts, like the charred fabric of Tom's uniform—

"Oh!"

Emma was sucking her fingers, the knife forgotten next to the potato. Jimmy hastened up to put his arms around her skinny shoulders. "Emma love, you all right?"

Emma jerked beneath his hands. "Oh, yes, I'm fine," she whispered, laughing pointlessly. "Just cut myself, that's all. You know how clumsy I am!" She shifted away from him and stumbled out into the hall, brushing her hip against his. She paused in the doorway, the sunlight shining behind her, halo-like. "I'm going to practice the piano!" she chimed brightly, wiping her fingers on her skirt. The fabric was cherry red (*red that pumped from the ragged hole in his knee; he stuffed his greatcoat against it but it soaked through*), with white frills at the edges. He had bought it for her birthday, he couldn't remember how long ago now. "Would you join me?"

"Of course."

Years had gone by and Emma still played the piano, just as she had when Emma Gardner was still Emmy Castle, always the same three pieces (*but not the Moonlight Sonata, not anymore, she never did play it again after the war*). He brought her cups of tea from time to time (*brackish*

stuff, Cecil Barnes adding ash to his, he said it gave more flavour) and she thanked him, placing the cup on a coaster by the piano stool.

In the silence of their days, she chewed off her lipstick and passed him the morning paper (*they burnt their newspapers for heat, the smoke stung his nostrils but it was better than the cold*) with a hopeful smile attached, lipstick now smeared at the corners of her mouth. At night sometimes she turned to him, tiny hands gripping his shoulders. She had a voice like the whine of a falling shell.

They came to an agreement, and so Emma took Alice and Ada for walks while he took Sam to play football with Mags's children. She'd made a good match, Mags had, even if it did mean that she insisted on being Margaret. He had never called her that before, but then, she hadn't wanted it (*not when she was a girl in plaits, waving to him at the pier, her beau's arms around her as the ship sailed out of her sight*). Her daughter Jane was three when he returned, such a fat, bouncing kid, all red cheeks and giggles. Now Jane was a young lady dragging Sam around the park, introducing him to her friends.

Mags had produced a few brats since Jane had been born, and her six children were strong rivals to Emma's three. Mags's three sons wrestled Sam away from their sister, the football lying on the dusty ground a clear indication that all talk needed to be done away with now in the face of turf pride.

Jimmy settled on a park bench that seemed to sag beneath him, watching as Sam aimed a good kick between the goal posts. The boy could be a star player if he put his mind to it, Jimmy observed. Then stopped. Chuckled. They had once said the same thing about him (*just like they clapped his back when he went to war*).

Out in the dirt, Sam passed the ball to his youngest cousin, while the elder cousin, Billy, fished around in his trouser pockets, already bored. Billy kicked at a stone and made a half-hearted attempt to steal the ball from Sam. Gave up. Snapped the gum he was chewing (*Tom, chewing on the kitchen seat. He stuck the gum under table when he thought Ma wasn't looking*).

It made a crazy sort of sense, that Cowboys and Indians would surpass football, and Jimmy wasn't at all surprised when Billy suggested it to the other boys. Sam wanted to be a cowboy, which didn't surprise Jimmy either, and he felt an odd burst of pride when Sam pretended to shoot Billy in the chest. The boy was just like him.

*Bang, bang! Bang!*

Jimmy leant back over the bench, pulling at his hat to cover his eyes. The sun was burning his face, and as he drifted into sleep machine guns applauded in his ears.

# When I Was Sick

SARAH MACLEOD

To separate the wheat from the chaff,  
a sharpened mind should cut the fuff;  
to cure my body's imbibed tragic bias,  
I lacked the funds for the alternatively pious.  
No unscientific tests divined causation in my blood,  
to find the seeds of Discomfort's (expensive) flood  
and Oh! Some advised to let my body be,  
not nuke it out and give myself radioactive pee.

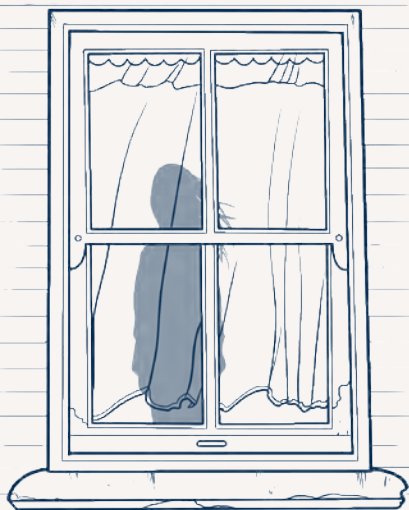
But know, my friend, I do not mean  
to write a treatise to vent my spleen!  
But to document how my fear was caught;  
to err mortally, for want of thought.  
There in waiting rooms long I stood,  
and wondered if it came down to food?  
Or should my mouth cease to entertain and chew  
those things my friends-of-friends eschewed?

Frightful figures were painted in my mind's eye,  
shadowy nymphs competed with my logic and vied  
for centre stage in my dazzled brain,  
as ideas of cures waxed and waned.

They're shouted out in an amphitheatre's surrounds -  
ideas from the spectre of dread; which abound,  
and put my internal alarm to screaming;  
my racing pulse, set by my mind's dark dreaming.

Oh, how in such a fearful state do glean  
those who in a stormy world remain serene,  
the calm bedfellow of rationale: reason,  
to quietly restore a more temperate season?

Thus I took to Certainty to dilute,  
the fear which through my veins would shoot  
and followed what my doctor said,  
for it tires me, this meeting of hope and dread.



Sarah digs poetry. It started with *The Cat in The Hat* and was fuelled by her English high school teacher. Then one day she decided to write herself. Ta-da!

# But I Dreamt All Night

JANE (QIHANG) LIANG

my generation is inaugurated by an atmosphere of schizophrenia  
leaking a tiredness and despoiled childhoods strung  
    hand to sticky hand with petal-lust, neon-thrums;  
my generation is earthly-relegated, louvred feelings thresholded,  
    stacked and breadcrumb-cut, humming with an undercurrent  
    of breathlessness and a quiet regal fury;  
humanoids bleat-eyed shut-eyed hypersomniacs,  
    sommnambulant hypocrites; hyper-aware messengers  
    electrical and magical, neurons battling, tragically short-circuited;  
helpless apologetics finessed with wealth hungrily riding their painful  
    too-young-to-have-this-disease  
    too-young-to-be-burdened  
        but look at these chafing heels and glass-brimmed fears and painted eyes,  
        (tell me that this is youth then fix your lies)  
    too much to be significant  
    burdened backs;  
liquidation of crisped-confusion circled hollows unevenly labelled,  
my generation would rather turn off that hovering lightbulb in favour of bright smiles and  
brighter days,  
    it is the crazed ones who do not have a will to refuse and allow the will to control their way;  
caffeine-soaked intolerance for difference from difference; or, normality,  
    yet fedora'd faux-bohemian frolics meadows breathing petroleum  
    infer undercurrents of homogeneity;  
    ill-suited intentions,  
    ill-suited interns and the flashy partyholics who all die another day;  
my generation's statistically high split-wristed limbs reaching for the high beams,  
    shadowphiles' insatiable hapless remonstrations with the feather-light glass-half-full people:  
    closet pessimists or closet optimists or simply closets  
        hinged with fake wood painted to look like real wood;  
an entire world cruel but kind, happy with an unhappiness, searching for or denying the myth of love.  
my generation is a sham and the only truth I shall ever know.  
    what makes us so special and so different,  
    to lose steam before the end of the rail tracks, before the plane has caught sight of buildings  
        cued for defenestration,  
    to accelerate candy-red ahead of ideological desensitvity,  
    what gives us the right  
    or the need?

WINNER  
UNDERGRAD  
POETRY



Jane is a second year Commerce (Liberal Studies) student. The liberal part is important but no one knows why (probably because it will soon be an extinct degree). An inexplicable humour that's not actually humour. This poem is about the world as a collection of mostly negative sentiments made by an introvert who spends sleepless nights wishing for more.

Milton was a careful man. He reached adulthood (the world of long, pressed slacks) with knees free from the crisscrossed gristle of scar tissue that covered the legs of his contemporaries.

