Kaleidoscope

An Anthology of Creative Writing
From the University of the Sunshine Coast
2013
You know about second-book syndrome. You’ve heard writers talk about it at festivals and on the air. Performance anxiety. Writing in a ‘lost state of bliss’, says British editor Simon Prosser. Peter Carey, Harper Lee, Zadie Smith... Cervantes. You might believe it’s a myth, but they’ve all wrestled the phenomenon in one way or another, with varying results.

I recognise the apparent absurdity of equating a student anthology with the second-book syndrome of such authors, yet I cannot deny the sense of threat and challenge that loomed at the beginning of the semester. Three months ago I sat with seventeen creative writing students and shivered in the shadow of last year’s in.tense; the minimalist sophistication and dark heart of USC’s 2012 anthology established a dangerous precedent. But the upside of precedence is that it gifts you a guide and a target, and it soon became clear that these seventeen were brazen enough to envisage a publication which etches its own trajectory.

An eclectic mix of prose, poetry, personal essays and experimental forms yet to be categorised, Kaleidoscope is a Frankenstein monster of phantasmagorical proportions. A polychromatic adventure. A literary fractal. Like any good story, Kaleidoscope embodies collision and its transformative effects. And it shines... To the production managers, manuscripts editors, proofers, designers, desktop publishers, in-house and solicited writers, I commend you for such a unique and spirited publication.

Second-book syndrome? Around here it’s the stuff of legend.
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Dear Daddy

Earth is at war, defending the eight moons of Jupiter.
I always told you I'd make you proud, didn't I?
Sam’s letters to Daddy expose naïve excitement, and over months, the dawning reality of being a 'Hero of Justice'.

Night in Barcelona

‘Signora, I show you Las Ramblas, I take you club and we dance and...’
The sensory delights of Barcelona tantalise, evoking the richness of the Spanish city.
Weary from her solo pilgrimage, but seduced by the pulse of the night, the traveller loses herself in the seedy back streets...

Blue on Blue

The yachts in the marina are trapped in the sludge.
Their masts point at awkward angles, like threadbare trees in a forest devastated by a cyclone.
Earth’s adjustment to humankind’s exploitation brings a new reality.

Coin of Fate

Has an adolescent lesson been learnt, or is he really no better than those he smugly holds in contempt?
He spent his teenage years convincing himself, with the aid of a coin, that everything is a choice and that there is no such thing as fate.

Jack (You don’t know Jack)

‘You deserved what you got, bitch. Every single time you deserved it.’
Sarah, damaged and disoriented, struggles to resist Jack but needs his insight to resolve her traumatic past.

No one will ever know how a change of heart could twist such well-laid plans.

Self-preservation is everything.
We do what is necessary. Tom is missing, presumed dead, but if I hadn’t come to Lisa’s rescue, she would have died out there. I’m being interviewed by the Sheriff, who I swear could hire himself out as a jumping castle when he’s done with law enforcement.

Wannabe gangster Jimmy the Tongue demands power and respect.
For Ruby, the macho bullshit is wearing thin. And Milo? Well, just don’t fuck with him.
You sure you want to push this, Jimmy?

What good are morals to a dead man?
Swallow, wipe the dribble off your chin and survive.

I am a dog and I have known love...
We were a good team, but there were things I couldn’t help him with.
Our feeble protests go unheard as we’re dragged unwillingly towards uncertain futures.

Set in a dystopian reality controlled by social surveillance and media propaganda,
you are a mere cog in the factory of the Ultimate World Union.
Duty bound to uphold the laws of the State, your information to higher powers threatens public order and control.

‘You deserved what you got, bitch. Every single time you deserved it.’
Sarah, damaged and disoriented, struggles to resist Jack but needs his insight to resolve her traumatic past.

Every firestick has a telling… Their characters are as forked and diverse as every flame they bring.
If you need to know, go to her doorstone.

An exploration of the human condition that habitually exists in the past or future tense, rarely acknowledging or appreciating the present.
May I? She asks reaching across, offering to co–author my story.
I hand her my note pad and pencil, thinking, I can always erase it.
Peter: Nearing the end of our Creative Writing studies at the University of the Sunshine Coast brings cause for reflection on the passions we have nurtured.

Kerrie: Caffeine.

Peter: Chocolate.

Kerrie: Heated discussions about literature. Encountering writing that I otherwise may never have discovered (or understood), which are now favourites.

Peter: It has been an extraordinary journey: entering a time-honoured dialogue where past and present writers become mentors, guiding our search for new possibilities.

Kerrie: I’ll miss the full, rowdy rooms of nervous, yet eager writers finding their voice as they read their work to the class for the first time. No longer will I wish to be one of those spoilt kangaroos lazing in the sun as I rush off to the library to finish an assignment.

Peter: In the closing stages of our studies, we are given an opportunity to publish an anthology of student short stories and micro-fiction. Kaleidoscope becomes the second such anthology to be published, following the success of 2012’s in.tense.

Kerrie: As Production Managers, we have shared in the creation of this anthology with 15 other Creative Writing students, known as ‘the Collective’. Together we have worked with 13 authors to bring you this heterogeneous mix of narratives. We commend our colleagues on their dedication and thank them for sharing this process with us.

Peter: The Collective has worked throughout the semester under the guidance and expertise of Dr Ross Watkins – publisher, author, illustrator, Creative Writing lecturer and creator of this capstone course. Dr Watkins’ insight and support has made our exploration of the editorial process invaluable to each of us as writers.

Kerrie: So, welcome to our publication of Kaleidoscope, a collection of stories showcasing a diversity of writing that reflects our changing world.

Peter: Manuscripts have been submitted from all stages in the Creative Writing program. Writers within the Collective have then responded to these selected narratives and to the kaleidoscope theme that draws the spectrum together within these pages.

Kerrie: We invite you to join us on our journey. You will experience an unexpected, entertaining, thought-provoking and eclectic collection of works that spin and collide to take you somewhere you have never been.

Peter: The first half of Kaleidoscope explores reading the future, grasping for memory, the nature of heroism, discovery in a foreign land, humanity’s environmental reckoning and the power of choice.

Kerrie: The second half provokes as many questions as answers. You’ll find revenge, the deadly price of self-preservation, gangster games, the morals of survival, animal rights and a new world viewed through the all-seeing eyes of the Bureau of Culture.

Peter: Wherever you now sit – be it in your favourite chair at home, in a bus on your way to work, or orbiting the earth – make yourself comfortable and prepare to enter our kaleidoscopic world of narrative possibilities. We invite you to join in a conversation with our authors, and proudly present to you the writings of our colleagues.
Every firestick has a telling.

Often seekers come to her from afar, gathering at her doorstep, beg-
ging her to read their fires. She steps out and faces them, leaning so close as
to almost touch, her ember-flecked eyes searching long and deep into their
own. Then she tells them to come back in three days.

Or one week.

Or never.

After closing up her simple earthen hut, she sets out, carrying only a
conical, open-ended wicker basket, papoose-like at her back, and her fires-
tick staff which is burnished with the rub of age and use.

Many firesticks share her skin; smooth, grey and brittle, yet still de-
ceptive holds of the most cracking heat. Some firesticks are lichen-blotched
and twisted like her hair; empty of life and shadowy in their vapour flames.
Other firesticks are stringy, fibrous, and as char-black as the bark of her
fingers; reluctant but worthwhile firehearts. Then there are ochre-skinned
stalwarts with the same thickened suppleness of her bones, bringing dance
and endless colour to the coal. They are all part of her.

She knows which ones will tell a fire. She knows which stories will
spark and burn in her and which will brood and smoulder aloof. Their
characters are as forked and diverse as every flame they bring.

Bending and sorting as she goes, she picks through the fallen sticks,
gathering her read. She has no need for Latin to own or name the Eucalyp-
tus. She doesn’t ponder the canopies they abandon, but among the forest
debris she finds the names of those that will tell: victims, freefallers, mar-
tys, and widowmakers.
A simple flagstone circle beds into the rear of her hut. Here she burns. The kindle sets the bed, raises the glimmercoal, and lures the flame. Here she reads.

As she leans in, gathering the flame to her, the slick furnace is mirrored in the flecks of her eyes. She’s a fire sprite. Shuffling through the hot coal, her firestaff alongside, she traces her flame-tipped fingers along the eager, telling sticks.

She hears the victims screaming in the howl of a storm, branch ripping from limb; crashing green anguished at nature’s wrath.

She watches the freefallers surrendering their final heights, relishing their leap from the fine trapeze of time.

She knows the martyrs as the tellers of dry times: cracking and sapless, spending themselves to spear the dust, relics in the ancient cycle of thirst.

She thinks the widowmakers abandon all reason. Great boughs twist their firestick fingers into breakfall; violent huks telling their widow tales.

Bending, collecting, sorting as she goes, she wades among the glowing firesticks, the live coals, the flame licks, reading down to every smouldering ember. The flecks of her eyes are burning red glass, molten spotfires in the blackness of her eyes.

Her firestaff flickers.

When the seekers return, the faintest tendrils of their stories follow her to the doorstone. She brings her ember-flecked eyes so very close to theirs, searching long and deep.

And she tells them their fire.
How I Lost 20 Years of My Life, a Marriage and Found Happiness. Maybe

Mark Attwood

I have always been somewhat aloof. A being comfortable on the edges of whatever socially constructed group I found myself in, but never to become too integrated, too involved.

From a young age I was an observer, a listener. And a reader – a voracious reader.

Perhaps that’s why I’m a writer.

My earliest writing memory is putting my own Doctor Who books together. I’d write the story, do some illustrations and staple it all together. I even remember drawing a Target logo on the cover because all the Doctor Who books I was reading at the time were the thin Target novels.

Sadly, none of these self-publishing efforts exist today.

In fact, very few of my early writings do. Except for two stories from when I was in the latter stages of primary school and early high school. Both copies mailed to my grandmother and years later after her death, found their way back to me.

In the closet under the stairs at my mother’s house are two boxes. The kind of boxes you get reams of paper in for your multifunction printer. Scrawled on the lid of each are the words: Mark’s Writing Stuff. This means they contain the short stories and abandoned novels I wrote during my teenage years and early twenties; back in the days before I pushed such fanciful pursuits aside to focus on reality.

Most of these writings are hand-written on foolscap paper or one-finger-typed on an old electric typewriter someone had given me circa 1992. I have vague memories of some of those stories, but I can’t tell you how badly, or well-written they are because I have consciously avoided them for a number of reasons. Perhaps one day I’ll delve into those boxes and try to unearth any gems, but for now I leave them where they are. You learned two things from this:

1. I loved writing.
2. I pushed that love aside (for what seemed like good reasons but in hind-sight clearly weren’t).

I grew up in a low socioeconomic area. The only university educated people I came into contact with were school teachers and the town doctor. The only artistic people I came into contact with was that kid that’d scratch ‘fuck’ into a desktop with a paperclip, and his mate who liked drawing dicks and tits and wrote all those ‘For a good time call…’ and ‘… takes it up the arse’ messages on toilet walls. Most of the mothers were the stay at home type. Those that had jobs were labouring types: cleaners, supermarket shelf stackers. The fathers were tradesmen or labourers – labourers on building sites, labourers on trawlers, on the council, in the local abattoir.

My younger brother was the first in my family to go to university. Nearly twenty years later, I’m the second.

What’s the point of this? Just to give you an idea why a kid who likes comics and drawing, reading novels and loves writing, would push it aside. Not because anybody told me to, or even forced me to, but because I had low self-esteem and self-confidence, and no conception of how to live as an artist or writer. Or that it was even possible. Teachers and guidance counsellors advised me to get a ‘real job’ because artists and writers didn’t earn enough to survive on. They told me I could always write as a hobby. Coming from where I came from, where you had to have a job or you were a bludger, what else could my teenage-self do? I’m not offering excuses here, or apportioning blame, just showing you what I did and why.

Writing became a hobby for a few years, then I was working long hours, driving great distances to work, and when I started my own business the time constraints were even greater. Writing got pushed aside in the pursuit of a ‘real life’. But the love and desire remained, gnawing at me.

Enter the Black Dog. Actually, he’d been nipping at my heels from my teenage years and I’d just passed it off as the usual teen angst. Everybody felt like I did, didn’t they? Why should I think I
Creativity is not just a talent, but a part of a person’s being. If you deny and suppress it, as I did, you pay a price for that – I lost a part of myself. Without it, I could never be complete, could never be happy with anything I did or achieved.

The only way to fill the void was to accept that creative part of my soul.

Four years later, I’m still trying to reconnect with that denied self. We’re talking to each other and on occasion we merge, like long-lost lovers, and magic happens.

But this reconnection, this new love affair, came with a price also. I’ve lost friends who either couldn’t accept, or couldn’t understand what I was going through. Maybe they didn’t want to. I’m in the process of losing a wife who cannot reconcile the man I was with the one I have become.

The last four years have been the most painful, challenging, and uplifting years of my life. They say life begins at forty and in a few months I’ll be there. I wouldn’t say I’m happy, but I am content with myself for the first time, with who I am becoming.

I think I’m ready.

was special? Or was I weak? Alcohol and drugs probably kept him confused during my twenties, but by my thirties he was getting stronger, growing.

As a small business operator I was always timely, well-organised and efficient, but this started to slide in my early thirties. Maybe this slow rate of decay would have continued for another five or ten years, maybe I could’ve kept the growing despair and sense of worthlessness hidden and in time come to terms with it. Maybe I would’ve started drinking, maybe I would’ve parked in bushland one afternoon – after I’d finished the day’s work, of course – taken one of the tools out of the back of the work ute and ended it all.

I was 35 when cancer took my father and looking back I believe his passing saved my life. Not something I rejoice about, but I’m sure he’d be glad his premature death served a purpose. (I almost wrote ‘higher purpose’, but that would be pretentious, right?)

So began the great retreat. I retreated from my wife, from my family and friends, into myself. And I didn’t like where I was.

One day I drove an hour to a job site and sat for another hour trapped in the car - because every time I reached for the door handle I’d burst into tears. What a blubbing, drooling mess. I didn’t feel upset or sad. I could sit quite calmly in the car, making sure no other soul was within viewing distance. I pretended I was on my phone, I pretended I was doing paper work; I pretended everything was fine and maybe I believed it, until I reached for the door handle.

I drove home confused and afraid.

I told no one.

Two days later, I was up early, had my coffee, packed the car for the day’s work, kissed my wife and kids goodbye, grabbed my Esky and couldn’t walk out the front door. It was like being in the car again. Every step toward that door pulled my strong, rigid façade apart.

I wasn’t a tradesman anymore. I didn’t even think of myself as a man.
In between the double-glazing of the aeroplane window, dust sits on the sill. There’s something in that space insulated by the two panes that seems untouchable, yet dust settles there.

The stranger beside me is thumbing her wedding band with her left hand and holding a pen in the other. She’s completing a crossword puzzle in order to minimise the awkwardness of sitting so close to another man. I get that.

The sell-outs, power dressers, sunglasses, mothers, fathers, and their carbon copies are all shuffling along the umbilical corridor that connects the plane to the terminal.

Switching airport mode: ON. Checking passport, wallet, time, and seat number… I think.

Outside, two men wearing fluorescent jackets have arrived and are loading luggage into the hold. Their unshaven jaws yack as they heave each bag up and in, like two mimes enacting a divorce.

Inside, people are either stowing their luggage overhead, or uncomfortably passing each other with their eyes averted, muttering “sorry, sorry, excuse me, sorry”. The stranger beside me is bending forward and unzipping her boots for the long haul. Her shirt is riding up, gradually revealing the small of her back.

I miss you.
She could be you.

I remember seeing you once during a lecture. You were standing behind the lectern with a microphone clipped to your blouse. The slide behind you outlined the evolution of man:

Homo sapiens

- Pelvis with rotated ilium allows bipedal locomotion.
- Enlargement of the cerebral cortex.
- Opposable digits.
- Stereoscopic vision.
- Serial monogamy.

Your Friday lecture was held after dark, so those nights were always our date night. I’d arrive early to collect you from the university, sneaking in through the lower door to catch a glimpse of the person you were when I wasn’t around – uneclipsed. Then, stepping out from behind the lectern, you’d stuff your hands into your pockets, hiding a piece of yourself, and I’d recognise you again.

The smell of food fills the cabin. The options are beef curry, vegetarian lasagne, or a bread roll with cheese; exotic, traditional, or bland. The stranger beside me inhales deeply and opens her eyes. I nod and smile, pretending not to notice her stretching. The food trolley stops one row behind us and the couple ask if the curry is hot or mild. The stewardess assures them it is mild, and so two tastes-just-like-chicken trays are passed along. The lipstick mannequin arrives at our row and the stranger beside me orders the bread roll with a glass of wine and then adds a Southern Comfort and Coke for dessert (“option D”). I’m speechless and I’m staring.

Blink.

Look again at the menu.

Blink.
I'll have the lasagne, please.'

Traditional, boxed, and labelled. That's me.

As I open my meal, steam condenses on the window, blurring the flash of the port-
ing light in the darkness. Suddenly I've lost my appetite.

'What are you writing about?' the stranger asks, offering me a chunk of her bread roll that's topped with a slice of cheese.

I take it and tell her that I am writing about a man who lost his wife.

I remember sitting on the old blanket down where the river meets the sea with pebbles all around us. Back when we could still see the stepping-stones across the stream before the storm washed them away. We made a pact that we would never bring more than our blanket to the cove: no picnics, no fishing rods, and absolutely no deck chairs. We liked everything that way; just us. I was always in charge of building a Zen stack of large stones about ten metres in front of our blanket while you gathered fist-sized pebbles for throwing into the stream. But then we stopped playing, for a whole bounty of reasons I'm sure, but none specifically that I can recall. We just stopped. Work pulled us away from the coast and in its absence we filled our time with mowing the lawn, ironing, cooking, eating, washing up, and shopping, cooking, eating, washing up, and shopping, as though anything else would have been unproductive somehow. After dusk, the bright lights of the city turned the stars black. After dawn, the earth beneath the concrete would radiate heat into my shoe soles, as if it were reminding me that she was still alive under there, trapped.