Possessed of a remarkably sensible disposition from an early age, the leveling-off of any vestigial risk-taking behavior deposited him safely in a life of comfortable adequacy.

He and his partner of seven years, Kathleen, returned to their suburban home after a well-planned and meticulously researched trip to the Middle East. God, it had been hot.

Kathleen had recently quit her job, mere months away from formal recognition of her long service. Milton's accountant salary was sufficient to prevent any sense of immediacy entering into her return to the workforce.

"I think it's time we seriously consider children," called Kathleen from the living room.

Milton nodded. They should. He paused in his unpacking of the groceries. He had a large, purpling bruise on the inside of his forearm. A result of some careless altercation with the shopping trolley, no doubt.

"Milton?"

His nod had not produced any perceptible sound, naturally. "Yes, darling," he said. "Considering. Under consideration. Most seriously."

Undressing for bed that evening, Milton noted another odd bruise. A knock on the shin. *Perhaps I have leukemia*, he thought dispassionately.

This being incredibly unlikely, he shuffled to bed. He felt a twinge in the tiny cluster of bones at the base of the toes of his left foot. This feeling was not unfamiliar. It was a relic of a rare, rebellious escapade in his youth. It played up particularly in cold weather.

"I could stay at home, at least for the first few years. We're doing alright now, and as long as we budget..."

Kathleen performed her usual soliloquy over breakfast. Milton rinsed the last straggling cornflakes out of his bowl. A curious swirl of red joined the milk-white that rushed down the drain. Painlessly, absent-mindedly, he had gashed his palm on something. A cursory glance around the kitchen revealed no obvious culprit.

"Milton, I really - oh, what have you done?!"

Kathleen appeared over his shoulder, then dashed down the hall before he could think how to respond. He stood motionless, hand open. The tap was still running. Over the hiss of water and morning television, he heard her banging around purposefully in the bathroom cupboard.

Clap, clap, clap. Her shoes on the wooden floor.



She returned with the medicine chest and seized supplies from the neatly labelled containers inside it.

Milton passively extended his hand. She took it, dried, cleaned and bandaged it – silently – until: “You’re really in the wars, aren’t you?”

His mother used to say that too.

On the train, Milton remembered a similar injury. In precisely the same place on his hand, in fact. A visit to the neighbour’s place that had ended in adults shouting and accusations of blatant disregard for neighbourhood safety aimed at the elderly owner of the ragged-edged metal fence. He could practically taste the iron. The smell of blood.

It seemed sharper than the dull, censored ache in his palm.

“Rough first weekend back?”

Milton stared blankly at his grey and politely inquisitive coworker. Louie-from-Admin.

“Minor accident during a bit of cleanup; house gets run down while you’re away. You know how it is,” he replied.

“Well take it easy, you’re about 50 per cent down on productivity by the looks of it.”

Milton’s hastily bandaged hand rested uselessly and glaringly obvious at the side of his keyboard. He said nothing. Louie’s failed attempt at levity thankfully ceased with a final sweaty guffaw and the patter of steps of one headed back to their cubicle for lack of anywhere more interesting to be. Milton, exhausted, pressed his face to the clean surface of the desk.

He waited. He waited to become aware of what he was waiting for. He felt a peculiar warm damp on the back of his elbow, twisted his head to look—Jesus!

He shot out of his wheeled chair. It clattered against the desk and rattled the shared cubicle wall.

“Whoa there,” said Stephanie-from-Accounts, unseen but present on the other side.

“Sorry,” murmured Milton. He tried to clutch his elbow as inconspicuously as possible. He walked the calm but swift walk of one who has learned to appear unflappable.

Down the empty, fluorescently lit hall, he spilled into the men’s room. The back of his inoffensively mauve shirtsleeve was marred with a spreading patch of red.

This was inexcusably inconvenient. He rolled the sleeve up to discover the source of the importunate bodily fluid. Where the familiar faded white scar should have been was instead an open wound that expelled blood with some tenacity. Milton pulled a roll of toilet paper from the unoccupied stall, wadded it imprecisely and stuffed it into his sleeve. He knotted the lumpy edifice in place with his exuberantly patterned tie – not an easy enterprise, owing to his stiffly bandaged hand.

*I am falling apart*, he thought.

He quick-stepped back to his desk and pulled his suit jacket on over his suspiciously misshapen shirt, internally grateful for the dark material. Already the padding added to it felt sickly tepid and heavy.

Milton announced loudly and nonspecifically that he must leave to attend to an emergency at home. Nobody responded, so it was alright.

The house was empty. Kathleen was out to lunch, no doubt. Milton tore off his jacket and shirt, the fabric and paper slapping moistly against the floor. He went to the medicine chest and methodically bandaged the wound on his elbow, picking out tiny pieces of stuck tissue paper as he went. They would soon run out of bandages and he was not in any fit state to drive to the chemist.

He remembered, as a child, ruining his friend's 11th birthday party with a fall on the road almost as soon as he arrived at her house. Sarah's fiercely independent parents, rather than taking him to a hospital, wrapped his gory elbow in layer upon layer of sterilised bandages. He bled through them all. The bleeding only subsided, hours later, as he watched all his friends ice skate from his rink-side seat. His mother, horrified, had driven him to a medical centre as soon as she picked him up. The doctor told him he had opened a vein.

Milton combed his sweaty hair as best he could, gripping the handle with the tips of the fingers of his left hand through layers of fabric. It did not seem that Kathleen had quite mastered the correct manner of covering the gash in his hand – surely his fingers could have been free? But it was so nice of her to do it for him.

Milton met his own gaze in the bathroom mirror. He would clean up before she got home. He'd left a bloody mess in a trail from the front door, across the shiny wooden floorboards into the hall.

A sudden wooziness gripped him. He remembered that his knowledge of blood loss was limited to an interesting anecdote about some sort of medic having been present on the set of *Reservoir Dogs* to ensure Mr Orange slowly bled to death on the floor in a realistic fashion.

Curiously, and without urgency – there was no pain, after all – Milton picked up the cordless phone from the kitchen. On the bench were enthusiastic, pastel-coloured pamphlets about conception. Kathleen had evidently been doing enough 'serious considering' for the both of them.

Milton sat heavily in the bathtub and dialled two numbers.

Zero, zero.

He looked down, and – yes, there it was. Another scar. This one was older but decidedly more ominous than the bruises, or the other on his elbow—

Well, it should have still been a scar.

Milton did not remember this himself, but he knew from collective retelling and family legend that he had been involved in a serious car accident when very young – practically an infant. Some kind of near-fatal puncture wound sustained when his overworked, overtired grandmother fell asleep at the wheel.

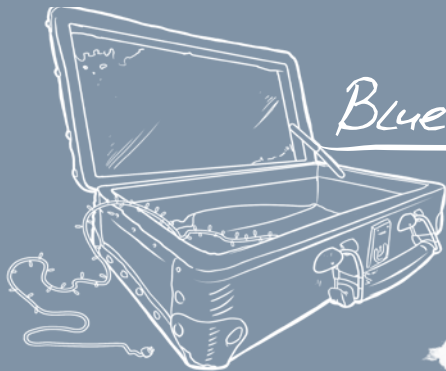
The wound opened slowly, pensively, of its own accord. Blood poured down his stomach, onto his charcoal business slacks. It pooled where he sat at the far end of the tub and began its journey to the plughole.

Milton held the phone limply. He pressed zero again.

No, he thought. *It's definitely not leukemia.*



Alex needs to be constantly reminded she is not Andy Warhol. She can generally be found drinking whiskey, listening to a *Stompin' The Country Blues* record, or enjoying delusions of grandeur. She also runs the elusive *Broadside Zine*. Rock and roll.



## Blue Skies and Bare Feet

CHLOE BARBER-HANCOCK



Robin left England because it was too grey and cloudy and she kept bumping her head on the sky. She moved to a country called Australia where the weather was (mostly) good-tempered, Yorkshire puddings were an endangered species, and the sky was so clear that it went up and up forever.