My mind was always somewhere else... researching, writing, reading. Sometimes you'd tap on my door just to remind me to check the time, take a break, or come to bed.

From Monday to Thursday we lived separate lives. It would take us a starter, main, dessert, and an entire bottle of wine to remember that none of the week had even mattered. Everything must have seemed important to us though, as it was all we spoke about for four days: the car insurance, students, other teaching staff, the mortgage. We didn't speak about the negative pregnancy tests until you had drunk the Southern Comfort and Coke that you always ordered before the bill arrived. Before the lie-in on Saturday morning, when the realisation of infertility became soberingly bright, unshaven, and clear. The doctor had done the tests; we knew the problem was me. Forget about the names you'd picked, the books you'd been collecting for bedtime stories, the baby shoes and blankets, the hand puppets. All they ever did was make you cry. I spent my time waiting for the day you'd up and leave; find someone new.

One Friday night I sat in the front room holding an open book and watching car headlights flash by our house. You were late coming home. When the rumble of your car pulled into the driveway, I expected you to see me and explain where you'd been, but you didn't. You looked at me for a second, placed your keys on the side-board, and then closed the bedroom door. I fell asleep to the flash of cars passing by.

While we were sitting up in bed late one night, you told me a tale you had once read on the back of a restaurant menu. It was a story about a fisherman. After a long morn-ing out on the ocean he would tie his little boat to the dock and unload his catch. One day a businessman walked along this very same dock and noticed the fisherman's success. Curious, the businessman introduced himself. He asked the fisherman if he would be returning to catch more fish. The fisherman replied that he was going to spend time with his family and play with his grandson. Surprised by this, the busi-
nessman said that if he fished just a little longer, he would be able to buy a new boat. 'And then what?' asked the fisherman. The businessman exclaimed that with this new vessel he could catch more fish and buy another boat with the profits to catch even more fish and then with the proceeds from that he could purchase an entire flotilla and catch even more fish. The fisherman looked at the businessman and asked him one more time, 'and then what?' The businessman replied that after that he could retire, and then spend more time with his family and grandson.
It wasn’t always that way, though. Some nights we would turn out the light and lay awake as though we were in separate beds, not speaking. I’d move, rub my back on the mattress, yawn or turn, just to let you know that I was awake. Just in case you wanted to talk about it; fall apart even. You hated speaking when you were upset because you said tears muted your words; you preferred to wait until you were calm again. Despite this, sometimes you’d cry. Sometimes you’d say you missed the coast. Sometimes...

Every winter, the city square became an ice-skating rink for people to bruise and sprain their bodies so that they could feel alive. At the far corner, beside the viewing stands, there was a pretzel stall that needed no other advertisements but cinnamon-infused steam. I remember leaving you there with sugar dusting on your lips while I went for one last skate. I remember the way my nostrils burned, the way tears trickled out from the corners of my eyes, and then my vision became blurred. I stopped and turned to look for you. Woollen scarves, hats, gloves, and flushed faces blurred into a crowd of strangers. There was no helping hand to guide me through the maze.

The lipstick mannequin is back at our row to collect our trays. Her smile falters as I hand her mine, probably because its weight is unchanged; the contents untouched. She looks at the stranger and asks if everything is okay, as if I were invisible. I guess that’s the punishment for insulting the microwave chef.

The stranger changes the subject after ordering a coffee.

‘Is there more?’ she asks, and adds, ‘does your character find his wife?’

I tell her that I don’t know; that I haven’t got that far yet.

‘May I?’ she asks, and reaches across, offering to co-author my story.

I hand her my notepad and pencil, knowing that I can always erase it.

She writes:

The next morning we took a taxi through town. Neither of us

could face the drive there, let alone the drive home. The strangeness of the back seat had kept our minds occupied; we both stared out of the window at the world passing by, holding hands to fill the space of cold leather and pine-fresh air between us. Thirty dollars later we were in town, seated in a waiting room surrounded by peppermint green hand-sanitising stations, air conditioning, and flyers explaining breast cancer, heart disease and diabetes, until the doctor was ready to see us. After a few questions and tests, the truth fell into the room.

“John, you have Alzheimer’s disease.”

I reach across and grasp the stranger’s hand to stop her pencil from writing.

She looks up from the page and into me and I feel the pencil wriggle again. She continues writing as though she’s talking slowly, spelling it out for me, telling me what I’m supposed to remember:

I reach across and grasp the stranger’s hand to stop her pencil from writing. She looks up from the page and into me and I feel the pencil wriggle again. She continues writing as though she’s talking slowly, spelling it out for me, telling me what I’m supposed to remember:

We went home and searched online for more information but everything just seemed so helpless. There are no cures. No solutions. No answers.

Inside the plane, the seatbelt signs have been switched on, the tray tables stowed, and the seats adjusted into an upright position. The captain advises his passengers that we have begun our descent and will be arriving at the coast at 8pm local time.

Outside the plane, the clouds become the shoreline as salt fogs up the window-pane.

The next morning we took a taxi through town. Neither of us
days later I am holding my newborn daughter in my arms. I am 35; suddenly single, the mother of five children under eight.

I have never needed my mother more.

A decade later the erosion of her mind is most evident in her communication. She only ever catches the middle of most chatter; the majority of subjects go straight over her head. As for jokes? Forget it. She rarely initiates conversation, but often butts in mid-sentence. She’s forgotten the beginning and end of things. Without these bookends to uphold her stories, her personality has crumbled. Because of this, most of her friendships have ended. She can’t keep up with the back and forth; the circular nature of conversation and relationships baffle her.

But she’s desperate to talk; lonely, she wants to know everything, and ceaselessly asks questions without taking in the replies. It’s tricky to settle on a topic when she doesn’t remember our shared history, our stories, her stories, or even what we talked about last week. Every meeting, every conversation with Mum starts this way, in medias res, in the middle. I begin in medias res, but I have to contextualise these chats with constant flashbacks until the story is just a rehash of the one we had at our last meeting and the monotony is a drone and a bore and it shatters my will to communicate. Topics are reduced to soap-opera level plotlines. We are forced to talk about her in hushed tones behind her back, in secret, concerned voices. We aim to spare her the distress of topics deemed too complex for her to comprehend. Her days are occupied with TV and Christian radio broadcasts and the banality of women’s magazines. Crosswords remain unfinished, puzzles uncompleted, and newspapers unread. The common myth is people retain their long-term memory much more readily than their short-term, but this is not necessarily true. There are patches, gouges actually, of memory and experiences missing from her. She is diminished.

I love my mother and I miss her. I don’t comprehend this two-dimensional replica in her place. And it breaks my heart to say it, but she’s hard work to be around. I find my mind wandering as I labour to hold her in conversation and berate myself for it for days afterward. The task of mothering my own children is in contest with my guilt about the responsibility I feel as a daughter, and the will to be independent of both entrapments. I’m caught in the sandwich of middle age, in medias res, the flabby midpoint of my life. Not teetering on the edge of the cliff so much as pondering the liminal, the gully between two summits.

We all yearn for the hilltops, but hilltops are barren, temporary dwelling places. It’s in the fertile valleys below where we gain insight from...
They lay upon each other; the promised youth, rotting corpses piled high. Ravaged by the paper gods that violate and abuse, they crumble to earth and die. Along with the chords that bind them; bodies whole and less, frozen and darkened within the ground, no holy light exposed. They cry and suffer in time’s cold caress, once life has sucked them dry.

In Medias Res

Short story writing rule number one: always start in medias res. In Creative Writing lectures we’re given this astute advice on where to begin. This Latin term is usually translated to mean in the middle of things. The advice is to write the shitty first draft quickly, ‘with the door closed’, as Stephen King puts it. And then edit slowly ‘with the door open’, chopping the draft’s first and last paragraph as standard practice, enabling the story to begin as close to the heart, the nucleus of the story as possible, to get to the guts and hook the reader in. It’s these carefully-edited versions of people we meet in our daily interactions, and also the edited versions of ourselves, which we present to the outside world. We encounter people’s lives as they encounter ours – in medias res. We take snapshot-like first impressions of the personalities presented to us, only filling in the beginnings of their stories with flashbacks if the person piques our interest. Only a privileged few get to witness the opening and closing paragraphs and chapters of our lives.

Verisimilitude is the gelatine of a story, the gelling agent giving fiction its truth. But if you apply too many elements to construct authenticity, the story will become rigid; too few and the tale is watered down, its integrity lost. The conflict that fuels the story’s engine, the plot, is regularly described as an arc ascending towards denouement. The protagonist arrives on the other side of the conflict as a changed character in some way. Yet often in my mind’s eye I imagine characters descending into a gully, and then by either accident or enterprise, scrambling up the other side to a fresh outlook.

This is where I find myself now; on the other side of the gully, with the blank pages of my story still to be written.
Dear Daddy,

After four long years of training, I finally get a closer look at the stars tomorrow. This is so exciting. About time too. I always told you I’d make you proud, didn’t I? Would Bobby be proud Daddy? I like to think that he would be.

I packed three days ago – drew up a checklist and followed it meticulously. I’ve been counting down the hours before we kit up and ship out to the eight moons. My nerves get the better of me and they make me restless all the time. Mark thinks I’m going crazy, so do the rest of the boys. It’s so hard to imagine being that far away from home.

I don’t want to write the word ‘goodbye’ because I know it’s not that at all. So can you do some things for me, Daddy? Tell mother that I packed plenty of clean underwear and that I still brush my teeth twice daily. I’m a grown-up now, she can stop worrying. Give Nathan a big hug for me to remind him I’ll be coming home at the end of the year. Visit Bobby for me. Oh, and take care of yourself, Dad.

I keep a photo of the four of you in my wallet so I never forget who I’m doing this for.

I have to go; they’re making me load the food lockers. I’ll write soon. Oh, and I’ll remember your advice if I get into a fight with any of the boys – punch, not kick.

Love always,
Sam.
Dear Daddy,

The stars are so beautiful up here. They remind me of the pearl necklace that I bought mother for your wedding anniversary last year. We’re landing tomorrow morning your time and I’m told that I’ve been stationed on Adrastea. I’d hoped to be on Io with Rory; the landscape was always so exotic on the screens at home.

I haven’t seen or heard much of Adrastea. Jacko said his family used to holiday there every year around Christmas – until the moons were invaded. I still don’t know what to expect when we land though.

The astronaut tube food has been interesting, to say the least. Definitely not one of mother’s famous pot roasts, and nowhere near as easy to digest. Last night, Mark got his hamburger confused with toothpaste. Everybody laughed; maybe he’s the one going crazy. Bobby always said the food would take some getting used to.

Safe to say, Daddy, this trip has been exciting. I’m definitely going to miss the view we get up here. From the window in my dorm I can see the fighting on the surface. The bright lights are fantastic, like the fireworks back home on public holidays. It hasn’t quite set in that this is a war. Maybe tomorrow I’ll have a better perspective of it all. I promise I’ll stay safe, Daddy.

Love always,
Sam.

June 12, 2098

Dear Daddy,

Adrastea is heaven. Sleeping here is heaven. Waking up on this moon is bliss. It’s beautiful here. We’ve set up camp on the southern hemisphere and each morning I leave my tent, grateful to walk upon this moon’s surface. My squad’s camp is set by the northern bank of a river that curves down from the mountain to our west. We can see the enemy training camp far to the south, beyond the river. I know they won’t get us; the rapids are so violent and fast that the water feels like a safety belt. I can’t fall as long as it’s there to hold me.

Behind us are the trees. They remind me so much of the old oaks behind our house when we were younger, except more purple and certainly much more captivating. Captain Harvard says that we may have to cut them down for firewood and fuel, but I hope not. I would hate to see this moon ruined by men. The boys say that he was joking. I’ve taken photos just in case, so I can show you when I get back.

The only wildlife I’ve seen so far has been the fish. They look similar to the fish at home, but with strange, square eyes.

The days here are similar in length to home.

After this war is over, I think I could live here, Daddy.

All my love,
Sam.

July 1, 2098

Dear Daddy,

Today they briefed us for battle. The enemy camp has been crawling closer for days now. It should be less than a week before our first battle. The buzz of activity around the camp is making me more nervous than anything. It seems like people are finding things to do as a method to distract their thoughts from what’s coming.

I haven’t got a letter from you in a while, so I hope you’re all okay. You’ve probably just been too busy to find time. That’s okay, Daddy.

I should go and help around camp; sorry this letter was so short. I just wanted to touch base and let you know I’m okay.

Love always,
Sam.

July 28, 2098

Dear Daddy,

Today they briefed us for battle. The enemy camp has been crawling closer for days now. It should be less than a week before our first battle. The buzz of activity around the camp is making me more nervous than anything. It seems like people are finding things to do as a method to distract their thoughts from what’s coming.

I haven’t got a letter from you in a while, so I hope you’re all okay. You’ve probably just been too busy to find time. That’s okay, Daddy.

I should go and help around camp; sorry this letter was so short. I just wanted to touch base and let you know I’m okay.

Love always,
Sam.
Dear Dad,

I don’t quite feel myself tonight. I’m not sure what to say to you, or even how you would react if I told you what I did today. I still can’t believe it. We knew this would happen eventually though, didn’t we? My heart tells me that you’d be proud and that mum would forgive me. They say that it gets easier after the first, but that doesn’t help me sleep.

If only Bobby had warned me how terrible it feels to kill a man. Have you ever been so conflicted that your stomach kept twisting until you were physically sick? I hope you haven’t. I hope that no one I know ever does.

They start cutting down the trees tomorrow. That feels so terribly wrong. I thought we were fighting to preserve places like this, to keep our worlds beautiful. I hope this is the only sacrifice I’m forced to make on this moon. I’ve started to feel that perhaps signing up for this whole thing was a mistake.

I should try to find things that will raise my spirits. I think I’ll leave it there for now, Dad.

Please forgive me,
Sam.

August 13, 2098

Dear Dad,

I killed three more of them today, Dad. I see them fall after I pull the trigger and I know deep down that you would be proud. Each dead man on their line is one step closer to winning this war. You always said that I needed to be great after Bobby died, keep the honour of the Clarence name. I hear the voices of the people on the radio; I am a ‘Hero of Justice’. That’s what the President told them to call us, anyway.

I don’t feel like a hero, Dad.

I’ve learned much these past months about hardship... about suffering. At the end of each month when the rations dry out, many of us starve. I lost four friends this week. Two of them starved, Jack got bitten by carrion rats and Mark took a blaster shot to the throat. He never got a chance to tell me what to say to his girl back home. I feel for Jacko’s family the most. He was just a boy.

I often think about the families of soldiers forgotten in the dust on this moon. What pain would you feel, Dad? What hurt do the families of the fallen men feel? The President says I’ve done well for my world, but how does the enemy feel towards me?

They were right of course. It does get easier out there. But it gets much harder to sleep. I know why Bobby did it now, Dad. He couldn’t live with the guilt.

Love always,
Sam.

November 23, 2098

Dear Dad,

Adrastea is Hell. Sleeping here is hell. Waking up on this moon is a nightmare. They stopped picking up the bodies. There aren’t enough of us left alive. The boys have stopped hoping for the best. Those of us who don’t return within an hour are presumed dead. All my friends are gone, Dad.

I should try to find things that will raise my spirits. I think I’ll leave it there for now, Dad.

Please forgive me,
Sam.

September 1, 2098

Dear Dad,

I hope all is well back home. I got your letter about little Nathan, I can’t believe I missed his sixth birthday party. I hope he enjoys his present. It’s good to know that you don’t hold what I told you in my last letter against me, and that you’re proud of my commitment to Earth. I would write more to let you know I’m okay, but it’s hard finding time out here on the battlefields.
I am afraid. There’s talk among the officers that the President will surrender this week. The moons of Jupiter are lost and I find it hard to push forward each day. The enemy has cut off our supply route, and on both sides many have been left hungry, tired and sick.

The river has run dry; its banks are stained red. It’s no longer the harness stopping me from falling, Dad. It’s now a knife in my back. The trees are all gone. All that remains of their majesty are the stumps – a reminder of what we’ve given up.

I am afraid, Dad. Afraid that I won’t get home in time for the holidays. Afraid I won’t get home at all. To distract myself I have written a poem, just like the soldiers of old. I’ll send it with this letter. It’s not very good, but some part of me should be home with you, Mum and little Nathan.

I hope to God I make it home for Christmas, but just in case I don’t...

Merry Christmas, Dad.

Give Mum and Nathan my love. Visit Bobby, but don’t interrupt his sleep too much.

All my love.
Your little girl,
Samantha.

‘War’
War is no place for a girl:
Up here above the world.
Dying
To defend her rights,
Killing
Men, ruining lives.
War is no place for a girl:
Fighting
High above the world.

Running
Just to save her life.
Help her, Daddy – she’s terrified.

January 1, 2099

Dear Mr and Mrs Clarence,

It is with deep and personal regret that I inform you of the death of your daughter, Private Samantha Clarence. I give you my condolences and that of our great republic in honour of the sacrifice that she has made.

Enclosed is a poem that was on your daughter’s person.

Yours sincerely,
President of Earth.
Dear Daddy,

I’m sipping sangria with my friend from Uni, Jack (you don’t know Jack), as I write this postcard, watching the sun slip into the horizontal slits between the sky and sea, signaling the end of another magical night in Barcelona.

I fear the waiter has shortchanged me, but I’m not going to let it leave a bad taste in my mouth, or ruin the mood. That reminds me… I’ve spent the day wandering through the kaleidoscope of markets that stretches along the seaport edge. I felt as though I was in a Snoezelen room; such a refreshing assault on the senses. I sampled a strange pear-shaped fruit, or maybe it was a vegetable. I can’t be sure… anyway, it was a real firecracker. I’m led to believe it’s a local delicacy, but it tasted like dog dust to me - yuk! Still, sangrias on the sun deck are a ready cure for all that ails me.

I threw a coin of fate into the fountain today, so I’m expecting a miracle any minute now, or at the very least a wish granted.

Btw, congratulations on the promotion; it’s well-deserved.

I must sign off now if I’m to catch the last of the sun rays; the shard-like colourful mirrors are blades, painfully beautiful, and yet too wondrous to miss. They form a prism of intrigue in a dance against the blue on blue backdrop.