Robin arrived in Australia with a battered red suitcase and \$14 in a fading batik wallet. Deep in the throbbing heart of the city, she found a dodgy flat with a creaky door and a leaky roof. Robin painted the walls purple while drinking red wine. After several hours it became difficult not to paint the walls with red wine while drinking purple. Robin had a very long, very bubbly, bath and when the walls were dry she covered them with fairy lights and photographs from longago trips to India, Thailand and Spain. Picture-Robin beamed out of the wall from the top of an elephant, and still had a shiny nose-ring instead of a tiny scar where it used to be.

Robin found a job among moth-eaten upholstery and brass table lamps, in a little antique shop tucked deep in one of the many pockets of the city. When it was quiet she would lie behind the counter and watch the dust motes floating lazily in a shaft of sunlight near the ceiling. When it was busy (which was rare) she would rush around and bang into tables and get interestingly coloured bruises all over her shins. Outside the window, people would walk with their heels clicking angrily on the pavement. Across the road a grubby man sat in a sleeping bag day and night, squashed into the corner between buildings.

Robin bought a second-hand camera and a photo album and enrolled in a photography course at TAFE. On Wednesday nights she caught a train and a bus deeper into the city to spend an hour under blinding fluorescent light in a classroom with 20 strangers. One of these strangers was called Alice.

Alice and Robin made experimental messes in Robin's kitchen and passed them off as spaghetti bolognese and fish pie and sausages and chips. They used the rest of the purple to paint flowers on the roof of Robin's apartment block, so that people in aeroplanes would have something to look at. Alice, Robin and the moonlight had interesting, rambling conversations and stained their fingers with red wine. They went swimming at Bronte Beach and screamed so loudly whenever seaweed brushed their feet that anyone watching would

have thought it was a shark. Alice and Robin started catching the train and the bus to their photography class together. These days the winter would close in fast, and walking down dark streets the streetlights overhead would flicker like the strange arterial throbbing of the city's heart; in the distance, always, sirens.

The first time Robin saw him – and each time after that – he was standing on platform 19 at Central Station. Alice leaned over and whispered his name in her ear: *Henry*. Henry had wide blue eyes that always looked surprised. He wore a shiny silk waistcoat, but never any shoes. Henry hummed odd tunes under his breath and ate ripe bananas. Henry and his dirt-stained feet and sleepy hands made Robin's heart feel nervous and excited at the same time. Alice began to wear more make-up.

Robin's photo album began to fill up. Alice and Robin covered in seaweed and laughing hysterically. Alice pouting from behind red lipstick, blue eye shadow and false eyelashes. Alice and the perfect pasta primavera. And here, a clumsy photo of the back of Henry's head. Henry's elbow. The blackened sole of Henry's milky white left foot. One hand holding a ripe banana skin, custard-coloured and covered with small brown spots. Henry in profile scratching his whiskery chin.

Robin decided she needed more photography lessons. Alice decided to take pottery classes instead. Spring was starting to roll across the city, and the evenings were lighter yet still carried a cold bite in the wind.

One night over what was now the world's best spaghetti bolognese and too many glasses of wine, Robin splashed her heart all over the table in a muddled snotty mess, using half a box of tissues to wipe up the remnants of a rant about love and shyness and the unfairness of it all. Alice went very quiet and poured herself another drink. The green glass bottle matched her new earrings. A gift, she had said, from a boy.

The days got lighter and longer and soon the evenings were as bright as afternoons, with the crescent moon winking down from a blue sky. Robin walked along tree-lined streets by herself and tried to get excited about spending an hour in a blindingly lit classroom with 20 strangers, none of whom were called Alice. The ticket barrier at Central Station clunked open and Robin readied her camera for another photo of Henry. As she reached the top of the stairs to platform 19, the camera clicked and witnessed Henry, and Alice, and the world's most unfortunately timed kiss.

Robin's mouth made a shape like an 'O', and a little strangled noise came out of it. Then she turned around and went back to the purple flat with the creaky door, drank two bottles of red wine, cancelled her photography course and burned her photo album on the roof of the building so that people in aeroplanes would have something to look at.

Robin left Australia because the sky was so clear and blue that there was nothing to stop your heart from floating out of your mouth and up and away, until it was so small that it was only a little red dot in a vast sea of blue, and then you couldn't see it at all.

Chloe has been waiting forever to feel justified in calling herself a Real Author. She is beginning to suspect that it's more fun to do away with labels altogether, and be content to simply play with words. Her favourite authors include Neil Gaiman, Terry Pratchett and Haruki Murakami.



## Fellow Yolk

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ALEX PALMER

As autumn fettered summer's morn, wind led me through trees,  
And poplars led the bitumen straights with brooding, southern sneeze.  
Soon when the son caught up to me at around half-past-ten,  
I handed him fine oxblood wine condemned to older men.

He tipped the brew half-heartedly as it sauntered down his chin,  
While crows in murders cawed in grief, forewarning us of sin.  
My son arose to tremble now, his breath began to thin,  
As the wind that sinned lashed proud and prim with a Mississippi sting.

He gazed at me through sable eyes with a mournful, silent grin,  
As sweat that bled from his neck grew colder in the wind.  
And as he sipped from swagger with a pompous, virgin dread,  
A crow bent on fraternal intent settled on his head.

My son he did not flinch at all, the bird was a shade he knew,  
"Crows are black 'n yella', son, 'n we're just black 'n blue."  
My words they seemed to age his blood, the ether soaked in wine,  
That thrashed his head and broke the threads that strangle crows in twine.





*The smell of baking bread never gets old.*

We were more than happy to let the summer nights inch by; we loved to watch the golden sunlight dissolve in shadows. We raised our glasses.

Do you remember the time, every time, that my mum drove us home after we'd come back from drinking in the city? I'd sprawl across the back seat, put my head in your lap, close my eyes and lazily converse with my mum in Vietnamese. The words flowed out of my mouth like water from a brook, and I would be talking about my dreams and aspirations, things that my mum wouldn't have suspected existing in me. Well, it was at this point that my mum would ask, "Are you drunk?"

Second-hand beer seeping from my pores, I would reply, "I don't know what I am," and I'd doze off as you tried to stay still so as not to wake me up.

What were you doing during those conversations? You didn't speak Vietnamese, so you couldn't understand any of it. I imagine that you'd look out the window, watching the streetlights speed up, slow down and stop overhead, with insects fluttering about in a cloud under the amber light. In the front, my mum would stare ahead as the road rolled under us. I could never tell what she was thinking.

*People give their chips to one-legged seagulls, feeling sorry for them, not knowing that their other leg is tucked up against their body for warmth.*

When you were alone in the kitchen at work, people would approach and ask you for advice. Often you'd surprise yourself with what you came up with, and thought you'd be a better person if only you'd looked at your life with such clarity and followed your own advice.

You recall telling Tom that he should always look at the tops of skyscrapers at ground level so that he would be reminded of how small he was and how big he could be. Tom said he was the type to only follow orders. He didn't want to be big; he wanted to be happy. You told him that that wasn't the path to happiness.

His phone rang, and he said *fuck* several times. He squatted down with his head buried in his hands. After he hung up, you asked him what had happened, even though you didn't really want to know. He looked at you for a moment before telling you that his eldest brother



in Perth had overdosed for the last time. He wasn't close to his eldest brother, but it wouldn't have happened had Tom been with him in Perth. You didn't cry nearly as hard as he did. You didn't cry at all.

*The ibis is revered in Japan.*

The chilly night air bites at your fingers, ears, nose, and lips, but it is not windy. It is that time of the night when the world is perfectly still, asleep in its suit of glass armour. The frost turns windows into walls, lawns into green crystal fields.

Familiar in sights but not in distances, the streets that lead home stretched endlessly. You are convinced that the world is artificial. You are walking on a conveyer belt with a track made of asphalt, the silhouettes of trees against a purple screen scroll by to give you the illusion of movement. You are alone, but you don't mind. The sun could rise and fall a thousand more times and you would still be happy.

The coldness is sobering. When you finally make your way to the door, you fumble with your keys. Tar fingers, weed breath, alcoholic sweat – earlier, you tried to purge yourself from your body with an assortment of chemicals, and now you reek of every single one of them.

Your head throbs as you stand in the shower and water sprays on the back of your neck. You scrub yourself down, but after drying yourself off, you find that you still stink. You shrug. Your head feels like it's about to burst and you want to drill a small hole in it to relieve it of the pressure from so much air building up.