… perhaps I’ll write about it one day.

Lots of love, xoxo.
Often words uttered to another
Have reaped an ill harvest:
Two beat one, the tongue is head’s bane,
Pockets of fur hide fists.
– ‘Hávamál’

My knees were more angular than I remembered: bony, unfamiliar, and as worn as the knees of an old woman. They looked pathetic jutting out from under the hem of my khaki shorts. The fabric-thin pockets, stuffed with an assortment of things, bulged uncomfortably against my aching thighs. My feet, buried in heavy hiking boots, rested on the seat opposite me. I had become used to their distortion, but still felt guilty for what they endured while I indulged in my whim. Each day I pledged to take good care of them when my journey ended.

The long, punishing days of walking left my once-fit body in a state of wreck, a deep fatigue that infused me with a state of benign. Leaning against the high-backed seat on the train from Compostela, I yearned for just a hint of comfort, but it eluded me. My head slumped to one side and thumped heavily against the smudged window. The noon sun rendered my reflection in the glass surreal. I recognised myself in those worn eyes, but their sockets were sunken deep from dehydration. The dark circles framed a once attractive feature – the blue Spanish eyes of my heritage – but this was missing now.

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1 The Hávamál is a collection of Nordic poems from the Viking Age. Although the actual authors of the poems are unknown, the poems are often attributed to Odin.
By the time I reached Barcelona the afternoon train station was frenetic. People scurried like ants, criss-crossing the narrow platform in organised chaos. I walked directly towards the exit at the end of the station. In defiance of any apparent system, my intention was to get outside as quickly as possible. Commuters stepped aside easily, recognising my pilgrim apparel: the swollen pack, wooden staff, and scallop shell hanging from a piece of tattered string around my neck. Some called buon camino in acknowledgment of my pilgrimage.

It was autumn in Spain. I hurried from the station, searching for a place to stay before the afternoon chill slipped into the cold of nightfall. I found El Castillo Pequeño, a small hotel squeezed between others like it at the seedy end of Las Ramblas, a long tree-lined street in the centre of old Barcelona. The tall, narrow building towered regally above those adjoining it. The musk-pink façade, with its faded green trim, stood in contrast against the hotchpotch of eau-de-nil and lime-washed exteriors. The characteristic chalky colours, soft and dusty, are the epitome of a Mediterranean summer, invoking a sense of holiday. In a flash I was relaxing somewhere on the Spanish coastline, smelling the sea, tasting salted octopus with lemon, and listening to the lively banter of fishermen while they worked on their boats. Reveries!

Budget accommodation was all I could afford; besides, I abhor spending more than necessary to put my head on a pillow for the night. El Castillo Pequeño, The Little Castle, was anything but. Parts of the original building dated back to the 15th century, probably splendid in its day, while subsequent patchwork additions, when necessary, had modernised it. The structure was as fragile as a drained honeycomb, but it was still approved as cheap digs for budget travellers like me. The crumbled render on the exterior and the drab interior with its mildewy odour didn't bother me; after all, I was only there for a night. I'd spent the previous month sleeping on bunk beds and floors in refugios, so near to strangers that I found their sleepy sighs oddly comforting.

I dumped my pack on the floor beside the timber-framed, large Spanish-style bed. The long European pillow stretched invitingly across the top of the duvet, plump with soft feathers. Room for two, I thought, smiling to myself, remembering a line from an Oscar Wilde play – “I can resist anything but temptation”.

Conceding my weakness, I fell blissfully into the softness. I lay for a moment savouring the stillness. The gentle afternoon sun warmed my face and flickered lightly on my eyelids. I imagined you beside me then, like the first time we lay together. I had never looked so deeply and completely into another’s eyes. I tenderly sang words to you from a song whose title I hadn’t bothered to remember, as the chorus said it all. And that’s how it was; you became my inspiration, and to you, I was all that had been missing from your life.

I changed out of my hiking boots and into something smarter. With a light sweater draped across my shoulders, I walked out into Las Ramblas to see what many claimed to be the most special part of the old city. I read in the travel guide that Federico García Lorca said Las Ramblas was the only street in the world that he wished would never end. I was keen to see Las Ramblas, or at least attempt to, through the eyes of the Spanish poet.

The night had pushed the jaded day away. An excited hubbub of evening staff could be heard from bars and restaurants along the sidewalk. The warm glow of lights filtered from the apartments above, their occupants flitting across open windows. I envisaged their interactions and conversations; food and wine, children and work. For a moment I was lost in my imaginings.

I heard his voice before I saw him.

‘Signora, I show you Las Ramblas. I take you to club and we dance and—’ he rubbed provocatively against me.

My theatrics, a vulgar gesture and an uttered insult, were enough to stun the sleazy señor. He stumbled, jerking backwards as though he had been stung with a Taser. Before hurrying away, I shoved my clenched fist into his shoulder, causing him to stumble again and fall. He spat and cursed, but his wild shouts were dulled in the throng of animated voices on the street. I fleetingly felt an overwhelming gloom; an uneasiness that spoiled the moment.

When I reached the farmers’ market it was a buzzing canvas of white noise that made no sense, but was strangely calming. I spent a couple of hours strolling through the complex network of lanes, awed by the technicolour array of fresh produce. There were displays of cheese unlike any I had ever seen; large creamy wheels of indeterminable varieties stacked tight and high, their smooth, waxed skins begging to be stroked. Allured, I reached to lightly touch the cheese nearest me. The deep-ridged, zigzag pattern on its dark surface was firm and oily. I traced my finger along the name of the cheese and the province where it had been produced.
The stallholder observed me thoughtfully, probably as fascinated by me as I was of her. Her tanned face, framed by a black scarf, was a complex road-map of her life as a market gardener. It was the type of scarf traditionally worn by Spanish widows in mourning. It was also intended to keep her hair tidy, but some thin, greasy strands of hair kept escaping from the grubby edges of the tattered fabric. Irritated, the woman poked them back in place with two fat fingers and then went back grinning to tending to her produce. Her broad smile radiated a warmth characteristic of the Spanish people I met while travelling along lonely country roads.

She reached out, offering a sliver of cheese on the tip of a long knife. ‘Questo manchega, signora. Muy bueno,’ she said loudly, closing her eyes dreamily and making a soft sucking noise as she kissed the tips of her fingers.

‘Gracias signora,’ I nodded, carefully removing the piece of cheese from the knife. I could see that the cheese was from the province of La Mancha, and guessed that the name of the cheese, manchega, was derived from there. The flavour was intense; simultaneously pungent and nutty. It was sometime later I read that this was also called the cheese of Don Quixote, as it was his favourite type of Spanish cheese.

The goat’s cheese, milk-white, salty, and sharp, was sold in small rounds and large blocks. Again the signora offered me a small piece to taste. The texture was paste-like, smooth and soft, reminiscent of the plaster-of-Paris paste I used as a child to make small decorative tiles and plaques.

Apart from my penchant for goat’s cheese, I loved the creamy cheese from the province of Galicia, the Galician Tetilla, and in that moment I remembered those fat, contented cows grazing on the green meadows I’d walked upon only a few days before, and quietly thanked them.

A young gypsy girl, pale-eyed and swarthy, followed me cagily as I traversed the rest of the market. Long hair draped her angular face, but I could see subtle beauty buried somewhere beneath her haunted visage. Cradling a frail-looking baby in her arms, she seemed too young to be its mother. The child, floppy and languid, was wrapped in a soiled rug. It made soft whimpering sounds as it was thrust at me. At the same time, the young girl grabbed my right arm with a grubby hand. She clutched tighter and tighter, pleading persistently while I tried to shake my arm free from her grip. The gentle tinkling of the bangles around her thin wrist caused the baby to stir. It gave a feeble cry as it struggled to keep its eyes open to see what the fuss was about.

Pushing an open-palmed hand towards me, the girl begged again, curling her fingers towards herself to enhance her plea:

‘Por favor, signora, por favor.’

I’d heard about baby druggers and beggars just like this girl, but despite my reservations, I handed her a few coins and walked away, trying not to look back at the baby.

I continued to move along row after dizzying row of produce; the patriotic, regimental colours of the fruit and vegetable stalls and the reserved subtlety of the fish and crustaceans, cool and candid in display. There were geometric displays of dull tinted dried fruits resurrected through the richness of the vibrant, tangibly tempting apricot. The heady aroma of herbs and spices, a Moorish influence, covered one long aisle of the market. I could smell clove and cumin, cardamom and paprika, until my olfactory senses screamed confusion. Powdered saffron, the colour of monks’ robes, delicately boxed with glass lids, made me recall my recent time at Plum Village, a Buddhist retreat near the Dordogne region in France.

Outside the market, the streetscape had changed; the lights were brighter, the music louder, the ambience more lively. Snatched pieces of conversation punctured the roar of the music, filling the night air with excitement and me with expectation. I found a bar that served tapas and other traditional Spanish foods and ate a simple meal of zarzuela, a hearty seafood stew that was a specialty of the Costa Brava region. The combination of fish and shellfish in a rich, spicy sauce of tomatoes and fresh herbs was served with tostada, a type of lightly-toasted bread. I welcomed the complimentary half carafe of red wine from the La Rioja region, one of Spain’s smallest provinces. I swirled the wine around in the glass, observing the ruby liquid as it flickered hypnotically in the light of the candle. I reminisced again, a habit I’d indulged in during the past month. The wine was fresh and spicy, and its penetrating aroma was as fragrant as the spice market.

Tables lined the edge of a medium-sized dance floor in the corner of the restaurant. The DJ was busy setting up and arranging CDs in small, neat stacks. Late in the evening, the crowd thickened, drifting towards the music and the
dance floor. Deciding to stay awhile, I moved to a long table, sharing it with a number of other people. The easy-listening groove, ambient and smooth, matched my mood. I was comfortable with the cool, familiar sounds of Montecarlo Nights and wanted to dance. On the floor, I swayed to the rhythm of the music, enjoying my space and anonymity.

Before long, the tone of the music changed. It was deeper and louder; an hypnotic beat that enchanted all. Groups of young dancers gyrated sexily, shaking their heads rhythmically to the thud from the oversized speakers. Some, their eyes dreamily shut, moved sensuously together, while others gazed fixedly, trancelike, hour after hour. I knew it was time to leave when my head began to pulse to the tempo of the bass beat. Pressing hard into my aching temples gave me little relief. I moved towards the door, elbowing through the horde of sweaty bodies. At the exit, I gulped greedily at the air as if it were my last breath. The music continued to pound obstinately, but the final throbs from deep inside were a sign of surrender. People soon began to saunter out into the neon incandescence of the coming dawn. Red-eyed and tired, they lingered for a while before moving along.

Turning into the street leading away from the restaurant, I walked alone in the direction of El Castillo Pequeño, yearning for the sanctuary of my small room. The night quickly receded, sliding hopelessly into the bizarre jingle-jangle of the red-light district, backstreet noises and dim seediness. The narrow street heading in the direction of the hotel became an abyss. There was no beauty here, just dinginess reminiscent of Kings Cross after dark. A man’s thunderous shouts could be heard above the harsh, angry cries of a woman. The fiery quarrel broke the lonely silence, echoing. I felt a peculiar sense of reassurance knowing at least there were others nearby. But the uneasiness lingered as I squinted in the shadows for a familiar sign. During the past month I had walked nine hundred kilometres across Spain, following yellow arrows painted on rocks and trees, somehow reaching my destination without any difficulty. But in the backstreets of Las Ramblas, I was frustrated, lost, and bewildered; so near my hotel, yet so hopelessly far from it. The rhythmic clack of my shoes on the cobbled street was strangely comforting, or so I told myself. I recalled my childhood fears; the loneliness I felt in the middle of the night after waking from a nightmare. Many years later, on a backstreet of Barcelona, I was experiencing the same feelings of isolation and vulnerability. The street maze was entrapping and endless.

Coming out of my reverie, I was startled to see him beside me. The recognition was instant and alarming; the ugly, curled lip as he spat at me the previous evening near the hotel.

He was threateningly close, the flash of a knife blade causing me to gasp. My skin prickled.

For an instant I was annoyed with myself for not noticing him sooner. This sentiment was fleeting though, as he threw me violently against the wall of a building and pinned me there, helpless, like a butterfly in a specimen cabinet. The colourful graffiti looked out of place in the bleak tunnel.

My breathing, rapid and rhythmic, came in sharp bursts that burned deep in my chest. He pushed up hard behind me. The moistness of his repulsive breath on the back of my neck made me cringe. To an onlooker, our unmoving stance could have been construed as the urgent closeness of lovers, but this was not the case.
The Student’s Refrain

Anthony Greenwood

Now I am a writer, why do I write?

To make sense of the world of course, it seems
But to be trite is never, why I do write.

They’re demanding their bacon and eggs
Again, as a waiter, when do I write?

Looking for lodgings, a desk I call home
Is it where your books were? How do I write?

On doffing another hat from the world
Weary and sleepier, when do I write?

Dragging myself to an eight a.m. class
Questions from the tutor, what did I write?

Family ask ‘But why are you writing?’
I want to make things clearer. I do, right?

Greenwood’s made charcoal, according to myth
The burning creator, now do I write.

Hopscotch and Jump

Charmaine Peters

Sow to the whirlwind: a twist in the tale.
I can’t bear to watch the twist in the tail.

She’s wearing her adulthood back to front.
It’s bunched at the crotch; a twist in her tail.

His toupee’s skew-whiff; a naff, puckered crease,
Turn left a notch—no more twist in his tail.

Dinner and a movie, oh, what a treat,
Still a kiss to botch; untwists her Fantale.

Life’s a playground, ‘too old to die young,’
Pixi plays hopscotch, a twist in her tale.
Saturday. Break of dawn. Australia.

Parking is chaotic as usual. Carla and Jordan unpack their boards and sprint towards Granite Bay. The sinuous path is busy with bright joggers, three-wheeler prams and febrile surfers. Beyond, the ocean is glittering and the horizon hugs the water like a jealous lover.

Carla feels that embrace each time they come here. She remembers when she first saw Jordan a few years ago. It was a glimpse that changed her life. Jordan’s freckled salty skin and the eucalyptus scent are inscribed in a special section of her memory. Now they work and share a flat in Brisbane, but often come up the coast to visit Jordan’s parents and go for a dip in the ocean.

The surf has been great lately and the weather forecast is excellent. The tide has receded so far away that an unfamiliar sight is revealed at Tea Tree Bay. The continental shelf has never been so exposed. A cluster of people scrutinise what Carla and Jordan will later call The Great Wash Out. Jordan gets her phone out and calls home. ‘Norman! You better come and check this one out. We’re at Hell’s Gate. Hurry up. Bring Mum too.’

Norman is pleased to interrupt his weekly gardening session. His father bought this lush bit of land bordering the National Park in the 1950s. If left unchecked in this climate, the luxuriant vegetation takes over like toads in a cane field. He walks to the house, into the kitchen and gets to the boatswain whistle that hangs from a beam. Two short blows is the signal for Jenny to come up from the bottom garden where a wooden shed rests, a bit like a derelict trawler sitting in a muddy cove. Grass refuses to grow around it. Inside, there is a neat studio full of tools and the walls are covered with sketches and plans. Jenny is a yacht interior designer. Norman is her personal gofer, specialised in the art of finding things. He is a qualified
hoarder. Born to serve is his motto. So he just gets on with it. He is a poet. He is a lar-
rikin, witty and irreverent. He belongs to another era, when outlaws were bushrang-
ers and sailors were salty dogs. Jenny is the industrious one. You can see it in her
demeanour. She walks and talks straight to the point. Nowadays she treads water at
her leisure. After all, they are seafarers emeriti, members of the Turtle Society, humble
mariners, lovers of space, and tough nuts in civil life.

They decide to walk the three-kilometre track from their house to Hell’s Gate. At
this time of day, it only takes half an hour to get to the headland.

On the edge of the bluff, a group of codgers ponders in silence at the unusual
panorama. There are excited teenagers ready to get the ‘guns’ out. Down below, the
surf is forming on a new platform. Nobody has ever seen such a spectacular barrel at
that spot. A few daredevils are paddling out through the white water with great diffi-
culty. The tide is strong. Furious troughs are rippling towards the shore.

Jordan greets her parents with frantic gestures and comments. Carla gives her
some water to disrupt her verbal overflow. Then she deciphers Jordan’s babbling to
Norman and Jenny who are baffled. In their washed-out blue eyes, there is a hint of
fear that reflects the progress of their thoughts.

‘Tsunami. Somebody said tsunami?’ murmurs a spectator.

‘We’d better get home darlings,’ says Norman. ‘I don’t like the look of this. Let’s
find out what the experts have to say about this tide.’

‘But we want to have a coffee in Hastings Street.’

‘Forget about coffee in low land, Jordan. You are such a voyeur. And look at Car-
la. She’s pale. Come on. We’ve got phone calls to make. We’re comin’ back with you in
the car. Don’t forget your boards.’

Norman holds Jenny by the shoulder and steers her towards the coastal track.
The onlookers’ slow progression clogs up the footpath. It compels the foursome to
force their way through, like salmon swimming upstream to spawn. Large slabs of
sand dunes are exposed in Laguna Bay and the beach looks like the Bay of Fundy at
low tide. When they reach the car, the traffic is already hectic with gawking weekend-
ers and clued-up locals. They see familiar faces that may show up at the house later
on.

It is already midday. Back at the house, Norman hoists the orange pennon. The
flagpole is used to indicate the dwellers’ mood: green flag stands for ‘you’re welcome’,
red is ‘we’re busy’ and the orange one warns ‘at your own risk’. Then he starts to in-
vestigate. Radio stations and television news programs reveal vague information. Jour-
nalists are still expecting a statement from the authorities. ‘There is no tsunami alert.
There is no reason to be alarmed,’ they say. The Extinction Protocol Internet site con-
ffirms there has been no underwater quake or volcanic eruption detected in the region.

Annoyed and frustrated, Norman drives down to have a snoop on the riverside.
The Coast Guard volunteers have nothing official to say; they are debating the matter
over a cup of tea. The yachts in the marina are trapped in the sludge. Their masts point
at awkward angles, like threadbare trees in a forest devastated by a cyclone.

A few of their friends come and go through the afternoon. They were edgy and
decided to go home for the evening. At six, Jenny rings the bell. The bar is open. So the
first bottle of red wine is sacrificed. Carla and Jordan prepare dinner in silence while the
two sea-lords log on to Skype and contact old friends in the Pacific region.

‘Solomoni, Bula! How’s your family Solo? How’s Tavarua?’

‘BulaVinaka, Norman. Ni SaBula. We are well. Norman, you should see Cloud
Break. It’s gnarly surf out there! Can’t even get there. The bommies are sticking out ev-
everywhere, they’re sticking right up I tell you.’

‘How come? We have very low water here as well. I was callin’ to ask about that.
So can’t you get out at all? Do you know what’s goin’ on?’

‘I will try to know, Norman. When are you coming over?’

‘Nothing’s planned yet, mate. Maybe next year I’ll come with Jenny. Listen, I’ll
call you back tomorrow. Is that okay?’

‘Yes Norman. Bye, bye. We miss you. We love you. May God bless, give my re-
gards to your family. Bye.’

‘Bye Solo. Same to you. We miss you too. Bye.’

Jenny decides to trace the eccentric Frenchman who lives on his fifty-foot yacht
somewhere around the Rim.

‘Allo, allo, little Jenny. How is Australia? You are looking very well!’

‘Hey! Pierre. Thank you. How’s it goin’? I’m sorry to call you so early.’

‘I am good, very good. It is okay, but I am still in Panama, anchored at Las Perlas.’
’Great. That’s what I wanted to hear. Tell me, is there anything weird happenin’ your way?’

’It is funny you are saying that, but I have never, never seen so many ships that are waiting to enter the Canal. And not one is coming out. Why? You have problems in the country of Oz?’

’Aaaah, the tide’s very low and the swell’s playin’ tricks on us. I was wonderin’ if you knew anything?’

’No. But I will keep my ears and eyes open as we say…’

’Right. We’ll keep looking as well. I’ll call you tomorrow same time. Ciao Pierre. Salut.’

Dinner is served in the living room. Another bottle of wine is opened. Carla remains subdued. She is rubbing her arm on the darkish scar that looks like a shooting star in daytime, like an old celluloid negative. Her gloomy attitude puzzles Jordan who is trying to lift her spirit with a delicious cheese sample.

’I’m sorry,’ Carla says, ’I think I owe you all an explanation. Even Jordan doesn’t know about this.’

’Go ahead, darling. It better be good,’ says Jordan while holding her hand in support.

’It’s not a story I like to tell. Do you really want to hear it?’

Norman and Jenny crack a comical grimace. ’We can’t wait. Come on. Get it out.’

Carla takes a deep breath and blows it out to deflate her anguish. ’Well, I spent Christmas in Banda Aceh in 2004. I’d just turned twenty-one.

’Wasn’t that the year of the tsunami?’ says Jordan.

Carla nods and continues. ’Well that morning, I’d borrowed my friends’ Ford Transit, because I was supposed to join a diving party at Gapang Beach. All my scuba gear was in the back of the van, as well as some food I’d packed for lunch.’

’Soo I was driving to Ulee Lheu to catch the 9.30 ferry to Pulau Weh when the earthquake hit. It went on for at least ten minutes. I had to stop the van in the middle of the street. People were running out of buildings covered with dust. They were shaking and crying. There was rubble everywhere. A lot of houses had collapsed.’

’She pauses to recollect her thoughts. ’After a few minutes people began searching for survivors. I was stunned and scared. People were shouting and I heard: “the sea’s coming! The sea’s coming!” And there it was, storming on the road.’

Carla manages to keep the plate of pasta sitting on her knees. ’There was a loud humming. People were bolting left, right and centre. I didn’t know what was going on. I rolled up the windows. I jumped in the back. I grabbed the air tank and the mask. I was shaking but I managed to fit the regulator. I crawled back in the cabin. Fastened my seat belt. The van was already floating. I was riding along debris. I spat in the mask. Don’t ask me why,’ she says, shaking her head and rolling her eyes. ’And I put it on. I clamped the tank between my knees and shoved the regulator into my mouth. I opened the valve.’

They all reach for a sip of wine and she carries on. ’Then a mountain of dark water picked me up and carried me further away at great speed. The noise was horrid and ear splitting. The water was entering fast in the van. Stuff was floating in the cabin, including a cold chook and my tobacco pouch. My ears were buzzing. Then a second wave swept me towards the hill above town. I had water up to my neck. I was still holding onto the wheel, riding towards my destiny. There was a mosque just on the corner; I implored “Insha’Allah!” And then, the windows exploded, and the van rolled over. I was thinking: slowly, just breathe slowly. Then the van sank. I was stuck on the bottom. Somewhere. It was completely dark. My ears were pounding. I was sucking hard on the air like a beginner. Then the water receded. The van was entangled in a huge pile of debris. I was shaking. I was waiting. Still holding the wheel! Still clamping the air tank between my knees. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t hear anything, but I could see some kind of light. The water started to drain from the van. I spat out the regulator and ripped the mask off my face. I saw then the deep gash in my arm and the apocalyptic desolation around. That’s why I get edgy when nature is playing up. I just can’t forget the people who didn’t make it. I still think of the friends I lost. I was so lucky.’

They are sitting on the edge of the sofa, with eyes like Ulysses when he first met the Cyclops. Their pasta is cold. Carla shrugs and looks at Jordan with an apologetic grin, hoping for forgiveness and maybe a bit of compassion.

Jenny twirls her arms to dissipate the heavy atmosphere and says ’Let’s have one more glass of wine, or maybe something stronger. Let’s have a Scotch. We need a night cap.’

’Sure do. Carla, you’re a legend. You fit perfectly in this family. Cheers to you. And let’s hope for the best tomorrow. At least, we’re safe here,’ mumbles Norman.
They carry on and rave on for a while, exposing their erudite and practical knowledge, speculating on causes and outcomes. Then satisfied with their opinions and location, they go to bed, legless and worryless.

Norman is up before the kookaburras’ call and walks through the bush to Paradise Cave. Instead of the rumbling surf, there is a moonlike expanse from which a nauseating stench hovers towards the coast. Some dogs are howling. The bush spawns swarms of flies. Back at the house, he shuts all the fly-screens and fiddles with the radio to no avail. All day long they wait for information. Jenny calls Solo and Pierre back. It sounds like they are as ill-informed and anxious as they are.

By Sunday night, they are frantic. Carla, on the contrary, has locked herself in a shell. When an official announcement interrupts the TV programs, they sigh. The Australian Prime Minister’s address to the Nation is solemn. Even the possums playing in the roof stop their racket. “…the French Government has communicated the following information: a vortex has formed in Mururoa Atoll in the Tuamotu Archipelago. It is believed that the decades of nuclear testings in the Pacific Region have damaged the crust of the Earth. The crust is barely five to ten kilometres thick in the ocean basins. A fissure through the crust opened a passage to a vacant pouch in the upper mantle. This vacuum is absorbing masses of seawater. The consequences of this catastrophe are still undetermined but French President, Francois Hollande, has declared a state of emergency in all French dominions in the Pacific Region…”

‘I wish the Frogs were goin’ Dutch on this one. Bloody nuclear testings. I told ya. They’re goin’ to end up blowin’ the whole show,’ Norman roars.

‘Come on Dad, don’t sneer at the French,’ ventures Jordan, ‘we’re sellin’ uranium all over the world.’

‘I know luv. I’m just angry and a bit tired. So what’s next? Jenny? Do you know anybody at University who could tell us something?’

‘I might. I’ll check tomorrow.’

Carla and Jordan decide to stay on at Sunshine Beach. Better be safe here than go back to Brisbane’s beehive. Over the next few days, the ocean continues withdrawing. Army helicopters screen the disaster. On the radio, they can hear the population’s apprehension and discomfort. Shrewd comments on land boom and mining opportunities horrify the audience. It is a shambles.

A week has passed. Until now, nobody has been able to disclose any further information or at least a hint of hope. When Professor Schmittberg, from the American Institute of Oceanography, is interviewed on CBS, the curtain falls. A chart of the Pacific is displayed on the screen to support his theory. He looks confident while explaining that the Pacific Trash Vortex, which is travelling clockwise in the middle of the ocean, has altered its course towards Mururoa’s atoll. It carries thousands of tons of man-produced pollution. This mass of solid fragments and petro-sub products may obstruct the crevice and stop the massive inflow.

A few days later, Professor Schmittberg’s predictions are confirmed. The Earth has patched its wound, like Carla’s body had once. Mururoa’s entire population had been evacuated to Tahiti before the collapse of the atoll. The military base has vanished under the sea.

And so has the ocean from the Australian east coast.

Carla keeps a clear vision of unspoiled scenery and spicy sensation. Occasionally, she wonders why Earth and humankind’s powers engage in such violence. Are we not both made of 70 per cent water, mere creations of the universe?

Norman and Jenny now live on a ridge overhanging a landscape they fear to look at. Their panorama glitters no more in the morning light. The rhythmic rumble of the breaking waves does not soothe their nights anymore. The travelling swell does not bring the surf any longer. Their home by the sea faces a desert swamp where no one is welcome, not even builders or frackers. Unusual vegetation spurs up here and there. A resurrection is taking place underneath the coffee rock and dead coral. Still, if ice caps and bergs and glaciers all melt away, Norman and Jenny may recapture the scent of iodine, the roar of the ocean, and the majestic sight of the episodic passage of the whales.
Long and languid, sun-born and tanned,
She moves with the casual indifference of the tide,
In her wake mountains crumble to dust,
She is the falling sands of the hourglass,
She is the windswept waste of years,
Her songs are the stories of lost forgotten lands
Frozen and burned far across the sea.

Her smile is the sun-limned arc of a dead moon,
Her eyes the weighted souls of galaxies yet unborn,
Stars and undead gods wither before her,
She is the silence between worlds,
She is the elongating shadow on a sundial,
Her pulse is the heartbeat of the Earth
Winding down the days until the end of all things.

Magenta is my underwear tonight,
Deep Purple sings the First Sign of Madness.
On the verge, teary blue eyes rage inwards,
Green like a groundswell rises, nauseous,
As sickly yellow bile sours in my mouth,
Orange bleeds on passionate pouting lips.
I see red. My blood heats and throbs in vein,
Robbed of him again,
I sink into black.
He finds the coin in a box of trinkets saved from his school days. He turns it over in his fingers. The movement evokes a memory.

The coin of fate: that’s what he used to call it. It was a sixteen-year-old boy’s stab at irony. He used to clench it in his fist as a symbol of the control he held over his life. He had never subscribed to the idea of a greater power steering him in a particular direction.

Until recently.

He was sitting on a bus one day, years ago, and the coin was between his fingers. The head and shoulders of an impossible girl were lying across his lap; she lay just outside the realm of possibility. His insistence that their relationship was purely platonic was a denial designed to fight feelings that he didn’t know what to do with.

The pair was already in complex, epic loves of their own, which while withering, still possessed the all-consuming quality that only high-school relationships could. She was forbidden, but that didn’t change the way he felt about her. In that moment of clarity, he’d slipped the coin into his pocket and the two had shared an inevitable kiss.

All that mattered in that moment was proving he had control over his life. He proved more than he initially intended however, and he later realised that it had irrevocably changed the way he saw himself; that moment proved that he was capable of violently shattering somebody’s heart.

He distanced himself from old friends after that, and the space allowed him the luxury of observation. He learnt that people seemed intent on continually making the same choices, and suffering the same consequences.

While he always felt genuine concern for these friends, he couldn’t help
experiencing a sense of pity for their inability to learn from their mistakes. Why did they believe they were unable to change their fate? The coin had been placed inside a box of trinkets, but what it symbolised continued to haunt him through these years.

He thought he was better than his friends. They never learnt from their mistakes and he foolishly thought he was above that.

Until recently.

He stares at the coin. The truth is undeniable: he is quickly approaching the adult equivalent of a forbidden kiss on a school bus. Is he about to make the same choice? An optimistic voice is urging him to prove he still has control over his life. But could he live with the potential consequences? Is he about to risk it all on the off-chance that this could be something spectacular?

He spent his teenage years convincing himself, with the aid of a coin, that everything is a choice and that there is no such thing as fate, but as he teeters on the edge of making this decision, he wonders: Was I brought to these crossroads again for a reason?

From under the rainbow shade-umbrella that we bought together on one of our journeys to the shopping-mall, when you were looking for those mirrored sunglasses that I’ve never liked and that I told you, I watch your granite shoulders wash into the lulling and cool now Pacific waters.

Richard of York gave battle in vain. Red, orange, yellow, et cetera, ‘et cetera’ and all the colours outside and in between. My body is dappled with colour, stomach yellow, thighs orange and feet red. A chipped black-varnished toenail marks the horizon which is a firm yet invisible line between the lips of the sea and the sky.

I think upon this line.

As much as the blue sky shelters us from an infinite beyond, so too can we float upon the ocean, never fathoming the valleys and mountains below. A fine line indeed, to divide the idea or perception of the unknown.

Grandmother used to walk this beach. Now, in the home behind the Norfolk pines she sits quietly looking out, next to other folded blankets covering other knees and ankles, sheltering on the veranda looking out at that horizon. Looking out to a place perhaps where she had come from, or was going to. Over her horizon, travelling back over many horizons, a green, youthful and polite country existed, yet also dwelling there is an unknown country, a heaven, purgatory, hell, nothingness or re-incarnation. Another identity. England, Australia and beyond.

We sprawl, don’t we, predominately on the coastal fringes of this vast continent, and sprawl, like I am now, on the beaches or the cliff-tops, the ocean-view car-parks and the highways and the seaside cul-de-sacs of modern living. We do this as children because of the necessity of sunburn and sand and fun, and then as adults, not because of the necessity of meeting our children’s needs or even a desire to cool off in the ocean on a hot day, but a need to identify with our past and our future. Our present identity. We teeter on the edge and we look out, not inwards to the interior. And we look out from verandas, porches, beneath rainbow-shade, lonely umbrellas, tin bar-be-que shelters and hot car-seats. Forget the, ‘How’s the steak mate?’ or the, ‘Quick, get a cloth, her ice-cream’s dripping all over the place’. What is in the plain foreground and back of our collective Australian consciousness is ‘Who are we, and why are we here?’
So we flock to the beach and stare at the horizon.

I notice the sound of the waves on the shore. They patiently and quietly mark the time and have been doing so, I assume, while I have been otherwise intent. My body is coloured differently now and I draw lines in the sand with my fingers. You are swimming close in, fast and sure, and your wake momentarily changes the rhythm of the waves. The sand seems to suck at the water, as if gasping for breath. I close my eyes and look into the darkness.

At night-time the line is not so distinct. The horizon becomes a mirage evanescent; the sky nears with star-light and the ocean responds more intimately with its black depth. We have been closer then. The search seems less marred by external lines and more open to clear, internal modes of thought. You can’t pretend when it is dark, and I do not want to. We’d talked about our trip to Hill End, inland and outback.

There had been horizon all around us.

And the stars, so many.

You tried to name them all, according to a book you had brought with you. I preferred to make up new names and attach them to new, uncharted worlds.

I see the stars again in the blackness behind my eyes.

I see an unsettled interior, traced only by ancient Indigenous song and the occasional fading boot-print. I feel at home but it isn’t a physical sense of belonging. Where do you fit in? Is it like wondering where to stand or who to talk to at a party that you haven’t been invited to and you really don’t have a concept or a map for social niceties? You stand awkwardly on the fringe, never getting the inside jokes that they are laughing at, although they want you to belong, to feel at home.

Inland there was endless and open-enveloping visibility. On the edge, or the shore, there are limits to one’s vision. Mountains covet the sun at a certain time of day and to the north and south are only hollow concrete affirmations of a life being lived.

I lie on this edge. It’s a space of creativity and constant change, where earth meets water and air. Liminal. My hands dig deep holes in the sand. It’s comforting to feel the coolness of the minute fragments of rock. Centuries past are exhumed and given air by my excavation. I turn over and nestle a space for my hard head against the soft sands beneath my towel. I find the holes again and fill them in, turtle-like. I listen to the
In Your Hands

I’ve got the whole world to plan, in my hand,
Travel lines run through Saturn, in my hand.

Yearning is a curse for a young man’s heart,
Yet I yearn for that woman, in my hand.

Dancing before stillness, music made of
Faded memory, élan in my hand.

Fear in the city, I’m for rural life,
Better bird than bogey man in my hand

Venom coils a Viking lust, gloss of it
Striking, a wounded Taipan in my hand.

Great kangaroo and his mob on the spring,
A job for a good marksman, in our hands.

Chiromancers and clairvoyants heave sighs
When observing the old man, in my hand.

Great minds are like hour-glasses, losing sand,
Fight to hold more than I can, in my hand.

Eye-to-eye repairs the breach, our lips meet,
We ignite a flame to fan, in our hands.

Filthy poor beggar, his life without hope,
A shred of a man, outstretched with his hand.

Good advice a patronise in disguise,
Forget I’m a grown woman, in my hands.

It’s over now; my life begins again,
Loaded into a van, with many hands.

Bootlace, shoelace, playing there without trace,
Cradling tears like an ocean in my hands.

Those simple words on the page can become
Something Dionysian, in my hand.

Norsewomen, Larrikin and Peter Pan.
A Kaleidoscopic clan, in your hands.
The date was set to coincide with the spring racing carnival in November, when the weather’s not too hot, not too cold; seven weeks shy of Christmas before all the world turns silly for a season. And yet, the ring rests where she’s placed it, sideways on the polished oak table. His intended sits opposite him, on a small settee beside the fire.

What if the tear-shaped diamond’s setting scratches the mirror-perfect surface? That will take countless hours to correct. How dare she?

So careless.

So expensive.

She’s made her announcement. Now the tears start.

Tedious.