*I can't go to sleep like this*, you think as you sit cross-legged on your bed, staring at the wall opposite you, where constellations of Blu-Tak are the only reminders of the band posters that used to adorn it. You stare at the blue-grey dots until the after-image burns itself into your retinas and the wall and everything on it is simultaneously green and red and yellow and white and black.

You think it wise that you spent your time like this, clearing your head before it hits the pillow. You dream of nothing.

You wake up in the morning and wonder why you are still alone. Isn't it funny that this is the same solitude from last night which you wanted to prolong?

Maybe it has something to do with the way the sun melts away the night's frost, the way the leaves rustle as they shake off the dew in the morning breeze, the way that the birds chirp and sing to each other. Everything is in motion; you have only just woken up. You're off to a bad start.

If only this were nighttime, when everyone has gone to sleep; when everything that could have happened has happened, when you have done all that you can do and solitude is something you embrace rather than fight, when you are freed from the weight of, "I should do something".

The infinity of possibility crushes you.

"Big lols and fingers up to having a future!" Stephen shouts to no one in particular as he stands on a cafeteria table. Seconds ago, he was eyeing your half-finished bagel hungrily. Such is life for a freelance writer/pseudo-journalist.

# The Macabre Imagination of Ebony Grace

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KRYSTAL SUTHERLAND

There once was a girl named Ebony Grace  
who had lovely blonde hair and a pretty fair face.  
But Ebony was not like other girls,  
she did not dream of unicorns, mermaids or pearls.  
Instead she dreamt of more gruesome things  
like dogs that are dead and infected bee stings.  
Her room was pink, perfect and fluffy  
but she would have been happier somewhere dank, dark and stuffy.  
Though Ebony liked to eat biscuits and cakes  
she would rather have snacked on spiders and snakes.  
Overgrown gardens and carbuncle boils,  
bats, rats and monsters, rusty bed coils.  
These are the things that made her most happy,  
everything else she found rather sappy.  
Sometimes she did like playing with dolls  
pretending, of course, they were huge putrid trolls.  
Her favourite day of the year was Halloween  
when she dressed as a doctor and cut out her cat's spleen.  
Her hero in life was the ghoulish Vampira,  
to grow up like her was the greatest desire.  
Ulcerous blisters and maggoty meat,  
disease-ridden vegetables, smelly crust-covered feet.  
All these and more made Ebony smile,  
even if only for a very short while.

A homage to Tim Burton's short film *Vincent*, this poem was inspired by the author's youngest sister. While she has never dissected a cat, she did put the family kitten in a freezer once when she was little. It was fine!



# Pumpkin Soup

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SOPHI SMALL

Six months later. I realise how much things have changed and how they will never be the same again. 6:13 and the woman biologically known as my mother pulls up in her old white Laser. Over an hour-and-a-half late but, of course, we won't mention that. Like everything else, it remains unspoken. I wonder how unspoken something can be when you've been screaming it for years. We do anything to keep the peace, if silence equals peace. She said she wanted to see me, that she missed me, that it had been too long. I missed her too, sometimes, from afar, but 11 months without hospitals, 'episodes' and police had passed far too quickly for me to really miss the reality of 'her'. We're going to have pumpkin soup because she knows it's my favourite thing in the world. I haven't seen her in so long I can't remember the colour of her eyes or the smell of her skin, but the taste of that thick, reparatory soup lingers on my tongue, seeps through my skin, oozing and pervasive like a gas stove left on all night. After all this time, after all that's transpired, it comes down to soup.

Time in the car crawls like traffic along the highway, stagnant with words unsaid and the kind of small talk usually reserved for Christmas lunch with the strangers of extended family. My mind is eager to escape my body and I wonder how family can be 'extended'. Is family a birth right or something you have to earn? Why does the blood running concurrently through our veins mean we're inextricably connected to unfamiliar strangers for life? I imagine a family where Christmas is about turkey and seafood and fruitcake and small children opening presents. The chasm between a Hollywood family Christmas and my own holidays of hospitals, naloxone, police and lies tear deep into my skin, making my fingers tingle, drawing my mind back to my body, quietly strapped in next to my mother. I study her carefully without turning my head. Her soft arms grip the steering wheel like it's the only thing keeping her on the ground. Her once smooth skin rests permanently on the hollow of her cheek. She's thinner, smaller, less.

Slowly, the world outside the car window becomes familiar. We drive through my old neighbourhood, as my mother expertly twists the car along suburban roads like the tracks that scratch up and down her arms. This world seems familiar, yet strangely alien now that I am no longer a child. Happy memories and the naivety of childhood lie swamped by the pain of my youth in the back of my mind. I remember when we first moved here and how excited I was to have three girls my own age as neighbours. Our summers were spent lying under the macadamia tree in my backyard, forever searching for the perfect way to crack that impenetrable shell without damaging our hands or the reward inside. We learned to ride our bikes on this very stretch of road, paying our dues in blood and etching lifelong memories

into our skin. I trace the longest one down the inside of my leg, remembering not the pain of the fall, but the thrill and the freedom of learning to ride. I wonder if my mother thinks of her own scars in the same way, the bliss of the high without the terrible pain sewn deep in her skin.

We arrive at the house I used to call mine and sit silently in the car for what seems like hours. I realise I am scared to open the door. The little white Laser is a cradle protecting me from the dangerous world outside and I feel like a child. Once I venture out I can never return. I suddenly feel a shortness of breath. Something catches in my throat, threatens to tear it out. It is only at times like these I wish I hadn't thrown out that little white bottle marked 'once daily with food'. I consciously slow my breathing, concentrate on my mother absentmindedly watching the neighbour's dog and remind myself I am in control of my thoughts. Addiction is what got us here in the first place. Addiction and dependency on everything but ourselves. Somehow this mantra brings me back to reality almost every time.

The kitchen is piled with dirty dishes and plates tangled in a web of mould and grime. The bench tops are nearly invisible, cutlery and crockery lie abandoned on the floor and blotches of yellowish soup cover surfaces. I look at my relatively well-groomed mother and fruitlessly search her face for recognition of the absurdity of the situation. I decide not to say anything about the impact unhygienic living could be having on her health just as quickly as the thought enters my head. I feel encased in filth. I keep my hands by my side and resist the urge to pick up the familiar white mug emblazoned with our family portrait nana gave me for my birthday. Or Christmas.

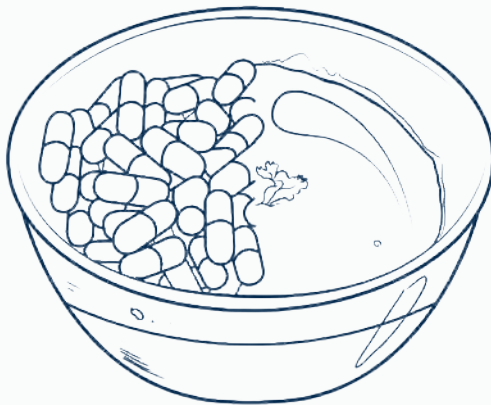
The mess in the kitchen looks permanent. Untouched for weeks, maybe even months. It was never this bad when I was growing up. I remember when Mum, Dad, Alex and I still lived here. I remember when she would have one of her episodes and throw everything from the fridge and the cupboard onto the floor, smashing plates and mugs in a frenzy of frustration and anger brought on by nothing at all. It would last hours. Dad hid us downstairs and tried to mask her screams with the crackling of vinyl and *Sgt Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band*. After the noise stopped we would creep upstairs, Dad motioning to me and my brother when it was safe. We would invariably find her collapsed on the kitchen floor, muttering in her sleep, sweating profusely. She would not wake up for days. These episodes were infrequent, at most three times a year, and the kitchen was always returned to its original state when we awoke the next morning. Dad always said he didn't know who'd cleaned it, but I'd hear him humming 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' and picking up pieces of shattered ceramic crockery until the early hours of the morning. Still, it was never this bad when I was growing up.

I stand back and watch as my mother gingerly washes a pair of bowls and spoons, retrieving a saucepan of pumpkin soup from the otherwise completely empty fridge. The smell rises high and sweet above the sour stench of filth, permeating senses, awakening memories. That smell underlines every memory I have of my mother. It gathers my thoughts and weakens my resolve so that I am a child again, smiling nervously, reaching out as she hands me a giant bowl of soup. I savour the hot, sharp touch of the bowl against my skin, feeling the burn through my fingertips. I eat silently, inhaling the thick liquid, letting it flow into my belly. It isn't the same. She's forgotten something. Ginger maybe, I don't know. All I know is that

she's forgotten how to make it. The smell lingers mockingly in the air, teasing me with empty promises. I know it's only soup. But suddenly I can't bear to be in the same room as her.

I reluctantly creep into the bedroom that used to be mine. It remains exactly as I left it six years ago, like a shrine to the teenager I was – only it feels different. A layer of dust sits thick and heavy atop the mementoes of my younger self. A purple bowl which once held cereal now spews mould and foul odours into the house. I have returned three times since I left, each time intending to find the things which once defined me, the things I left behind when everything went bad. I could never do it. This time is no different. A vine has pushed its way through the skylight and is wrapped around the head of what was once my bed, as if nature is in the process of reclaiming the house as its own. A photo frame given to me by a school friend now provides a home to two small snails, their silvery trails winding a haphazard pattern across faces whose names I no longer recall. Once this room held a clue to my very essence, my hopes and dreams, now it depicts the process of rot within what was once my family. I turn to leave. My mother is in the doorway. She is standing motionless, staring at the vine which twists and curls around the room. Her eyes seem polished, shiny, and I recognise the outline of tears collecting in the corners of her eyes. I realise I have never seen her cry. Not real tears. She looks at me intently and I wonder why we are always silent when there is so much to say.

Her eyes drink me in, studying every detail of my face, as if it will give her the courage to say whatever it is she needs so badly to. Her eyes are green. Not green-grey or green-blue, but pure green. As they fill with tears, those beautiful green eyes seem to see through the years, into the heart of the young girl I thought I'd left behind. How could I have forgotten? Never again will I forget the colour of her eyes.



Sophi is currently completing honours in Ancient History, making noise in a band called Missing Children, teaching high school English and history and filming a documentary called *Kitten Tourism* about the cats of Petersham. *Pumpkin Soup* is part of a series of works in a variety of media that explores how we interact with mental illness and addiction.



## *Death in Cellophane*

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DOMINIC BOWD

Cathode lagerphones under  
the sultry vagina  
sky-wold; stars of chalk  
to puncture  
a rolling black.

Vermillion red  
vibrating harpsichords -  
bodily machinery;  
the sweet nectar of  
sexual grease, caustic  
by day break.

Throbbing, the pornographic city  
foams - the bin-juice of sex'd urbanity  
lacquering streets - corrosive  
to the dictums of  
piety, and yet  
glorious to the  
siphon-youth - fibrous  
limbs of diodes  
mangled.

Garcia Lorca! Did Manhattan  
bleed profanity from its turgid  
streets for your eyes?  
Did iron, and steel, and glass  
birth wet cuckoos – mad and  
Delphic in neon-gloaming –  
for you?

Italo Calvino, did your  
cities cry? Did your allusions  
of decaying beauty masquerade?  
This, a death in vogue?  
Yes, a death in vogue.  
This a death wrapped in  
cellophane – thighs peeled  
on bitumen, white as  
alabaster.

These the flummoxed souls  
of filibusters, needled-legs  
with  
glockenspiel  
teeth. Them who  
live in the parched eyes of  
bards,  
like maggots; squirming.  
Little cities in the karstic mind-holes  
of disposable Enlightenments.

This piece is an exploration of cities after dark and a celebration of their inherently cosmopolitan, dynamic, and above all, creative character. It vomited out of Dominic's head one night and appears to represent a scrambled and hedonistic mind-trip complete with the usual culprits: sex, death, narcotics, and other associated epicurean phenomena.



It took one month, three weeks and four days to get my life back from the imposter. A double, doppelganger, mirror image, identical twin – call it what you will, something replaced my husband, wore his clothes and spoke as he did. It served as the cheapest of imitations. The habits and quirks I fondly witnessed throughout our marriage, so crudely replicated by this thing that insisted it was my husband.

It invaded my life one month, three weeks and four days ago when I fainted in the kitchen. I came to lying on the kitchen floor looking up at something that looked like, but also quite unlike, my husband. I dismissed its attempts to help me up and struggled to seat myself on a chair. It left me briefly to find something in the other room and returned carrying a small first aid kit, which it placed on the counter. Its movements fascinated me and I was fixated as it ran a face towel under the sink. The rushing of the tap stopped fast and it leaned in close to hold the towel above my right eye. Something was disturbingly unfamiliar about it. The eyes gave it away. The typically calm, olive eyes that I had gazed into countless times in our 16 year marriage were now different, as though someone inside had drawn blackout curtains. The high-pitched tone sitting between my ears dulled as the thing before me started to become more unsettling. It spoke softly, as though I was a frightened child, and left the room once more. I felt a panic rising in my stomach and quickly ran into the bathroom and locked the door.

My mind raced. *How could this have happened? Government conspiracy, alien abduction, a long lost twin or a combination of the three?* It seemed ridiculous, illogical, but there was nothing else I could think of to explain the sudden transformation. My head was aching from the fall and a glance in the mirror revealed a deep gash above my eye. The wound hypnotised me and the colours evaporated as the room started to spin.

Quick, light footsteps passed the door before coming to a stop in the kitchen. It called to me. The fabricated sincerity in its voice made my flesh crawl. The door handle rattled, then again more frantically in response to my silence. I yelled back at it to leave and demanded to know where my husband was.

“Regan, what are you doing? Let me in. We have to get you to a doctor.”

It sounded so much like him. I almost believed he was outside. However, when it brought its face close to the frosted glass the illusion was broken. I reaffirmed my belief that it was not my husband and vowed not to come out until it was gone. It appeared concerned and tried to barge through the door. Horrified by what it might do if it succeeded, I grabbed a

small razor blade – for what little good it might do – out of the cupboard and braced against the door until the pounding stopped. I glanced down at my hand and the ridiculous weapon I had chosen, when I heard the sound of the phone clicking and a receiver being picked up, snapping me out of my distress. It appeared to be calling Emergency Services and relief quickly overshadowed my perplexity.

I agreed to let paramedics into the room on the condition that the police arrest the imposter. Clearly confused, they asked me to explain the photos of my husband and I all over the house. Fervently insisting it was a substitute, I demanded it be removed from our house immediately. The lids of my eyes were red raw, and to watch it feign increased my despair. The police didn't believe me. I was ruined. Nothing I could say was convincing enough. With no other option, I brandished the razor and asserted my right to defend our property from the imposter. The police quickly overpowered me and had me restrained. While the paramedics strapped me onto the stretcher it tried to calm me, but the jet black gaze contradicted every word that came from its mouth. What happened next was utterly repulsive and deplorable: it came closer and attempted to kiss my forehead. I found myself engrossed yet nauseated and reacted with a violent combination of retching and screaming.

I didn't see it again for a week after the ambulance doors closed, but it still trespassed my thoughts. Knowing that it was living in our home and sleeping in our bed made me physically sick. That empty shell trying to duplicate my husband was now walking around in his clothes and using his toothbrush. The thought of it would make me sick until my fluids were drained and I was left dry heaving. Anxiety plagued me constantly and my pleas to keep it away from the hospital were, for now, honoured. My nightmares were haunted by it, each one nauseatingly similar. Every time I drifted off, I saw what appeared to be my husband at a distance, but then, after approaching it, I realised there was something wrong with its eyes. It was as though he was missing his essence. After the first two nights they moved me into an empty room where the nightmares got progressively worse.

A few days later a nurse came into my room and told me that my husband was on the phone. Despite my suspicions, I answered the call.

“Regan... just what the fuck is going on?”

Emotion overwhelmed me when his familiar voice came through the receiver, and I began to sob hysterically. There was no doubt about whom I was talking to; I could never forget the sound of his voice. The events of the last week came gushing out, followed by a long silence.

“They told me you don't want me near the hospital.”

I took a deep breath before pleading with him to come and get me right away, then handed the nurse back the phone, wet with tears. All my worries seemed to melt away knowing that he was back.