Tears turn into sobs, emanating from some hidden compartment deep within her delicate feminine frame. They contort her face into an ugly pose that usurps its uncommon beauty. He makes a show of concern, offering tissues and silence as comfort. Not sure of the etiquette for this situation, he suggests a cup of tea. Her moody tendencies are a vile revelation and they leave him with no choice. He can’t wait to be rid of her. She is even more disappointing than the previous candidates for his name and title.

What now of all his meticulous calculations of adequate breeding and suitability? What good is there in possessing an empire without an heir to groom? It’s not as if he’d plucked her from the reductant stock of those western suburbs housing estates. Handpicked from his great Aunt’s finishing school by the Lady herself, she seemed such a sensible choice.

Impeccable.

She has the crucial hip to waist ratio suited to childbearing – pear-shaped.
With the staff absent for the Queen’s Birthday long weekend, they are alone. He is left to his own devices in the kitchen. No one will know. He retrieves a small tin from a hidden compartment within the kitchen larder, its contents resemble the herbal tea leaves he is brewing and would appear to the novice eye as unremarkable. He is not averse to using his apothecary skills when the need arises as it does from time to time. He determines the correct dosage and adds the belladonna from the tin into a single teacup.

He returns to the sitting room, tray in hand. The scent of blackberries permeates the stiff air. She takes timid sips from the fine china teacup he hands to her. He draining his cup with one smug gulp. She rubs her thumb back and forth across the cup’s rim as if to conjure a genie of whom she’ll beg three wishes. The gesture cannot conceal the trembling of her hands. She makes polite conversation as he waits with cruel pleasure for the deadly nightshade to pulse through her lifeblood.

So clever.
So wicked.

He’s read about it in one of his horticultural periodicals. The initial symptom is fever, intense heat and sweats, followed by paralysis. It will look like a heart attack; no one will know.

At first, he accuses the hot tea for his flushed face and moist palms. He removes his jumper to reveal a damp shirt beneath and fumbles with his buttons as though fending off an attacker. He believes he’d give up to half his kingdom for a glass of cool water in this moment. All at once he’s immobile, lying on the floor in the chalk outline pattern common to murder mystery stories.

He hears the tap of her heels on the parquetry and then sees her face peering into his. Are her worst intuitions of his macabre nature confirmed? He can’t quite fathom the countenance she wears.

Contempt?

She collects his teacup, still filled with the safe brew intended for him, her footsteps retreat to the kitchen.

His breaths are shallow.

Futile.

She smooths down the settee cushions when she returns to the room. No one will know. She picks up the ring and replaces it on her finger before taking her leave.

Silence.
The bayou exhales a sticky, still air which clings to the tainted, grey water like hot breath on glass. Here, indistinguishable horizons swallow the past. It is a place for death. Yet I am reborn. Untold captive secrets of histories, now drowned, lie lost and silent within its depths. Civil wars and alligators have layered their share to the basin’s bed. Its watery limbs frame mangrove islands and alleys; its landscape is raw, primitive and consuming.

Primordial.

The air-boat idles near a mangrove landing. The water’s grey predatory patrollers claim the limp body, feet-first, as it touches the surface. Their scaly eyes protrude casually above the waterline. They are mirrored in my new eyes. Lisa would be shocked, but I am ebullient.

I am free.

The pock-faced deputy with no evident dental plan regards me closely, sweeping his erratic eyes over me without the slightest idea of my acuity. His shiny deputy’s badge displays the name Thorogood, which would be rather more accurate if it were Troglodyte. Another rooky, fresh from Sunday school. Lisa used to like that pastor with his receding hairline and the ever-increasing bank balance. I could have afforded her the time to bid farewell to the fiddling freak. Oh well, too late, Lisa. Self-preservation is paramount.

Troglodyte stares at me. My pose is a duel, for I am the best kind of soldier: an invisible one. You may smirk and consider me feeble, but let me enlighten you, you lanky, inbred redneck. I could end you, right now. Maybe I will. Rifle, perhaps.

‘Errm, ya wanna follow me, then? Sheriff’s a waitin’ for ya, down the hall.’

His shirt gapes at the neck. He lollops ahead like a six-foot tortoise. I smile. And fall into step behind him.
‘Ever considered elocution, Thorogood?’

‘Erm, it’s possible, yessirree. Or lethal ‘jection... ‘less you’re nutty as gramma’s fruitcake...’ He smirks, inanely.

‘And just what happens then, Thorogood?’ On second thoughts, I wouldn’t want to waste a good bullet, so barbed wire around the throat...

‘Ya get haul-assed to Lincoln Institute, that’s what! Yessirree. An’ there ain’t no escapin’ there ‘cept in a box.’ He nods.

Suddenly, I feel contrite for my intentions towards the skinny, half-witted rodent. A good orthodontist might transform his smile, but his intelligence quotient will never improve. And despite my military training, I will not swat him like a fly, not yet. Now, I must curb these quenchable desires, blend in a while. I must remain perspicacious.

I am led into a windowless room with a flickering, fluorescent light and a squeaky fan. Given its size, the room is stiflingly overcrowded as the afternoon heat settles on the desk and three plastic chairs. Troglodyte introduces the sheriff who regards me through narrowed eyes. His shirt buttons strain across a billowing belly. Perhaps the county could hire him as a jumping castle when he’s done with law enforcement? I’d pay to see that. I sit, struggling to retain my composure. My palms begin to sweat. I try to focus, but something inside finds its naissance and responds like kindling.

Overhead, the fan whirs and thwacks like a helicopter. It lures my attention inwards to a time when fairytales were real. A metal bridge; a stationary car, the shade of hand grenades; a five-year-old girl staring at solid, snaking waters metres below. The helicopter hovers, circles, hovers. She is a quiet, stubborn child. Her sister Natalie was the noisy one...

Troglodyte slams down manila files on the desk. He leers at me, exposing joke-shop teeth. Unfazed, I breathe deeply and straighten my jacket, which I notice is stained and wrinkled. Yet I decide to leave it on, remembering my manners for such a formal occasion.

‘So, let’s make a start, shall we?’ the sheriff asks.

I am bored already.

‘Tell us what happened to Tom.’ His flapping under-jaw, lively eyes and large nostrils evoke images of a string-tied hog, waiting to be speared. Kerosene fire. His shiny, pudgy fingers stroke the table and two beads of sweat drop onto a Texas-shaped patch on his shirt. I smother a gag. His porcine eyes fix me, probe me. Yet I remain camouflaged.

Then, as if he foresees all I am about to say, he leans back in his chair, stretches his tree-trunk legs out past the table-end and stares at his ox-blood boots, dusty from the roads that make up this rural backwater. The leather is not worn in. And before I can reply, he gestures, with a twirling finger motion, at Troglodyte, who frowns open-mouthed.

‘Thorogood, we recordin?’ asks the sheriff.

The deputy stands like he has been asked to dance.

‘Sure thing, boss. An’ ya want me to get Abrams in here? She said she’d be vailable.’

‘Good idea, son. Take the bull by the horns.’

‘Never touch’d no bull, boss. Never.’ He leaves the room, his gaze cast downwards.

Where do these specimens come from? The sheriff sighs. I stifle my amusement. He, on the other hand, may have the Hicksville accent but he is not impaired. His eyes bore into me and I am suddenly unnerved. I must be on my guard. Self-preservation is everything.

‘Ah, don’t mind Thorogood. He ain’t done trainin’ yet.’

I nod, trying to regulate my breathing.

‘So, where’s Tom? Reason I’m askin’ is ol’ Harry Beetham tol’ us ‘at Tom hired one o’ his boats on Tuesday. Said, he was fixin’ to go fo’ a pleasure ride. Never came back. Now, ’at was three days ago and the boat’s still missin’. What do ya know ’bout it?’

I have forgotten my discomfort and as the best policy is to always tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, I try.

‘Well, like I told you earlier, on the phone, sheriff, Tom did rent an air-boat and he took... er... me... out on the water for a picnic. I knew what he was going to do, though. I tried to... warn... to stop him, but Lisa never listens to me. She didn’t suspect anything was wrong. Hell! She never knew what he got up to, though the whole town knew.’

‘Knew what, exactly? And where is Tom?’ He scrutinises my expression. Switchblade.

‘The way he carried on with that woman, Lisa’s so-called friend. It’s ironic that infidelity was Tom’s most beguiling trait, don’t you think?’ I can’t help but smirk.

‘Was?’

I shrug. ‘I had no choice. It’s instinct, isn’t it?’
‘I see...’ His features rally. ‘So, Tom was seeing Angie Miller, an’ planning to kill you?’

‘He tried to kill Lisa...’

‘An’ you killed him?’ He has spittle at the corners of his mouth. Acid bath.

‘Lisa understood. She saw it in his hand, you see? He had chloroform and was going to dump her for the alligators. That’s why he set up the picnic charade in the first place; to start afresh, get close again. And she actually believed him. I kept trying to get through to her, but she has always dismissed me.’

He rubs his waxy forehead. ‘I’m not sure I understand. Once again, please. I just wanna get it straight in ma mind.’ The sheriff stares wide-eyed at the mirrored window, as if waiting for something.

‘How many times do I have to say it? He was planning it for weeks. She had no inkling, right up to the last moment. Then, she understood. When that cloth came towards her mouth, he looked into her eyes, expecting to see fear. I guess he found me instead; I finally broke through. Fortunately, she still had the knife in her hand, half-covered in key-lime pie. I suppose the instinct to preserve oneself is paramount, sheriff. And Lisa’s trouble was that she was always too damn trusting. She is quiet and stubborn. Always has been.’

‘Ya tellin’ me that... Lisa... killed Tom? Out in the ‘Glades?’

His perplexed expression, pulled tight across an otherwise unflinching face, allowed the slightest of twitches to surface, like dreams of drowning... No, not now, keep it together. Not the water, the screaming, the screaming... Stay focused.

‘Now, I think you’ve got it!’ I manage a half-laugh in a forced innocuous tone. ‘Yes. Tom planned to kill her but, as providence would have it, she fought back, self-defence.’ I almost applaud the fait accompli.

The sheriff scratches his head, squinting at the pattern on the tiled floor.

‘Okay, so one last time, lemme get this straight...’

‘Oh come on, are you a moron? Is this an underground stupidity movement? How difficult is it to understand? Cliff-top dive. I sigh as he continues.

‘Tom was planning to kill, um, Lisa? And then, um, Lisa killed Tom? Is that what you’re telling me?’ His voice has a subtle impatience now, as if I am wasting his precious fried-chicken-eating time.

I nod, slowly and deliberately, exhibiting a condescending smile. I am past caring.

‘Do you want to know where it happened? Not that there would be much left of him. I can show you where the boat is. And the knife.’

I try to concentrate, but it is hotter than a Kalahari noon in here and the air conditioning is less effective than a battalion of Thorogoods. I start to perspire and feel a solitary trickle snake down my back. The sheriff coughs and slides a finger into his shirt-collar to free his inflatable neck for a moment. He looks at me through hooded eyes. He considers saying something, then hesitates and thinks better of it.

‘Ya like a cold drink? Think I’ll fetch us some iced tea. See what’s keepin’ ma deputy.’

He leaves the room with more agility than a rotund man normally possesses. His shirt, darker in parts, sticks to his abundant flesh as it wobbles with every cumbersome footfall.

Too many doughnuts, not enough combat. Still, the ’gators would be thrilled.

When the door reopens, several minutes later, it is an older woman with the aplomb of an ageing pink flamingo who enters first. Dexterously, she carries several files, a red crocodile-skin case and a steaming black coffee, despite the gazillion-degree temperature. The sheriff waddles in behind her with two glasses of iced tea. He sets one down in front of me, before taking the corner chair. I stand and offer my assistance with her bags. Dismissively and quite abruptly, she declines, dropping all but the coffee onto the desk.

I could squeeze your neck until your eyes pop, you wrinkly whore. I purge the image with a synthetic smile.

She gathers a pad and pen from the clutter and takes a large gulp of coffee. Then, she focuses on me. Her hazel eyes channel an invisible beam of perception straight through my eyes. I have the sensation that she knows precisely who I am; her smile is a hatchet. Yet I do not feel threatened.

‘Hello, I am Doctor Abrams, but you know that already.’

‘I would certainly remember you, Doctor Abrams, if we had previously met. But I am pleased to make your acquaintance,’ I reply, giving her a gracious, sitting half-bow. She begins to write something, as she crosses one long leg over the other.

‘What’s happened to Lisa?’ she asks.

I am stabbed by a revelation.

‘I have met you before, haven’t I?’ I ask, trying to locate the memory, bubbling beneath the surface, in torrid waters. It eludes me.
‘If I’m right, we met about twenty years ago. And before we discuss Lisa, could we talk about that day? About what happened to Natalie? Was it you?’

I am beguiled. She is the only person who could possibly know about me, which is exhilarating. True freedom. A real conversation with someone, as me. She plays to my vanity. I should retreat now. Axe.

‘Tell me about your father. What happened on that bridge?’

‘I don’t know what you are talking ab–’ Within, a spark ignites something, like flammable bile.

‘Did he drop your sister deliberately? I know the report said it was an accident, but I suspected otherwise, especially after I got a glimpse of you.’

I am unable to speak.

‘He threw her, didn’t he?’

I am hot. I claw at my throat.

‘And where was your mother? Did she know? Was she the one to blame?’

The fire combusts; it reflects kaleidoscopic hatred. My words are barely discernible through gritted teeth.

‘Yes. Lisa’s mother was responsible. She left the poor girls on Natalie’s birthday. A four-year-old doesn’t deserve to die.’ The loathing slices the air into razor-sharp shards which stab my throat as I speak.

Oh you are good, Doctor!

I glance at the sheriff who is transfixed by our dialogue. My anger explodes into a million simultaneous mirrors, all reflecting fire.

‘Is that what you want to hear, Doctor? Or, do you want me to say that their father beat them, that he drank, that he forced them to eat whatever they could find and when they cried he beat them even more? But the fact is he didn’t. It was Lisa’s precious mother who abandoned them. Of course he blamed the kids. Especially Natalie. After all, she was the one responsible for the postnatal depression. But you know all this. It’s in your files. Just another case, another sob-story, another social situation. I know you and your views. Those girls were just pitiful trash to you.’

‘On the contrary, I have great respect for Lisa. Coping with trauma like that is admirable. And nothing I write can explain what happens in such circumstances, or minimise the pain. Sometimes we cope in the only way we can.’ She narrows her eyes at me. ‘So tell me, who are you?’

I hesitate. Once it is said, it can never be unsaid.

‘Look over there at that mirror. Tell me who you are.’

I turn to the mirror and stare at Lisa’s vacant, beautiful reflection: her button nose; the scared blue eyes; her grey, linen jacket, now dirty; her blonde, unkempt hair, which is usually so neat. I am momentarily ashamed of taking control.

‘Doctor, of course, I see Lisa. But, you know as well as I do that I’m not Lisa.’

The sheriff whistles through closed teeth. Bayonet through the brain.

‘Then who are you? And why can’t I speak with her?’ she asks.

‘I am Paul Waters. Captain Waters, to be precise. And don’t worry about Lisa; I have never hurt, nor silenced her. I am her saviour. If it wasn’t for me, her father would have thrown her off that bridge, just like Natalie. Poor Natalie. She was screaming so much, I thought he was only going to scare her. Lisa was only a child. What should I have done? If I hadn’t summoned all my strength, my rage, he would have killed her too. I saw it in his eyes. It was the same with Tom. He was going to replace her with that whore. After all that Lisa did for that bottom-dwelling, money-grabbing scumbag. The sad part is that she loved him. If I hadn’t come to her rescue, she would have acquiesced, died without a fight, out there in that muddy water. I couldn’t allow that, Doctor. Where is the respect? She deserves better. I could never hurt Lisa; I am her soldier, her protector. I just wish I could have saved Natalie, too.’

Abrams nods her head, slowly. I am burnt out. The embers in my stomach fade to murky ash, as I try to compose myself.

‘Thank you for being so candid. There are obvious implications. And after the sheriff’s finished processing you, we’ll need to admit you to Lincoln for assessment.’

She starts to collect her scattered belongings.

‘I’ll get Judge Mawson on the phone,’ the sheriff says.

‘I’m sure she’ll request psych evaluation on possible dissociative identity disorder, so I’ll start the ball rolling and make some preparations at the institute. And as soon as she’s ready, you’ll escort Lisa there?’

He nods and bustles into the corridor shouting for Thorogood.

The doctor smiles at me. As I watch her leave, the torrid waters begin to calm. I am tired of this war, but self-preservation is instinctive. Within, the charcoal ashes, still warm, absorb dust. I grasp the cold, metal blade in my pocket.

Razorblade.
I’m eighty-two, I’m entitled,’ he’d say to no one in particular.

It’s Harwood, Cato, or Wright who are my preferred masters; tales of suburbia. Never was one for the bush.

‘Who are you again?’ he’d say to me as I motioned to leave, ‘your voice is familiar.’

When it came time for the final farewell, I tucked a copy of Lawson’s In the Days When the World Was Wide and Other Verses under his head in the coffin as a means of a pillow, with many a dog-eared page to signpost his most revered passages.

‘In case you get lonely,’ I said.

Dog-eared Pages

Charmaine Peters

When in repose his mouth drooped at the corners like the dog-eared pages of a book. On the rare occasion he smiled, it seemed like a betrayal somehow, often catching onlookers unawares with its warm brilliance. To strangers the downturned mouth gave him a sour quality that prompted wariness. Aloofness was a quality he’d nurtured in his professional life as a magistrate; a mask for his compassionate nature. Through the naïve eyes of my youth, those droopy corners were a wonder and a source of amusement. Perched beside the basin watching him shave, I’d crumple my mouth between my fingers and thumbs trying to get my plump skin to cooperate, but the puckers were short-lived and soon returned to their smooth guise.

Together we’d sit – he in his worn armchair, me in his lap – and escape into a book. He favoured bush yarns; Lawson, Patterson, Dennis, and the like. I coveted his easy affection and the jersey caramels we shared in secret. We’d take it in turns to read aloud. He always performed the characters’ voices. His voice was rich and dark the way chocolate mousse is on the palate, so unlike my own boyish pitch. He had this habit of holding my hand in such a way that his thumb would rest in my palm. The circles he made with its heel, always clockwise, delighted yet dampened me until my eyelids grew heavy with sleep. These same honest hands put me to bed and tucked a book beneath my pillow.