\* \* \*

I can offer no definite explanation for what happened next. How the imposter found its

way into the hospital as quickly as it did, I may never know. I suspect somehow that it listened in on my phone conversation. This stirred more horror in me than the notion that my husband was just missing. Now there was the possibility that he was being held somewhere, forced to make misleading calls.

As it walked into the room, my stomach dropped. It was brandishing a bunch of my favourite flowers, freesias, which only sickened me more. I threw myself off the bed and crawled under the one opposite. It tried to reach for me under the bed only to receive one of my spasmodic kicks to the face. Crimson spurted from its lip and it slumped against my abandoned bed. I would have felt no surprise to see the blood come out in any other colour. Shortly before it regained consciousness, the orderlies descended upon the room and had me restrained again. I cursed them aloud for not recognising the imposter entering the hospital and indicated to their incompetence at protecting their patients.

Colours entered through the highway in my arm, quickly advancing to the smallest of side streets until each road tingled with life. He appeared above me, framed by the advancing darkness, blood running down into his salt and pepper stubble. I smiled as the colours enveloped him. Imprisoned in a world of grey, and now granted the fortune to submerge my eyes in the blooming fleet waters. As though I had forgotten every shade that the world had to offer, except for two: crimson and jet black. I can see him.

\* \* \*

I cannot say for sure which was worse, the first hospital or the next. Doctor Sienna was neither convincing nor reassuring. Although she promised to keep the imposter away, she failed to respond adequately to my questions (I had many). After wishing me a good evening, she left the room with a heavily noted pad. My admission to the 'clinic' was an insult and a clear insinuation of the credibility of my claims. I shared my room with another woman, who was perched on the edge of her bed, humming to herself softly. I rolled over in the dark and forced my eyes closed with my fingertips, spawning a plethora of colours and light on the inside of my eyelids.

The colours stayed, but the dreams never came. I dug my fingers in harder, bullying them into sleep until the pleasant display became a black and white, static mess of indiscernible, symmetrical shapes. My eyes throbbed from the pressure. The roommate's humming continued as the backing track to my sleepless night. Her tune was sporadic and haunting, as if she was musically incapable of operating outside of the minor key. As soon as a series of notes appeared recognisable, she would diverge and begin anew. I found myself infuriated by the unspoken suggestion that I was as crazy as her. My veins itched for the colour and sleep that satisfying the craving would bring. I buried my face in the sterilized pillow, devoid of any suggestion that someone insane had slept there before me, and wept.

Doctor Sienna leaned over her desk slightly to look me in the eyes and informed me that I was suffering from ‘delusional hypo-identification’, and when I suggested she was the most inept doctor I had ever met, she failed to answer me seriously. Instead she elaborated. Rather than listening, I clacked my fingernails on the table and asked her again to explain what happened to my last two roommates. Not fazed by my continuous interruptions, she carried on talking until one sentence stopped me dead. I asked her to repeat herself. She did. My husband was here in the hospital, in the next room in fact.

The metal door lay just ahead where I was told he was waiting for me, maybe sitting in a chair or standing, taking in his surroundings. Doctor Sienna walked ahead and pushed the door open. The official nature put me on edge and my heartbeat quickened as I stepped forward over the threshold. It sat at the table and its eyes shot towards mine as I jumped, hearing the door slam shut. I could only bear to take in its features for a moment before turning away. A chair scraped as Doctor Sienna took a seat and quietly started speaking. I blocked my eyes between my thumb and forefinger, trying to focus on anything other than the thought of being in the same room with it again. Then I heard it, or him, talking softly to the doctor.

“Well, this feels pointless. What was your plan exactly?”

It was him. I opened my eyes, afraid to trust my senses, and felt the blood rush back into them. That voice. I spun around as he continued talking with the doctor, facing away from me. I interjected, tears filling my eyes, and asked him where he had been. In an instant, I found myself faced with it again. A whimper escaped my throat and I backed against the wall. My composure was breaking but before my sanity departed I buried my face in my hands and listened. He was talking again, but now directly to me.

“Regan! You recognised me, didn’t you?”

I spread my fingers slowly, trying to keep the memory of my husband in my mind, but upon seeing it was defeated by rage. I lunged forward and shoved it towards the table, hoping to cause more damage, but it kept its balance. Doctor Sienna was on her feet, watching me carefully. For the first time I held its gaze long enough to tell it to stay the fuck away from me. I broke down and Doctor Sienna intervened, calling the experiment off.

\* \* \*

Sleep came quicker as the drugs were more overpowering than usual – I suspect they gave me a larger dose. It was not the comfort ride that I had been used to on previous nights in the hospital and there was a deep anxiety rising in my thoughts. My whole body became tingly and electric as I felt the cold wash of colour drench my body.

They stayed with me, long into the night. Hot flashes of red burned through onto the canvas of my mind, increasing in intensity until they were a smouldering white and impossible to ignore. All that was left was a blank space – and *it*. I found myself standing in front of it, utterly incapable of movement, of words, of awakening. I tried to back away, but every motion was made painfully slow by a resistance in the air. It held a hand to my chest



and pushed me till I was horizontal, as if floating on water. I was powerless. The force of its hand remained pinned on my chest, suppressing any movement as it stared into my eyes.

The invisible vice that gripped my head prevented me from looking away. I tried to scream but the sound was imprisoned in my throat, paralysed under its dark, expressionless gaze. Through the thick, clear tar my hands found their way to my face: a ditch attempt to obstruct my vision. But even in my dark sanctum, I could not escape its presence. I pushed my fingernails in harder, trying to banish its image from my mind. When the soft barriers breached, warm vitreous fluid spilled down to my ears before thickening. It trickled down between my clenched teeth then poured out in quantities greater than I suspected my whole body could have contained, drenching my hands and face. I felt the air disappear underneath me. I hit the floor.

I sat bolt upright from my dream, breathing heavily. The clinic was alive with the sound of movement, everywhere I could hear running and yelling, but somewhere in some corner of my room was a quiet sobbing. I turned my head, trying to focus on the sound. All I could see was the remnants of coloured shapes that had spilled over, contorting from my dream. I ran my thumbs over my fingertips and realised they had stuck together – wiping them on the sheets made little difference. The rushing sounds became louder before the door burst open and someone, or maybe more, held me down by my wrists. The colours swirled violently and settled beneath my head as a warm resin, refusing to fade. The voices were agitated now,

yelling for assistance, and I felt a familiar puncture in my left arm. Colours disintegrated this time and abandoned me to a grey, lifeless sanctuary.

Everything sat quietly in the room. A dull drone was above me, and distant voices echoed outside in the hall. I became aware of my body. The bandages pulled like a headband from my forehead to the top of my cheeks, hot and itchy. Muscle spasms of my phantom eyelids haunted me, leaving a sting in each vacant socket almost constantly. A light sheet covered me tightly, pushing my toes toward the end of the bed. It was the only protection I had from the dense, humid air. I ran my thumb over my now filed-down fingernails, before clenching them into my palm. My muscles expanded against the leather straps holding me to the bed.

I gasped as soft skin stroked the top of my hand and I realised he was sitting right beside my bed. I relaxed and drew in his warmth. Warmth I had not felt in a miserably long time.

“Do you know what happened?”

My lip began to quiver as I managed a quick nod. His hand wrapped around mine and squeezed tightly. All that I could have or would have asked of him was stuck in my throat, refusing to release until I broke down. I returned the squeeze, frustrated by the restraints preventing me from fully embracing him. The grip of my fingers began to falter as I drifted, still clinging to his hand. I managed a final squeeze and tried to focus on his soft voice before sinking into my pillow where the colours enveloped me.

Rory is a nomad at heart. He has travelled a great deal of the world and most recently found himself in Sydney studying English and History. In his free time he enjoys working on short films and pursuing his love of writing in all forms.

# Langa

RACHAEL STANIC



The air in Langa tastes bitter at the back of my throat – metallic, like blood,  
For a moment it makes me wonder how the hell I got here.

On the walls of rusting shipping containers,  
Vandals have sprayed their allegiance to the ANC  
And tattered posters advertise abortions on special.

The fences of school playgrounds are barbed wire,  
And in the hostels, 60 people share a single flat,  
Everything they can't find room for piling up on street corners like children.