‘In case you get lonely,’ he’d say to me.

In the last days of his life it was I who held his hand, the heel of my thumb resting in such a way as to allow the gentle stroking of clockwise circles on his palm. This gesture was a hard-earned honour awarded only after reciting some verse; the timbre of my voice tempered with masculine depth, his reduced to a rasp. The nurses fussed around him with pleasant officiousness, all firm tones and fingers wagging, ‘no sweets allowed’. I’d produce the contraband caramels from my coat pocket with a wink once the staff members were out of sight.
Maybe it was the Spanish blood in him that made him break into Jimmy ‘the Tongue’ Tucker’s beachside condo, help himself to a vodka and lime, and lounge in the shade by the pool to watch the Pacific roll in. Milo could think of a dozen excuses, knew they were all bullshit. He was here because of the brunette in the photo: the Tongue’s girl, Ruby Vegas. He liked the name and the elfish good looks – like Winona Ryder but with a badass rock-chick vibe.

So what was he doing here, getting this close? What did he see in that photo to make him risk a bullet in the back of the skull?

‘Thought you guys’d all gone down to Argo’s?’

Ruby Vegas walked by him. Her hair tied back, she wore an old Metallica singlet, designer-ripped jeans, her bare feet padding like a cat’s paws on the tiles. She had a glass of OJ in one hand and an issue of Rolling Stone tucked under an arm.

‘You s’posed to be watching me?’

‘Not exactly,’ said Milo. ‘Let’s call it a perk.’

She smiled at that. Ruby sat opposite him, on the cane lounge with floral-patterned cushions, one foot tucked under her butt, the Rolling Stone on her lap.

She said, ‘Ain’t you a little short for a Stormtrooper?’

‘Scuse me?’

‘Never mind, bad movie reference.’ She sipped her OJ. ‘You prob’ly get the bad jokes all the time, about your height. Sorry, I’m the kind tends to state the bleeding obvious… So you’re new round here?’

‘Just on the books.’

‘But you been in the business a while. You got that look.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Like you don’t trust no one. You guys’re all so guarded, defensive.'
Always standing ‘round, posing, trying to look like hard-asses. You’re all just big kids with guns.

‘You’re talking like you don’t dig the life anymore.’

‘You could say the shine’s worn off. Used to be a certain appeal in that macho bullshit, but it wears thin quick. A girl starts wanting more and realises there ain’t no more where she is, she’s got herself a one trick pony and the trick ain’t doin’ it for her no more.’

‘You’ve had enough of the Tongue,’ said Milo.

Ruby studied him for a beat, smiled. ‘You’re cheeky. None of his other guys have a sense of humour. Too worried Jimmy’ll pop ‘em if they look at me the wrong way.’ She made a gun out of her hand and put the barrel to her head when she said ‘pop ‘em’.

‘He know you’re leaving?’

Don’t panic. I don’t give a shit if you tell him. I know he’s been fucking one of those girls down at Argo’s. Shit, probably more than one. What bothers me is you sitting there. A new guy. What the fuck does Jimmy need a new guy for? He don’t trust the goons he’s got? And leaving the new guy in his home, alone with his girl? The Tongue don’t trust his own mother that much. So what’s so special about you, New Guy?’

‘You’ve got an idea.’

‘Got a couple. One I don’t want to think about, makes me wish I’d splashed a little more vodka in my OJ.’

Milo smiled and lifted his glass. ‘Like mine with soda water and a squeeze of lime.’

‘I’ll remember that for next round. So you got a name?’

‘Milo Carter.’

‘You’re American, but there’s something else in your accent.’

‘Spent some time in Europe. Italy and Spain, mostly; did a few jobs in France and the UK.’

‘My mother would say, “See that Milo, Ruby, that one’s cultured”’. To her, travelled equals cultured.’

‘Wouldn’t say cultured. Type of work I do, s’where the money is.’

‘You like some pint-sized hitman?’

‘They call me a contractor, a fixer. You seen Pulp Fiction, the Tarantino movie, got John Travolta and Samuel Jackson?’

‘And Bruce Willis is the boxer, yeah.’

‘When Jackson blows that kid’s head off in the car and–’

‘Travolta. Jackson’s driving and Travolta shoots the kid in the throat.’

‘Don’t matter who did it. They go off to Tarantino’s house and call Harvey Keitel to sort it all out, keep ‘em out of the shit. S’what I do, but I’m not as suave as he is. Usually deal with tricky problems: the kind people want to keep secret; the kind people pay big bucks to make go away.’

She nodded, her brow creased, thinking. ‘They call him, “the Wolf” – Keitel’s character.’

‘Yeah. Winston Wolf.’

‘Tell me something, Milo. You here to solve a problem for Jimmy?’

Milo looked into his glass. His thoughts went back to his meeting with Jimmy the Tongue...

More coffee?

Milo’s gaze flicked over the pouting waitress. The blouse pulled tight over her pushed-up breasts, the strip of material about her waist barely covering her arse, the long legs. He had a taste for young white women, but couldn’t stand the crude Australian drawl coming out of her mouth. If only he were still in Europe and this woman had a French or Spanish accent.

‘Not yet.’

They could have been clones, with their three-day growth, scruffy designer hair styles and Armani suits. The first entered the coffee house and stopped to straighten his jacket while he surveyed the interior. His gaze lingered on Milo a beat longer than necessary, before he crossed to the counter and mounted a stool. Milo caught the bulge by the left breast and figured a shoulder-holstered Glock. The Glock being the weapon of choice for law enforcement agencies and wannabe gangsters. The second followed the routine of the first and took a seat at the booth behind Milo. Two more entered, one in a suit, the other in jeans and a white button-up shirt, the sleeves rolled to the elbows, his fingers gleamed with gold. This would be Jimmy the Tongue.

‘You’re not what I was expectin’,’ said Jimmy.

‘You’re late,’ said Milo indicating the seat opposite. The suit slid in first, then Jimmy. ‘And if my stature is going to be a problem...’

‘You threw me, is all. Only time I ever seen a dwarf is at the circus.’

‘Let’s put this to bed. I’m not a dwarf. Dwarves, like elves and wizards, belong in fairy tales. You can snigger and smirk and make whatever sly comments you want about my height, but remember: my time is expensive. It’s your money you’re wasting.’
‘Been hearing rumours ‘bout this European fixer holidaying in town,’ said Jimmy. ‘Those in the know say your kind don’t know how to relax, that you’re here on business. After all, who comes to this shithole of a town for a holiday?’

Milo shrugged. ‘Maybe I’m visiting. Got a lot of friends, some I don’t get to see often as I like.’

‘You got a helluva reputation for getting things done. I like that. You do what’s got to be done, no questions asked. You don’t hold back, you ain’t squeamish. I hear these stories ‘bout you and I think, I’ve got to meet this guy, we got a lot in common. So I call a guy I know who calls a guy you know...’

Milo drained the last of his short black. ‘So you arrange a meeting then leave me twiddling my thumbs for twenty-five minutes. And now you sit there gasbagging and I’m wondering what the fuck I’m doing here.’

Jimmy the Tongue stiffened, his eyes hardened. The goon beside him sent a hand beneath his jacket, as if he wanted to scratch his armpit. Milo heard movement behind him.

Jimmy said, ‘Fair enough. You’re a man with a reputation, you’ve earned respect. You don’t deserve to be sitting ‘round waiting for some dickhead like me. Okay, I’ll cut to the chase, since your time’s important. I got this piece of arse that’s doin’ the dirty on me. Sure as shit I didn’t give it to her. Not some piece of arse that don’t mean shit to me except a good time.’

Jimmy slid a photo across the table. ‘Calls herself Ruby Vegas.’

A brunette, that’s all Milo took in at the time. Later, lounging in his apartment, he’d study that image and wonder what it was about this girl that fascinated him.

Milo said, ‘Let me play devil’s advocate here. This girl hasn’t stolen your money; all she’s done is pound some other guy’s balls. Why the fuck do you need me? She ain’t on the lamb with your cash, your goon squad can deal with the guy’s been cutting your grass.’

Jimmy leaned over the table. ‘This business is about power and respect. You gotta know that better’n me, considering how long you been in it. Me’n my boys’re just coming up, making a name. Got the scavengers and predators sniffing ‘round, wanting a piece of my action. I gotta have street cred, gotta let it be known: don’t fuck with Jimmy the Tongue. Having you involved gives me clout, gets me respect.’

‘You’re setting this girl up.’

‘Sure as shit. By the time I finished with her and this young surfer, people gonna think twice before messing with Jimmy the Tongue. I’ll let you know when it goes down. Bring her to me, but all I want of him is his balls.’

‘I don’t deal in body parts.’

‘Fine. Bring them both to me.’

‘So I doubt the Tongue had anything good to say about me, not since I found out he’s screwing that stripper,’ said Ruby, handing him another drink. They’d moved to the Balinese hut at the ocean-end of the pool. From here, Milo could taste the salt in the air and hear the gentle crash of waves on the beach below. He watched her cut extra lime, her fingers long and slender, the nails a midnight blue.

‘Kept droning on about reputation and respect. Met plenty like him in my time; make a bit of cash getting teenagers selling drugs and all of a sudden they’re the Godfather. Think they’re running an organisation, starting their own Mafia.’

Ruby laughed and Milo liked that about her too. ‘So what’s he want done with me?’

Milo shrugged. ‘Nothing pretty. He’s using us both to boost his reputation. Spreading the word I’m on his payroll. Gonna take you and your surfer boyfriend, make an example of you.’

Ruby gulped her vodka and stared out to sea. Wind caught stray locks of her hair, made it dance.

‘You okay?’

‘Why’d you come here, Milo? What did you hope to achieve? ’ She looked at him, her eyes wet with the threat of tears, yet Milo saw strength in there too, building a dam.

He said, ‘I don’t like being played.’

‘I’m used to it. Realised a few months ago that’s all my life has been. Jimmy don’t like a woman that talks back. Don’t like a woman that talks at all. Just wants an accessory he can fuck. S’what I’ve been. Sad, huh?’

‘What about the surfer, it serious?’

‘Brent? I don’t know. He’s good-looking, built. Surfing does that to a guy. And he treats me... like I never been treated. Was even gonna run off with me. Told me not to worry about Jimmy’s money.’

‘Think you can do that, start a new life?’

‘Don’t have one as it is. I’m so fucking sick of gangsters. With Brent...’

‘What?’

She shrugged. ‘Prob’ly sound like a giddy schoolgirl, but with Brent I feel like
I’ve got a chance, y’know. A life. Kids. Shit, who knows.’ Ruby laughed and it sounded light and free. Her eyes and face shone and Milo felt his heart leap.

And he knew what it was that caught his attention in the photo. It was that yearning for something more. It was hope.

Hope.

‘Want another drink?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘You got a bag packed?’

‘What?’

Milo leaped from the stool and marched for the house. ‘You’ve been planning this so I’m thinking there’s luggage ready. Where were you gonna run off to?’

‘Overseas,’ Ruby rushed after him, ‘somewhere I could lie low for a while.’

‘You’re gonna need money – Jimmy can help with that. Call your boyfriend, tell him to get to the airport.’

Pretending he hadn’t noticed Jimmy and the suited goon lurking in the airport gaming area, Milo pushed open the toilet door and went inside. An enclosed trolley sat by the opposite wall, a ‘Closed for cleaning’ sign resting against it. Milo checked the cubicles were empty, then moved to the teardrop-shaped urinals and made like he was taking care of business.

The door swung open and Jimmy strode in, followed by the goon.

‘What’s goin’ on, Milo? You ain’t called. I’m worried ‘bout my girl. And ‘bout my cash.’

Jimmy pointed at the cleaning sign and motioned for his minion to sit it outside the toilet door. ‘Now we don’t need to worry ‘bout interruptions.’

While the goon stayed by the door, Jimmy moved in close behind Milo.

‘Went by your place this afternoon, had a chat with Ruby by the pool,’ Milo said over his shoulder.

‘That what I paid you for, short-ass?’

Milo wiped the spittle from the back of his neck. ‘You paid for my reputation. That was the deal, wasn’t it?’

‘You ripped me off.’

Milo shrugged. ‘You get what you pay for.’

‘You’re gonna give me that bitch and my money – all my money.’

‘I don’t know what’s funnier: you acting the hard-ass, or thinking that I give a shit!’

Jimmy grabbed Milo by the collar, shoved him forward. Milo dropped on his haunches and the movement pulled the Tongue off balance, sent him sprawling toward the urinal. There came a satisfying slap of flesh against porcelain. Milo rose, shrugging Jimmy’s weight from his back and shoulders and spun to face the goon. The suit remained by the door, gaping.

Jimmy landed on his arse between urinals. He lifted a hand to the cut above his right eye and wiped blood away.

‘You little fucker,’ he said.

Milo straightened his coat. ‘We done here?’

‘You think you’re protecting that bitch? I’ll track her down soon enough.’ Jimmy the Tongue rose and pulled a toothbrush from his pocket. ‘You know what this is?’

‘That a trick question?’

‘In the joint, they call it a shiv.’ He nodded to the suit by the door. ‘Mario did a little time for B and E, this is what he learned.’

‘You gotta heat it with a lighter or something–’

‘Shut up, Mario. All you need to know, Mr European-fucking-dwarf, s’gotta point and a blade and it’s gonna do you damage.’

Milo said, ‘You sure you want to push this, Jimmy?’

Jimmy came at Milo fast, whipping the shiv at his face. Milo stepped to the side, drove a punch into his balls. Air exploded from him and Jimmy dropped to his knees, eyes bulging. A head-butt smashed the Tongue’s nose and Milo plucked the shiv from his hand as he crumpled to the floor.

‘Fuck,’ said Mario.

Milo felt the weight of the shiv in his hand. ‘You wanna live, Mario, go now.’

As Mario fled the room, Jimmy stirred.

‘I fix problems for people, Jimmy. I’m not in the goon-for-hire business. I don’t cut people up or kill ’em, unless I have to. And I’m thinking this is one of those situations.’

Grabbing a handful of hair, Milo slammed Jimmy’s head into the tiles and dragged him into a cubicle, locking the door behind him.

Forcing Jimmy’s mouth open, Milo said, ‘They ain’t gonna be calling you Jimmy the Tongue no more.’
My pen poised before
Clouds of thought descend upon
The white winter’s page.

Only on the page
Can I see my humble world
End in a full stop.
The meat resisted for a moment, but eventually I managed to tear it from the bone with my teeth. I swallowed without chewing enough. I almost choked, but I immediately went back for more. It wasn’t well cooked to be honest. It was burnt on the outside and too rare on the inside for my liking. My lack of cooking skills, however, has never bothered me much as I’m not a fussy eater. These two attributes really complement each other.

I raised my head and used the back of my arm to wipe the juices away from my chin. Across the campfire my two companions stared at me, doing little to hide their contempt. They were judging me and wanted me to know this. It had been duly noted, but they didn’t fool me. They focussed on their hatred, but they couldn’t ignore the hunger eating away at them. I caught Lance licking his lips. A part of them wanted to tuck in too. I had already offered them the chance to join me. It was up to them to accept and admit they were wrong to judge me so quickly.

There had been controversy over my decision concerning Adam. It wasn’t easy for me. I didn’t want to do what I did. However, his leg was broken and the bone was piercing through the skin. There was no help for miles and as soon as it got infected he’d be no good to any of us. I made an executive decision to assist him with his medical problem. I will admit that I didn’t think it would be so difficult to do. The piece of metal from the wreckage seemed more than adequate to do the job. The piece of metal from the wreckage seemed more than adequate to do the job. The piece of metal from the wreckage seemed more than adequate to do the job. The piece of metal from the wreckage seemed more than adequate to do the job. The piece of metal from the wreckage seemed more than adequate to do the job. After a while, my arm became sore from lifting the piece of metal up and down so often. If Lance and Troy hadn’t tried to stop me, the whole fiasco would have lasted half as long. I had explained to them in detail why it had to be done, but they just weren’t ready
to listen to reason.

I’m feeling quite full now and there is still plenty of meat to go round. They just have to ask and it’s theirs. If not, I think it’ll keep for tomorrow. Lance informed me moments ago, with Troy backing him up, that I will be going to hell. I guess I’ll deal with that when I get to it. For all they know, we are all going to hell and they’re just making sure they get there first. Yet they still sit there and preach to me after all I’ve done. Well that’s their problem, not mine. They can die with their morals. I’d rather survive.

Muse

Mark Attwood

Long fingers, dextrous, her soul shapes chords,
The lilt and song of her voice ensnares you,
Peels back your skin and delves within.

She enters your veins and arteries,
Rides the red highways of your being,
Bringing light and warmth to the buried thing within.

She is enthusiasm and despair,
A frozen heartbeat waiting for a stab of adrenaline.

She is hope and yearning,
A being sublime who hooks the soul and cannot be removed.
If you are going to read this, there are three things you should know about this story:

I am a dog. I know love. I will die.

I was not born into this world. I was flung into it. A man tossed my mother’s body – her belly sliced open – into a ditch, unaware that I was still inside. It was the only time in my life that I can say I have flown. A small patch of clovers caught me. The sack that attached me to my mother split and the world pushed at the opening, forcing its way in. My legs twitched and I raised my blind head searching for milk.

For warmth.

For a heartbeat.

There is nothing more alone than a small, new soul with only a maternal corpse for company.

I do not know how long I lay there, but I know I was crying. It was chance that he heard me, out on his daily hike. My pitiful cries leading him to the roadside. A wall of warmth surrounded me as I was lifted from the ground and placed alongside a beating song that sang with my own.

He was the first one I loved.

His hands are what I remember most. They became my saviours. My bed. My home. It was from those cupped, veined hands that I opened my eyes for the first time and looked into his moulded-clay face. He fed me bottles of milk from those hands and afterwards I nibbled on his finger-tips; they tasted of years steeped in earth and gravel. They were workers’
hands – hard, deft and strong – but they were kind. I grew, as everything young does, and while I could no longer fit in those hands, I never outgrew them. They would frequently mould to the curve of my head or the arch of my spine. As we sat on the dusty wooden steps, those hands would wedge into the cleft of my shoulder and I would feel warm, like the sun itself had placed me in its sleeve. We would tramp over the countryside together. He loved to touch the trunks of the trees and run his hands over the gnarls and knots. At times, his hands seemed to blend with the trunk. When this happened, I would be overcome with a desire to lick his knuckles and every time I did he would say, ‘good boy’. I would swim in the creeks, collecting the sticks he threw for me, and from this I built strong legs.

We were a good team. I would hunt out the snakes around the property and bring them to him, so he could chop their heads off with a shovel. If the chickens wouldn’t come into the coop when he called, I would chase them in so he wouldn’t have to. In the evenings we sat in the old floral recliner and he would tell me stories of the stars. Yes, we were a good team.

Although, there were things I could not help him with. Like the way his abdomen slowly sank into his hips, like a building on soft earth. He began to forget to walk his lands. Or eat. Sometimes he would just sit in his chair and repeat names and dates to himself. If I had had hands I would have cradled him in them, like he once did for me, but instead I sat with my head on his knee and gave him my company.

His family came and deemed him unfit. He tried to demand that I should come with him, but he was told it was not allowed. A feeble man’s protests are like that of a dog’s; unheard and unwanted. A stranger held my leash as he was rolled away. I whined and he turned. Tears traced lines down his cheeks. The last thing I saw were his hands, lifted towards me in a beggar’s salute.

My saviours.

My bed.

My home.

The house we pulled up to was wooden with shutters on the windows and a verandah that wrapped around the house. At first glance it seemed normal, but after a while the shutters became hooded eyes, blank and untrusting. The verandah became a noose that was squeezing the frame of the building, until the stress started to show. There were broken boards, cracks etching the paintwork, and popped nails scattered on the ground. He opened the car door and called me out. The dirt was cold against my paws and the same smell of blood and rust hit me. At the side of the house was another man with the wrong face, his features bulged, stretching at the edges. He sat on a barrel, oiling a pile of chains. He looked up as we approached.

‘He looks a bit runty that one Levi, ay?’ he said.

‘Nah, I think he’ll do alright actually,’ Levi said. He led me around the back. A small girl squatted in the dirt, cradling a sick looking chick. She was slight of frame, the grass chains on her wrists encircling twice and still hanging at the bottom. Her knotted straw hair sat up on her head. She was covered in a layer of dirt, but a sweet smell of orange and cinnamon lingered around her. When she looked up I could see her eyes were bright and full of sympathy.

‘What ya doing Pria?’ Levi said to her.

‘Nothing, just playing.’

‘What’s that ya got in your hand?’

‘It’s my friend.’ She placed one of her hands on top of the chick, hiding it from view.

‘What did I tell you about that?’ Levi said as he strode towards her. ‘It’s worthless.’

‘It’s not, it’s my friend.’

Levi grabbed the chick from her and dashed it against the side of the house. Pria ran to the crumpled body lying discarded in the dirt. She cradled her friend in her hands as tears welled in her eyes. I trotted to her and licked her cheek. A line of clear, white skin appeared amidst the dirt, tracing where my tongue had travelled. She looked at me with gratitude and rewarded me with a small smile.

Levi grabbed my lead and dragged me away from her towards a large shed at the bottom of the yard. From inside I could hear the clink of chains and the desperate whines of other dogs. My stomach clenched and I dug my legs into the ground. Pria ran to my side.

‘Come on ya dumb mutt,’ Levi said, pulling me forward and kicking me in the side. My lungs constricted from the blow and I felt sick. As I was dragged inside the shed, Pria stood watching helplessly with the body of the small chick still cradled in her hands.
Inside the shed were ten cages. They were bent and most were caked with dried blood, urine and faeces. The shed had the haunted, fetid scent of fear. There were five dogs in cages and another dog that had collapsed in the corner under a thick chain laden with weights. Its face and body were covered in puncture wounds. There was a nasty gash in its lip which had been clumsily stapled together and part of its right ear was missing. The rest of the dogs were in a similar condition.

Levi called out to the other man who was putting the chained dog into a cage. ‘This one needs some strengthenin’,’ he said and dragged me to the chains. I struggled under the weight and started to panic and thrash. I tried to bite through the chains and snapped at the men’s hands. The men laughed.

‘He’s got some fight in him, that’s good,’ Levi said. In the shade of the shed, his folds seemed darker than ever. The men left me to the dark, the feel of the cold metal, and an empty cramped cage for company.

A metal scraping came from the back of the shed and then a scent of oranges and cinnamon drifted into the air. The smell was too sweet for the darkened, festering shed. Pria crawled towards me from the shadows.

‘Hey little doggie,’ she said.

I gave her a small wag of my tail and she crawled forward to stroke my paw with her fingers. My wave of panic receded. I licked her knuckles and allowed her sweet smell to warm me.

She was the second one I loved.

I spent long hours bottled up in a cage. Sometimes they would put my cage side by side with the other dogs. They would growl and snap their strong jaws, slamming their bodies against the sides of their cages, trying to get to me. Their eyes were red-misted. After periods of this, I became drunk on the pheromones, until I descended into the darkness as well. Afterwards my gums would be bloody and my paws swollen.

One morning, I was taken outside with one of the other dogs, that the men called Crater. We were led to a post that had a small, wire-haired dog tied to it. He skittered and struggled as we approached. They made me sit next to them and then released Crater. The little one’s life was crushed in a fierce snap of a jaw. Crater whipped his head back and forth. The dew on the grass shone red in the sun.

I tried to do what they wanted. It is in my nature to please. I was smaller than some of the other dogs, but I was quicker and stronger. In my practise bouts with them I began to learn. Dodge their lunge. To train. Bite their tail. To anticipate. They turn in reflex. To dominate. Pin them down. To kill. Crush their throat. I borrowed a killer’s mask.

Pria wouldn’t come every day, but she would always come eventually. As I began to lose myself to the darkness, I would smell the hint of orange and cinnamon on the air and my heart would lift. I would lick her knuckles and stare at her bright eyes, while she told me of the adventures we would soon have. Her tenderness saved me.

During one of her visits we heard the sound of Levi approaching. She kissed my forehead and then disappeared out the back of the shed. Levi entered and forced me from my cage.

‘Your time’s here, little mutt.’

I was driven to a large clearing by a brown-tinged river. Men surrounded a central dirt ring and I saw other dogs adorned with battle scars. I was led into the ring to face the other dog. I felt his dominance coming off him in waves. My lip curled and a growl announced my challenge. He attacked first. With hackles raised, we wrestled together on the ground. My heart beat against my chest, pumping my blood through my veins and calling to his teeth. I felt them sink into my ear and rip away the tip. He lunged and I dodged him and bit down on his tail. His blood filled my mouth. I pinned him to the dirt with my mouth to his throat. I could hear the men cheering. One shake was what my instincts were telling me.

But his blood was in my mouth.

I could taste the cold ash of fear. His eyes rolled wildly with panic. My eyes met with Levi’s across the ring. An eager smile split across his face. I stared at him as I lifted my mouth from the dog’s throat. He saw the defiance in my eyes. I lay on my back at the dog’s feet.

Submission.

Levi was on me before I could take another breath. He wrapped a chain around my throat and dragged me to the water. I felt his blows to my head and body. I felt my ribs crack as pain lashed down my side. I saw stars through my eyes and my lungs spasmed for air. Water filled my throat. A buzzing chill spread through my limbs, making them feel like foreign objects. They were heavy. My heartbeat slowed. A hint of orange and cinnamon danced in my nose and as the cold seeped through my veins I felt his cupped hands under my body. His hands cradling me as my life slowly drained. Blackness crept at the edge of my vision.

I was released.
I strap the creative to the table, shackle hands and feet and strap the head down to prevent unexpected movement. He may experience some pain and a sudden jerk would render this procedure obsolete.

The creative is not what I imagined. When the Separator divided us, I expected a being more than myself; but this thing is less, a mockery. He is an abstract version of myself, the Hyde to my Jekyll; he is the abused portrait of Dorian Gray.

The eyes are dark pinpoints. Not the eyes of one who looks upon beauty, horror and disgust with awe and wonder, but those of one who observes, notes and catalogues.

The ears are too large.

The lips are ink black.

He has no voice of his own.

I lift the metafictional power saw and sink the rotating blade into his cranium, follow the black line circumnavigating the crown of his shaved head. The cap comes away with a delightful pop, exposing a nest of cables like a bowl of boiled spaghetti awaiting the red splash of bolognaise and shavings of parmesan. Along the length of some I can decipher fragments of words, labels perhaps, indications of purpose.

The skull-cap is well-balanced and spins across the room, bounces from the wall, into the bin.

Score!

I begin methodically, lifting sterilised surgical clamps in each hand and choose my favourite colour: teal. I trace it through the knot, searching for the alpha or the omega of it, but the teal fades into another colour, and another, and so on. I withdraw cables. Some are rigid and unwieldy, others pliable. The thickness of the strands does not indicate how strong the cable will be.

Tossing the clamps aside I take great handfuls of cable and rip them from the cavity; segregating each but finding there is no beginning, no end. I’m standing in the midst of a giant, multi-coloured Mobius strip; circularity folded back on itself. The nexus is where thoughts collide and rests within the cranial cavity. Fingers of ribbon peel away to the eyes, the nose, the mouth and ears. More still stretch down past the Medulla Oblongata – the primitive brain, the bit responsible for basic motor function – into the spinal cavity and extend to other sensory nodes: the finger-tips, the nipples, the penis and anus, the ticklish spot on your left flank, that ridiculous point on the elbow you always manage to hit and even the softest impact brings incredible pain – pain so bad it makes you laugh.

I wheel the Collidescope – that metafictional device for observing how ideas are created – into place and focus the lens on that point where thoughts collide and become something new. Words draw my attention, they say:

I strap the creative to the table, shackle hands and feet and strap the head down to prevent unexpected movement. He may experience some pain and a sudden jerk would render the investigation obsolete.

The creative is not what I imagined…

I don’t get it.
Sitting alone along an elm-lined street, the manor groaned in anguish from the abuse of the midday sun. The oppressive heat sullied the thick curtains that enshrouded each double hung window in a pall of shadow and malevolence. The heat had fed upon the rubber linings of the windows and doors, creating rivulets of molten gloop that seeped down the walls as if the house were weeping. The lieutenant rocked on his heels as the probe was pulled from the small hole made within the oak door. He knew that the smell was caused by disease and corruption; he knew that behind this door was a fouled semblance of order in decay. There was little reason to wait; the Public Trust had solid information regarding infringements of the Supreme Law concerning this particular residence. The lieutenant motioned to one of the apprentices to relinquish his grip on the dual-handled ram. This mission would endure as a great triumph in his career; he would be the one to charge the door, not a mere grey-coat. His voice was low yet authoritative. ‘Be confident, brothers. Our service will be recounted with pride and parade. Keep your apprentice in sight; watch your line of fire.'
Jensen, you’re on point with Holmes. Safety off. Let’s move.’

The door shattered under the heavy blow from the reinforced steel ram. Tumbling pieces of splintered wood bounced across the polished floor like rim shots. A staccato of boot-clad footfalls hammered the boards as Black Squad charged into the stately house. The large foyer was curtained by two imposing staircases that wrapped their way along the far oblong wall to a balcony floor above. In the time it took the heavy-set lieutenant to regain his composure and dust his armoured jacket down, his heavily-armed tactical squad had determined the foyer and first-floor balcony of the old timber manor to be clear of imminent threat. Four armour-suited pairs covered and advanced around one another in a synchronised dance to secure the two sprawling living rooms in the centre of the house while a separate force scouted the manor from across the manicured lawn, emerging between the hedges to meet their compatriots by the servants’ entrance at the rear. The lieutenant watched the first squad secure the library and living quarters on the first floor. In the thirty years of his Public Trust experience in the Supreme Guard, the lieutenant had never been confronted with a sight like the one before him. From the vaulted ceiling hung a great pendulum of crystal shards, a vibrant vista of colour and adornment, as useless as it was obscene. Several apprentices could be heard quietly whispering the prayer:

*Life for the Leader.*

*Loyalty for the Union.*

*Thoughts for the Truth.*

*Actions for the Sceptre.*

The lieutenant had anticipated that the resident would be home. He had prepared for a confrontation; a fight, a standoff, even an illegally-raised voice but what the lieutenant and his Black Flag operatives did encounter would change their lives forever.

The interior of the house was an alien sight. On countless furnishings, cabinets and shelving were hundreds, if not thousands of forbidden religious icons and relics: from stone buddhas to crucifixes, illegal flags and banners adorned with stripes and stars and colours of nations past. On display were infringements of every manner of gaiety: from alcoholic beverages to posters of scantily-clad women, from taboo histories of nations past. On display were infringements of every manner of faith from stone buddhas to crucifixes, illegal flags and banners adorned with stripes and stars and colours of nations past. On display were infringements of every manner of gaiety: from alcoholic beverages to posters of scantily-clad women, from taboo histories of nations past. On display were infringements of every manner of faith.

Many of the operatives disguised their awe with nonchalance as their lieutenant took in the garish surrounds. He had never before felt such a conflict of emotions. Every instance of evil exemplified in his youth education was apparent within this shrine to opulence, yet he felt a sense of pride and elation at having uncovered this abundant arsenal of abhorrence. The lieutenant began to think further afield; with some political ingenuity, he could advance his career immeasurably. The possibilities flooded his mind as he paced from room to room; a promotion, higher commissions, perhaps even a chance to secure a marriage licence. With eyes transfixed upon his own reflection in the shining surface of a solid-gold dinner plate, the lieutenant resolved to report his findings personally and directly to the Sceptre. The men of Black Squad made no eye contact and said nothing to each other. The only sound inside the decrepit structure was the whispered groaning of the walls.

Hurry. In fifteen minutes you are expected in the Office of Truth. Stop wringing your hands, it’s unbecoming. Power resides from preparation and posture. Your whole life has been crafted to excel in the task you will complete today.

Wear a mask of nonchalance as you walk quickly towards the lift, appreciate now; the grey-coat sentinel is not privy to your schedule, merely your status as signified by your superior birthright. Do not make eye contact. Do not engage in idle chat. He is beneath you. He is a grey-coat and you are not.

*Up.* The gilded button illuminates a deep red around its edges. You stare at it, the vivid colour reminiscent of the bonfire and branding ceremony every adolescent endures to become a citizen. You feel a surge of pride and purpose welling inside your heart. A magnificent speech from the righteous Supreme Leader echoes loud and resolute through to your very core. Your fingers caress the raised flesh on your forearm as you recount the sea of shimmering red flags, the brilliant glow of the purity fires and the pleasure of being marked with your number. 1-0-3-0-4-5. In the distance you hear a bell chime:

*Life for the Leader.*

*Loyalty for the Union.*

‘It won’t come any faster the longer you hold it.’

Your reverie shatters at the interruption. Turn your face towards the offending grey-coat, give him a steely stare, yet say nothing. You will report his outburst some other time. Forget about him for now. Focus on the task at hand.

Inside the lift, inspect the crisp figure staring back from the mirrored glass interior. You look impeccable. This is appropriate considering your audience this morning. Turn to face the music. A polychromatic symphony cascades from a square-set interior. You look impeccable. This is appropriate considering your audience this morning. Turn to face the music. A polychromatic symphony cascades from a square-set speaker below the lift control surface. The precise notes reflect the synchronicity of your stature within the state. The small backlit display counts:

4...5... thou shall idolise the one true Supreme Leader... 6...7... thou shall uphold the laws of the state... 8...9... thou shall strive for collectivism... 10...11... thou shall renounce false religion... 12... thou shall report any infraction of the law... 13...14...

Straighten your collar and tie, remain in control of your emotions, resist the
urge to smile. You know they are watching you through the Sceptre in the lift ceiling.

At last, the countdown has ended. You feel calm and even a little giddy. All of your past experience reminds you that in the whole scheme of things, you are but a cog in the vast factory of the Ultimate World Union. You are not an individual, yet you are important, for what is a colony of bees without its skilled workers? As the buzzing tremor begins, first in your toes and stomach, crawling, shaking through your spine and tickling your back teeth you begin to feel an overwhelming sense of euphoria as you step beyond the iron gates of the lift and step proudly onto the fifteenth floor.

Prepare your thoughts and rehearse your introductions. Whatever you do, do not give away any indication that you expect them to reward you, arrogance is unbecoming. You must remain in control of your emotions; you cannot afford to lose the initiative.

Make your way across the carpeted hallway framed with small office cubicles occupied by the diligent disciples of the bureau. They are waiting for you inside the glass-panelled room at the far end of the floor. As you reach the bronze-framed mirrored-glass doors you are engulfed in a serene wash of silence. Your fears dissipate as your nervous energy dissolves. You are ready, you are righteous and your reward is well deserved.

It is done. You have given your witness testimony. They talk amongst themselves now. Lower your gaze. Be patient. They must verify what you tell them is true.

‘Black Squad,’ they say, ‘Deploy Black Squad.’

They send out an official telecommunication. Your reward is coming. Be patient. Breathe. They are watching you, assessing you. A transmission is returned.

One of them mumbles, ‘Black Squad confirms it. The information is accurate.’

‘You have performed your duty this day,’ says the bearded one. Look at them in the eyes. Thank them for the opportunity to serve the Ultimate World Union. They are about to give you your reward when the phone rings. Lower your gaze again. There is a shouting voice emanating from the phone. Whoever is on the other end of the line outranks every man in this room.

‘Yes sir. I understand. Immediately, sir.’

The phone call ends. The men begin arguing. Several official transmissions are made.

‘It’s too late,’ says one of the men, ‘Black Squad’s already inside.’

‘We’ll have to clean-scrub it.’ Several more transmissions are made along with a certain amount of bickering. Just as you think they have forgotten you, the bearded one addresses you, by name no less.

‘Mr Patterson, how would you like to work for the Office of Truth?’ Look him in the eyes. Keep the smile off your face. Tell him it would be your honour. ‘Good,’ he replies, ‘because we’ve just had a position open up.’