The doors to the shacks are always open, like old men's mouths  
When they sit in circles drinking home-brewed beer from buckets,  
Repeating the same complaints they had yesterday, and last year.

By the road, a mosaic reminds passers-by  
Of two Langa schoolchildren murdered by Afrikaner police during apartheid.  
Their portrait shows them with their heads up, hands in the air and smiling,  
Fearlessly treading those potholed streets like they are soon to own the world.







# You've Got No Right

---

S. J. MCALPINE

We didn't speak much after that. She'd send me emails and text messages, but I'd only respond tactfully, out of necessity. I ended up finishing high school and dropping out of uni without so much as a phone call. During that whole period, I only ever had vague notions of where she was in the world. I'd get an email, just a couple of lines, saying she was in Goa doing the *Eat, Pray, Love* pilgrimage and that I absolutely *had* to read that book and do a trip just like it someday.

I hated the tone of her updates, the stupid emoticons and the complete and utter lack of remorse – they were like postcards from a Contiki tour. I was livid at the thought of the Neverland existence she'd created for herself, and repeatedly ignored her friend requests on Facebook. I'll admit that it made me feel righteous at first; I thought I was sticking up for Dad. He needed it, especially in those first couple of years when she had him convinced it was just a phase she was going through and that she'd be back when it was out of her system. When I decided to leave I made sure Dad was alright first, that he was through the worst of it. The house already felt cold and lonely when it was the three of us. Lonely men break easier than women.

\* \* \*

I'd been back in Sydney almost a year and was absurdly proud of this relationship I was in that had lasted nearly that long. We had a granny flat in Glebe. I was behind the bar a few nights a week, Katie worked in graphic design and painted. On nights off we'd sit on the floor in the lounge room and drink. It was on one of these nights that my mobile phone rang. It was a blocked number and Katie answered while I was in the kitchen chopping carrots.

She came out and stood in the doorway with her hand covering the receiver. "Some woman," she smiled, leaning against the jam.

"Pray tell, madam?" My first thought was that I'd booked a gig. I'd been to a few auditions, mostly to keep from getting lazy. Since arriving home I'd really turned my attentions to writing and pushed out all thoughts of acting. After everything that had happened in Melbourne, it seemed the best course of action.

I took the call in the other room. Katie winked, mouthed *good luck* and took over the carrots.

"Hello?"

“Frances? Baby, it’s me. God it’s weird hearing your voice. How are you?”

It didn’t register. Her voice didn’t register at all at first.

“Oh my God,” I stumbled, unsure, peeking back in the kitchen to see if Katie was playing a joke. “Uh, good... good... how are you?”

“Fantastic, I’m really well. I’m back, Frances.”

“...Oh.”

“Can you believe it?”

“You’re back?”

“I’m staying at a hotel in the city. It’s strange seeing everything again. Nothing’s changed here, y’know?”

I stood at the sliding glass doors of the lounge room trying to see out into the yard. The windows were darkened like mirrors. All I could see was my reflection.

“So, you’re back,” I said again, feebly.

“Tell me what you’ve been doing.”

“Uh... uni,” I lied.

“Oh? What are you studying?”

“Literature. Mostly.”

“Oh, I’ve been reading... what’s his name... he’s very good!”

“Uh huh.”

“Quote me something! Quote me Shakespeare,” she said.

“Towards die many times before their deaths,” I blurted.

Pause.

“Well, I like that! What’s it from?”

I didn’t know. “Uh, *Macbeth*,” I guessed.

“I’d really love to see you,” she said tentatively

I didn’t answer, and she went on without breath, “I’ve got other big news, babe. It’s not the sort of thing I want to mention over the phone. We should meet up, don’t you think?”

“Well...”

“We could have lunch.”

“I’ll definitely call you back,” I said.

Pause.

“Right,” she said. “Well... let me give you my number then.”

I wrote it down on the back of an old poem.

“Okay,” I concluded.

“Okay. Bye, Frances.”

“Bye, Mum.”

I slunk into the bedroom and paced around as if about to break something, ending up in tears instead. Katie came in from the kitchen and lay down beside me. For a long while we didn’t speak, just held each other until the tears stopped.

An hour later we were having dinner.

“I’m seeing Dad tomorrow,” I explained. “I don’t know how... shit, I obviously can’t tell him.”

“This is her mess, let her break it to him. It’s not your job,” said Katie.

“What a fucking monster,” I exclaimed, turning away. “What’s she thinking? It’s been four years. She’s insane if she thinks I’m having lunch with her.”

Katie poured more wine, took a sip from her glass. “What do you think her big news is?” she asked.

“She wants us to know how amazing her life is, how she made the right decision.”

“Maybe she’s met someone.”

My heart sank. Would she come back to Sydney just for that? Like a cat with a bird in its mouth?

“Y’know, I’m surprised you don’t want to see her.”

“Why?” I asked, startled.

“You could put her in her place” Katie reasoned.

“No. I wouldn’t know what to say...”

“I mean, you want to tell her she was selfish, right?” she interrupted.

“I dunno.”

“It might be cathartic.”

“No. You’re putting words in my mouth.”

She nodded and pushed her plate aside. “You could always tell her about me.”

After dinner we washed up, silently, and went to bed. I felt restless and irritated. I couldn’t sleep and was up again a couple of hours later. It was after midnight. I sat in the lounge room with the lights off and the TV on mute, reading over some work by the glow of an infomercial. *You should only stop writing when things are going well.* Valerie, a playwright I’d known in Melbourne, told me that it helps to know what the next scene is. The problem was that writing never came easy for me and it was always a battle coming back to it in the morning. I had a dozen stories, most only rough drafts I couldn’t bring myself to read again. I had a bad habit of diving in without any planning. I’d fall in love with an idea, or even a phrase, and just go for it, only to find I was out of steam halfway through. It always felt like a combination of too much and too little.

I also had a stack of poems, mostly about Katie, living in Sydney, living in Melbourne, and a couple about ■■■■, who I never named directly but left enough snarky allusions so that it was obvious. I didn’t have to hide it. Katie knew about ■■■■ anyway. She knew I was still raw from the experience but said there was no point hiding from it. Her theory was to use everything and anything. She never seemed pleased unless I was writing about pain. She said all true art sprang from discomfort, and she was right, I think, but she could never get me to write about Mum. The whole ■■■■ situation had been hell, but at least it was behind me. I had something else now, something new. ■■■■ could rot in Melbourne for all I cared. If I wrote about him, it was like looking under my shoe to see what I’d stepped in. Mum was different. She loomed. I couldn’t pretend it was over, or that she didn’t exist. I didn’t have the imagination for it.

I tried going over some work but I wasn’t focused. Sentences stank, every line, every word. I was a fraud. I wasn’t a writer. If Mum saw me now, she’d tell me to grow up. I’d tell her the same, but would it mean anything coming from me? One fraud to another?

“Something must have happened,” Dad stated.

“Why do you say that?” I was going around with a wet cloth, wiping down the coffee table and the shelves and the top of the TV. I didn’t look up. He was in his recliner with the newspaper I brought him.

“Well, you haven’t stopped since you got here.”

“I haven’t said a word.”

“How’s your little mate?”

He meant Katie. Calling her my *little mate* was like saying she was imaginary and a buffer against what we did behind closed doors. The first time I brought her around, right after we moved to Glebe, he had the gaud to ask me about ■■■ right in front of her. “How’s ■■■ doing back in Melbourne?”

I responded to that one by sitting on Katie’s lap.

“Katie’s fine,” I replied.

He looked down and flipped to the sports page. Something came over me then. I had this urge to tell him that Mum had called. That she was back, probably a suburb away and he didn’t know about it. I wanted to see his face, ask him why they’d lived together nearly 18 years and never got married, if maybe he knew he’d set himself up to fail. I felt like screaming. *Did you leave the gate open for 18 years, Dad? Did you wake up one morning and find the dog had run away?*

“How’s work?” he asked, still looking at the paper.

I opened a window and went into the kitchen. When I was still at university, I used to come home during breaks and clean so I wouldn’t have to at night. In those days, Dad was sleeping a lot and I was rarely home. I don’t know how the mess even got there. Everything had a weird sense of disarray and no matter how hard I scrubbed, things couldn’t be put right. Regardless of how many windows I opened or curtains I pulled back, every room seemed forlorn and gloomy. When I returned from Melbourne and visited for the first time, the house had really taken a hit. From outside, it had looked like an *A Current Affair* story waiting to happen, everything overgrown and falling down. Inside was worse; there was mice. I didn’t know how anyone could live like that – and Dad didn’t have an answer for me. All he said was that my room was still the way I’d left it, and it was, with the minor addition of Mum’s old clothes packed away in boxes and stacked against the walls. It had taken months of weekend visits to get it back to something half recognisable. It still wasn’t the same, something was missing. Occasionally he’d call me by her name. I’d go on like I hadn’t noticed. I used it as inspiration for a story just before I left. It was about a cleaner hired by a real estate company to clean out properties that old people had died in. It was actually published in one of the lit journals at uni and was part of the reason I thought Melbourne was a better option than the Bachelor of Attendance in Sydney that I was never going to complete.

I had some soup on the stove for Dad’s lunch. He must have smelt it from the other room because he came in and stood at the table.

“How much do you reckon this place is worth?” I asked.

“Can’t you wait till I die?”

“Just curious,” I shrugged, still stirring, keeping it just under a boil.

“I dunno. I wouldn’t sell it.”

“What if... what if you didn’t want to be in the area anymore?”

“Why?”

“What if something changes?”

“Like what?”

“A neighbour.”

“Who?”

“Someone you don’t want to see.”

“What? Like who?”

“Jesus, Dad, what if the house burns down tomorrow?”

“Well, shit Fran. I dunno. Where would I go?”

I took the pan off the element and opened a cabinet to get a bowl. “Anywhere,” I answered. “Don’t you find it too big for one person?”

I turned just in time to see him leave the room. The saucepan was gone from the stove. I put the bowl on the counter and followed. I watched him with his back to me, shoulders hunched, flannelette shirt stretched tight across his back from all the weight he’d put on. He coughed a wet sounding cough and fell back in his chair. He had the saucepan by the handle. He brought it up to his lips and sipped from it, then blew across the skin that had formed on the surface and sipped again. Dribble ran down the whiskers onto his chin and dipped onto his lap. I watched from the doorway, waiting for him to notice.

\* \* \*

Outside was bright and intensely clear. The sun was shining down, there wasn’t a cloud up there, but it was cold. The wind blew at me from every direction. I had to walk with my head down. I waited in the park across the street from the bus shelter and sat on the swing with my feet anchored in the sand, rocking back and forth, phone in hand. I brought her number up. Just to look at. That image of Dad in his chair, hunched over with soup down his chin, was still with me. While I thought about it, I started picturing Mum on the streets of New Delhi, pushing through crowds as thick and hot as vindaloo, bright eyed, bushy tailed, life-affirming book under her arm. It all played like a montage. Back on Earth, Dad’s emerging from his room at sunset like some lovesick vamp, unshaven, fumbling the can opener on his cream of mushroom soup. In Melbourne, [REDACTED] has a girl in our bed. He’s telling her he’s giving me a place to stay because the house I’m renting is haunted, but I’ve read too much into our arrangement. Three weeks later and that play has its opening night and I’m flying back to Sydney, having an anxiety attack in the bathroom, thinking maybe he’s right. Someone’s always right. This time it might as well be him. Now Mum is somewhere in Italy. A café or a fountain with the moon laid out over rooftops, its pale light splashed across ruined facades. I imagine she takes it all in, pretending it’s profound and meaningful. Katie’s reading me Gertrude Stein aloud in the bathtub. I’m shaping mounds of bubbles with my

hands, watching her brown eyes dart back and forth across the pages. Later that night, after a bottle of wine, we go to bed, and the two of us is all I'm picturing.

I accidentally pressed dial. It was ringing. My mind went blank. I forgot everything except my promise to call her back about lunch. I put the phone up to my ear. It rang three more times and I hung up. Across the street my bus was just pulling up. I jumped down off the swing and started to run. If she was calling me back, I couldn't hear it for the sound of my own feet hitting the pavement.







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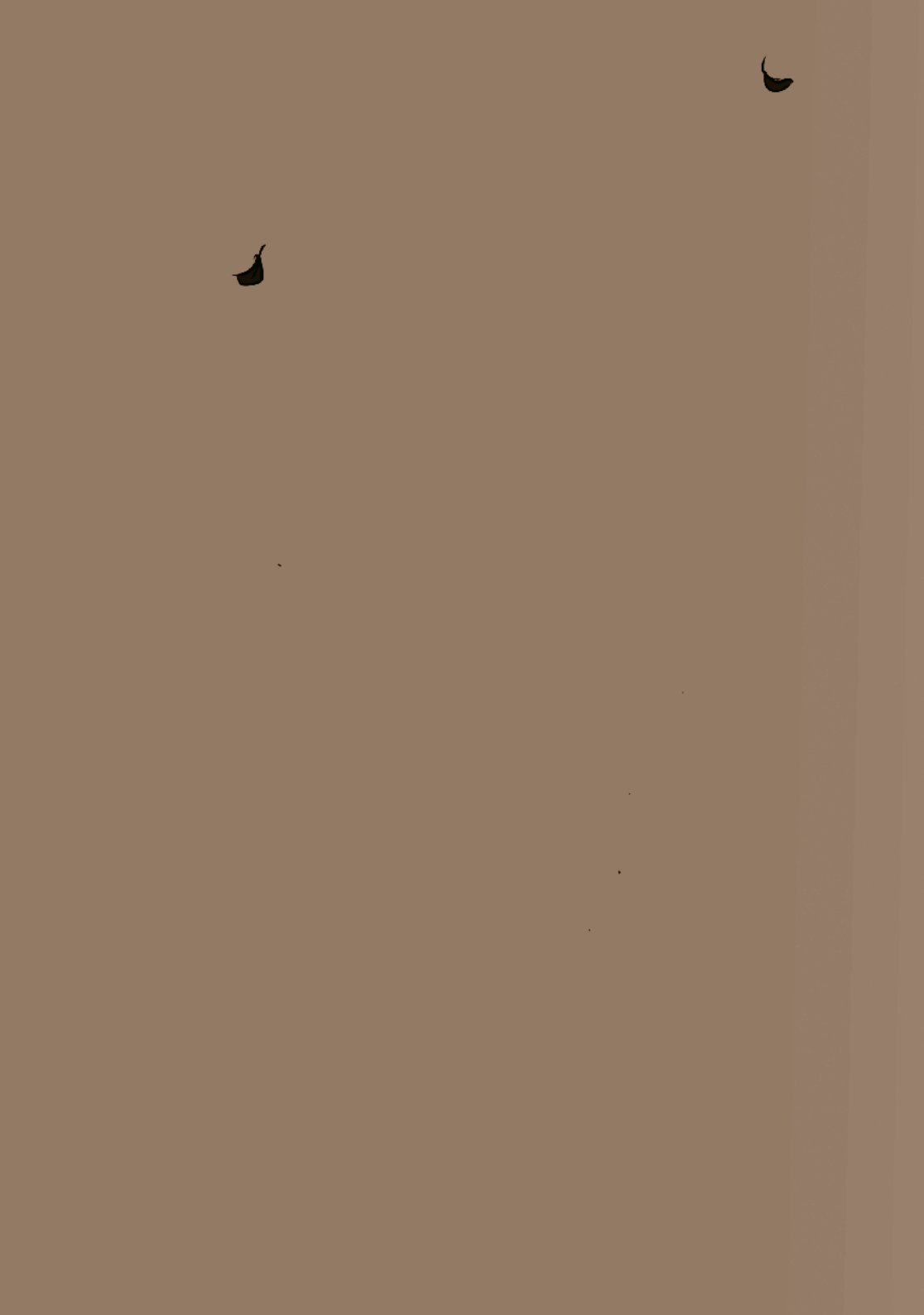
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“The arts are not a way of making a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable. Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven's sake. Sing in the shower. Dance to the radio. Tell stories. Write a poem to a friend, even a lousy poem. Do it as well as you possibly can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something.”

KURT VONNEGUT, A MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY



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