Hang your esteemed award of Servitude of the Sceptre to the left of the framed Certificate of Marriage Entitlement. In a matter of days you will be given a wife, your clearance level will be elevated and your future assured as a Black tactical squad lieutenant. Sit smug in a halo of glory, sip gingerly on your cup of tea and admire the spacious, commissioned office. The prayer tone chimes from the Sceptre mounted on the opposite wall.

Life for the Leader.
Loyalty for the Union.
Thoughts for the Truth.
Actions for the Sceptre.

Peruse the broadsheet paper before you and re-read the headline that you were instrumental in creating:

The Reichskonkordat Standard

TERRORIST HOSTAGE PLOT FOILED BY INFORMANT

An anonymous informant has been awarded the coveted Servitude of the Sceptre upon providing detailed evidence of a well-planned conspiracy to assassinate the Chairman of Commerce. A measure of security details have been kept to a minimum for fear of copycat attempts by future terrorist cells however Master of Cultural Affairs, Chief Greg Pell has verified that a well-armed and professionally trained group were engaged within the undisclosed private premises of the Chairman. In total 23 armed assailants were apprehended, tried and executed as a result of one member of the community reporting his suspicions to AWARE. In a press release provided to the The Reichskonkordat Standard:

“We are grateful to the informant, whose identity shall remain confidential. His description of the run-down nature of the premises led us to rightly ascertain that the owner, the esteemed Chairman had been taken hostage within his own premises. Without the diligence and exacting information provided by the public, as shown in this case, we would not be winning the War on Terror. Congratulations to the recipient, he was justly rewarded for his excellence in civil duty.”

Continued page 6.
It is on the road to Byron when I realise I’ve left her behind. It must have been at least an hour ago that I last thought about her. Did she have hazel or green eyes? Stuck now, in a headless snarling snake of exhausts, I try to remember. The oncoming traffic wanes and for a moment the Beatles give way to the cicadas. Green, definitely.

The buoyant momentum I’ve been experiencing of a day away has become an inert myopia of misgiving. What else can’t I remember? In my mind, the indistinct portraits of our past seem to fragment further when I try to see, as if I am attempting to put a jigsaw together in the dark. A corner crawls up underneath the car and I slowly turn the wheel.

The kaleidoscope you bought. I remember that; an op-shop curio that I clumsily dropped. And with that, what had been bright and clear became opaque and vague. We crawled on for a bit, after that, I even bought another, but it wasn’t the same. I’ve travelled this road before, but at this speed it is painful.

So have I really left you behind? The conjured broken images suggest I am departing. In my mirrors, the traffic is choked back as far as I can see and a haze has settled above it through which sunlight throws brackish tones. Hazel eyes? I honestly can’t remember. I stall the car after braking for the umpteenth time. It starts again and I slowly move forward.

In the afternoon sun the wattle scent is heady. I inhale deeply and feel a shift in energy; the smell reminds me of our better times last spring. And I see your kind green eyes in my mind, calm and forgiving. Ahead, the road is clearing. I change the music for something more upbeat. The cicadas suddenly stop. Another hour of freedom beckons and I shift up a gear.

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**Stop and Go**

*Antony Greenwood*

She sings a mournful song of colours,
Of black beating wings,
And shades of blood.

She sings a melancholy ballad of love,
From lips the hue of night,
And poison to kiss.

Her heart as black as words in moonlight,
Sings a serenade of mortality,
Of Pygmalion love,
And ornaments of stone.

Into her arms my skin of clay,
Entwines our ghosts of flesh,
Weathered by wind and rain,
For now and never.
I wake to the sound of car horns honking angrily nearby. The pain hits me straightaway and makes me gasp for air.

Then I remember.

Jack.

That’s not his real name.

I don’t know his real name. But it doesn’t matter. In fact, the less I know about Jack, the better.

Better for my health.

I wince. He’s really done it this time. My body is aching. I don’t know why he keeps getting angry. I won’t ever know the reason for it. But for now I’m safe.

Time to get up and find out where the hell I am. How to get home. Or to a hospital. It takes all my strength to drag myself to the shed door. The sunrays shine through a grimy smashed window next to it. I can tell this place hasn’t been used in a while. The shed is empty apart from a pair of old tyres and some rusty tools. God knows where I am this time.

The door gives way easily. Thank Christ. I didn’t have it in me to be stuck in some forgotten shed. I wonder if anyone is missing me. Maybe they’re just saying:

‘Hey, that’s just what she does.’

‘Yep, sometimes she just has to disappear for a while.’

‘I don’t know how she can live that way. I couldn’t do it.’

And then they’d continue with their normal lives, cooking dinner...
or washing stuff or whatever else a normal life has to offer. Either way, they’re not really bothered whether I’m there or not.

But it’s better this way. He just makes my life too damned complicated and so fucking unpredictable. The others are not too bad. He seems to be the one in control. Of all of them. Including me. I really hate him. Fucking Jack. Every time I hope he won’t come back to haunt me like he does. That he would just forget about myself; or maybe he would just forget about himself. Even better. Problem solved. And I wouldn’t have to deal with his rage again and again.

There’s a busy street not too far from the shed and as I’m walking along it, I can see a roadhouse. Maybe a ten minute walk. Cars drive past, not stopping. Some drivers glance at me, frown and then they’re gone. I mustn’t look my best today.

I drag myself into the ladies’ bathroom and over to the sink. I look into the grubby cracked mirror. Fuck. My eyes are red and swollen, probably from crying. My right cheekbone is bruised; dried blood is building a crust on my lips. Blood stains my shirt. I touch my right cheekbone and breathe in sharply.

Man that hurts. My right hand is bruised too. I splash some cold water on my face and look at myself in the filthy broken mirror again. Cold blue eyes stare at me. Maybe I deserve this.

The stupid bitch. She just couldn’t keep quiet. Always has to have the last word. She’s just asking for it. At least the other ones shut up. No problems there. Just her. Why don’t I just put an end to it? It’d be so easy. She’s so weak. Always has been.

That slut of a waitress asks if I want a refill. I growl my answer in my deepest voice. I don’t like my voice. It doesn’t suit me. She smiles at me. I know she doesn’t mean it. But even she knows when to shut up.

I look around the roadhouse. Not many people here.

The stupid bitch. It’s all her fault. It’s always been her fault.

The others keep warning me. Well, they haven’t really told me, but I know they are.

And they’re right.

He’s been getting worse.

Just when I thought it was getting better.

I find some cash in my pockets and although I still look horrid after cleaning up a little, I know I have to get something into my stomach. I enter the roadhouse and can see a waitress storming towards me.

‘Why are you back? I told you to stay out,’ she says. She seems unsure whether to step closer or stay away from me.

‘What are you talking about?’ I say frowning. I already know what she’s going to say. I’ve been there before. I’ve been here before.

‘Don’t give me that crap. You know exactly what I’m talking about,’ she says, studying my face. And then something in her behaviour towards me changes. ‘Look, I don’t want any trouble in here. But, you seem to be off whatever you were on this morning. So… What do you want?’

‘Food. And rest. I won’t be any trouble. I promise. I have money.’

She pulls her shoulders back and thinks about it for a moment. ‘Alright. You can stay. But, if you start to get funny again, I will call the cops.’ With that she turns and walks away. I follow her. In front of a small table in a corner, nearly hidden from the sight of other customers, she stops and gestures for me to sit down. I oblige. She turns again and walks over to the counter as a middle-aged woman approaches me.

‘Are you alright, darling? She shouldn’t talk to you like that. She can see you’ve had a rough day. Who did that to you?’ she touches my shoulder softly. Her voice has a warm motherly tone and I can feel a lump building in my throat. I close my eyes and inhale deeply, but when I speak, my voice sounds shaky.

‘No. No, I’m not okay. Jack. He..’ And then I can’t stop the tears from running down my face and I start sobbing like I haven’t done in years.

I open my eyes to bright white lights and people in white coats standing over me.

‘Where am I?’ I say.

‘You’re in hospital. You’re safe,’ says one of the white coats holding a chart.

‘What happened? How did I get here?’

‘A lady at a roadhouse called an ambulance for you,’ a nurse answers. ‘Do you remember anything about it?’

It all starts coming back to me and I nod. The waitress had enough pity for me to call an ambulance. The paramedics told me I’d be safe now. What do they know?
They don’t know Jack.

‘Is there anyone you would like us to call for you?’ the nurse asks.

‘Yes. My doctor. The number is in my mobile phone. Under Therapist,’ I mumble. The white coats exchange looks with each other.

‘Okay, we’ll do that for you. Now you just rest,’ the nurse says and I close my eyes again.

‘I think what’s most important right now, is for you to be safe,’ my therapist says.

‘Yes, I think you might be right. I don’t have the strength to fight him anymore.’

‘Well, as I told you, there’s a new drug on the market which had great results in trials. We could give it a go and see if it works for you,’ he says.

‘Are you fucking kidding me? You’re trying to get rid of me?’

‘I’d like to try the tablets, but I don’t know if I can. He’s not gonna be happy about it. I know he isn’t happy about it. I can hear him,’ I say. ‘I’ve never heard him before.’

‘Yeah, you’re damn right. I’m not happy about it. You fucking bitch. I’m gonna fucking kill you if you try anything.’

‘Don’t give in to it. You know if you want to try it right now, I’ve got a sample here with me and I can make sure you’re safe until the tablet starts working,’ the psychiatrist says and rummages in his bag.

‘You think you can just get rid of me? You’re wrong.’

‘I can’t do it. He’s gonna kill me if I try something,’ I say and watch my hands starting to shake. ‘I think he’s trying to take over.’

‘We can’t let this happen. I’ll get the nurse to give you something so you will sleep,’ my therapist says and pushes the call button for the nurse.

‘Please, don’t make me take the tablet. I can handle it. And I still need a chance to find out,’ I say.

‘Yeah, that’s better. You’re not so stupid after all. And you know you won’t find out anything without me, bitch.’

He knows he’s got me there. I do need him to find out.

I wake up in my hospital bed, feeling fuzzy in my head, but very calm. And I know he’s nowhere near me. Whatever they gave me, made him disappear. There’s no knowing how long he will be gone for though.

I sit up slowly and check the drawer for my things. I’m surprised to find the delicate little pocket mirror still intact. The swelling around my eye is slowly getting better and the bruises have turned into a purplish stain.

I actually look like myself today.

I find paper and a pen and start writing.

I must’ve fallen asleep again. It’s getting dark outside. I can hear the staff doing dinner rounds. I feel weaker again. That must mean he’s back.

The door opens and my therapist walks in. ‘How are you feeling today?’

‘I’m feeling okay, thanks.’

‘I’m feeling okay, thanks.’

‘Have you thought about what you want to do?’

‘Yes, I have.’ I take my written note out of the drawer, as my fragile pocket mirror falls out and shatters into pieces.

That bitch is up to something. I told her not to do anything stupid. She knows I’m the only one who can help her, tell her what she wants to know. I should just get rid of her. And that doctor is there again, too. That’s it. I’ll tell her to get rid of him and then get rid of her. I won’t have to answer her stupid questions anymore. Won’t have to listen to her anymore. Or the others. All quiet. Just me left. Yeah. That’s it. That’s what I’ll do.

‘I hope you’re right about this,’ my therapist says.

‘I have to try it,’ I say.

‘What are you going on about, bitch?’

‘He’s here,’ I nervously look at my therapist. He nods.

‘I want to know what happened, Jack. I want you to tell me.’ My hands are starting to shake.
‘So you’d like to know what happened, bitch. And you want me to tell you. Why should I?’

‘Here’s the deal. If you help me, I won’t take the tablets. If you don’t, I’ll take them and you’ll be gone forever.’

‘You really think you can threaten me, bitch?’

‘I’m not threatening you, I just want to know.’

‘You couldn’t handle the truth.’

‘I deserve to know;’ I say.

‘You deserved exactly what you got, bitch. Every single time you deserved it.’

‘What did I deserve? What do you mean? I don’t remember,’ My hands are shaking and I feel dizzy. I close my eyes and try to focus. When I open my eyes again, the room is spinning and my hearing has become muffled.

‘You know exactly what happened, bitch. You were there. You do remember it. You look part in it.’

I can hardly control the shaking that has taken over my body. I have to stay awake. I can’t let him take over. I can feel that I am close to remembering. There’s something trying to come out. My doctor touches my arm and I look at him and shake my head. Not yet. I need more time.

‘You’re too fucking stupid to remember.’

‘Please tell me,’ I sob.

‘I’ve had enough of you, bitch. Always with the crying. You’re so weak.’

‘I’m not weak. I just need to know so I can move on.’

‘You want to move on? You just want to get rid of me. I can’t allow that. I’ve had enough of you, bitch.’

‘Please help me,’ I whisper.

‘This ends now. I don’t wanna hear anything anymore from you.’

‘Leave her alone!’ I can hear two children’s voices yelling inside of my head. ‘She was just a child. She didn’t have any fault in it!’

‘She fucking loved it!’

I don’t have control over my speech anymore and with all of my strength I lift my hand and hope my therapist understands.

‘Wait.’

‘No.’

‘What’s going on?’

‘You’re going down, Jack,’ the voices say.

‘You fucking idiots. If I’m going down, you’re going down with me.’

‘We don’t care, Jack. We want her to be safe from you,’ the voices say.

‘I should’ve killed her. That fucking bitch!’

‘Goodbye, Jack,’ the voices say.

And then it’s quiet inside my head and I close my eyes.

I wake up and look around. I’m still in my hospital bed.

‘You’re awake.’ My therapist gets up from the chair next to my bed. ‘I’m glad this worked. I was really worried the sleeping medication wouldn’t work quickly enough and you’d be gone. Here, take this before he has a chance to come back,’ he says and hands me a small blue pill.

I hesitate for a moment. Do I still want to find out more? What I heard should be enough for me to work on for a while. And I could really use a break from Jack. I know this is not the last time I’ll hear from him, but for now, I’ll have my peace. I throw my head back and swallow the pill. I smile at my therapist.

‘I feel better already.’

‘You look better too, Sarah,’ he says. ‘Here, have a look, I bought you a new compact mirror.’ I look into my shiny new mirror. Warm brown eyes smile at me. He’s right. I look much better.

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The average lead pencil will write approximately 50,000 English words. In the book Les Misérables by Victor Hugo there is one sentence that is 823 words long. Dead people dream in sign language. William Shakespeare introduced 3,000 new words to the English language, including 'bubble'. In Australia, people buy an average of 13 books per second. Your common mode of procrastination is? An urgent need to look up random stuff on the Internet. And ABC iView! Cleaning anything that doesn’t move and sometimes things that do – the car, the dog. Walking the dog. Producing music, spoken words, and stories that have nothing to do with what I should be working on. I’ll get back to you. Answering questionnaires. Spicy chai as it’s always associated with sitting and reading. ‘Almosst’ is the longest word in the English language with all the letters in alphabetical order. It took Noah Webster 36 years to write his first dictionary. One out of every eight letters you read is ‘e’. The world would be better off without: Humans. Monotheism. Glitter, it shits me... oh, and sand, definitely sand, because of the same reason; it gets in everywhere. Racism, sexism, and specismism. Violence, because violence breeds violence just like oppression breeds oppressors. Us. Fanatic religions. Gadsby by Ernest Vincent Wright was published in 1939. The 50,000 word novel doesn’t contain the letter ‘c’. You cannot place your elbow in your ear. The largest book in the world is The Klencke Atlas at 1.75 metres tall (about 5 feet 9 inches) and 1.90 metres wide (about 6 feet 3 inches when open). Everybody deserves: A hug. To be heard. To be free from the fear of persecution or harm. An education. Someone who loves their freakish ways. Honey. To sleep safely. Bill Gates purchased the world’s most expensive book, Codex Leicester by Leonardo da Vinci, at an auction, for $30.8 million. The dot above ‘i’ is called a tittle. The total time for a novel to reach the shelves after the initial idea, is on average, two years. A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens is considered to be the highest-selling book of all time, with 200 million copies sold since its publication in 1859. Of all the words in the English language, ‘set’ has the most definitions. Your last death-row meal would be? Bangers and mash. An LSD icy-pole. Lemon cheesecake. Pancakes. Those delectable chocolate brownies I had at the markets – sex in the form of cake! Fresh oysters by the dozen. Chocolate. John Locke, author of nine novels, was the first author to sell more than one million Kindle books on Amazon, and the 8th to join the Kindle Million Club. According to a report by The Guardian, most self-published authors average $10,000 per year with unlimited earning potential. Your favourite place to write is? In my head. In a quarter-full café, beer garden, train carriage, or campus seating that overlooks an expanse of society at large. In my room. In my mind without any means of physically writing. Outdoors in the shade. The longest one-syllable word in the English language is ‘screeched’. No word in the English language rhymes with ‘month’, ‘orange’, ‘silver’, or ‘purple’. If you could have a superpower for a day what would it be? An invisible aeroplane. Invincibility. Inception. Mind travel. To instil compassion into the heart of every living soul. To stop time. The exact opposite of invisibility; for one whole day everyone everywhere would be saying: ‘Hey look, there’s ___. Dreamt is the only English word that ends in the letters ‘mt’. ‘Rhythm’ is the longest English word without a vowel. The Irish invented spaces between words in the 7th century AD. They were struggling to learn to read and write the Latin script in texts, so they decided that putting a space between each word would help. ‘The sixth sick sheik’s sixth sheep’s sick’ is one of the hardest sentences to pronounce in the English language. War and Peace by Leo Tolstoy was written before the invention of photocopiers, word processors, or personal computers. His wife copied his manuscript seven times by hand. The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn is an infamous novel by Mark Twain. Written in 1875, it is considered as the first published book that was written using a typewriter. A debut novelist in Australia could earn less than $5,000 from their publisher as an advance on their book. The printing press was invented in order to facilitate mass production of the Bible, so the common man could gain access to the scriptures previously only available to clergy. The Complete Sherlock Holmes is a legendary book by Arthur Conan Doyle. He was an eye doctor, but his medical practice did not provide a great salary; thus, he became a writer to support his daily needs.