

THE LAST WORD



The Last Word

NEXT

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Next

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When capitalism commandeers pedagogy and creative culture: the writing and publishing industry

foreword

Dr Adam Casey

Head of Program, Creative Industries & Writing and Publishing Programs, Melbourne Polytechnic

Distinguished English and Art History professor, W. J. T. Mitchell, dismissed books as merely ‘tree flakes encased in dead cow’. And with the democratisation of publishing technology came the purported death knell of the printed artefact, now referred to as ‘legacy publishing’. However, the popularity of the printed word, and the novel itself, has not taken as big a hit as was speculated. Russell Grandinetti, who oversees Amazon’s Kindle business, states that the print book is ‘a really competitive technology’ as it is portable, hard to break, has high-resolution pages and a ‘long battery life’.

Many of our Bachelor of Writing and Publishing students at Melbourne Polytechnic would consider themselves budding novelists; the novel has enjoyed a resurgence in sales in 2018, a 5% boost on 2017 sales (Keane, D, 2018a), however, the authors themselves have suffered a 42% drop in earnings (Keane, D, 2018b) over the last decade. Many authors face the poverty line, and those who are supplementing their wages (primarily via work in government agencies and the education sector with an increased focus on writing for social media), are still more than \$30,000 below the average expected wage of an Australian in 2018. So, it seems, publishers are still selling books; it’s just that authors are getting a smaller piece of the pie.

Nicola Solomon, chief executive of the Society of Authors, criticises publishers and Amazon for not sharing a greater percentage of their booming profits with the people who supply their raw material. ‘What concerns us is that during the same period that we see authors’ earnings plummet, the large publishers are seeing their sales rocket,’ she said. Solomon estimates that payment of authors accounted for a mere 3% of publishers’ turnover in 2016. ‘The industry pays so little for the raw material. Publishers talk about diversity then pay lip service to sustaining writers’ careers. They have a responsibility to see that authors are properly paid, and their earnings do not go down,’ she added.

As a result, Solomon claims the ability of authors to craft their ideas over years and write books that tackled important questions has been seriously undermined. ‘Now the publishing business wants bestselling novels at whatever cost, but to develop talent and great writing you need patience, encouragement and financial support,’ she added. Publishers being risk-averse has led to a situation where celebrity authors are leaving others with a smaller pool of money to compete for. As a result, authors are finding it harder to get novels that ask big questions into print.

This concern of the quality of content was echoed in 1471 in a letter by Niccolo Perotti, a learned Italian classicist, to Francesco Guarmerio, less than twenty years after the invention of the printing press. ‘Now that anyone is free to print whatever they wish, they often disregard that which is best and instead write, merely for the sake of entertainment, what would be best forgotten, or better still, be erased from all books.’

Without proper support for the development of enriching stories and appropriate publishing opportunities, and, of course, the guidance toward these opportunities, are we giving in to the vacuous reality that Perotti feared? And if we remove the pedagogic culture that supports the development of our authors, what are we left with? And what does it matter anyway? Philip Pullman, bestselling author of the *His Dark Materials* series and president of the Society of Authors, claims ‘this matters, because the intellectual, emotional and artistic health of the nation matters.’

‘Authors are not a special case, deserving of more sympathy than many other groups,’ added Pullman. ‘We are a particular case of a general degradation of the quality of life, and we are not going to stop pointing it out, because we speak for many other groups as well.’ It is suggested that the democratisation of publishing technology offers a free-for-all for creative practitioners, but, the tired stereotype of the ‘starving artist’—a figure to be revered as novelty, and before long, discarded at a

whim—is as relevant now as it has always been. The dominance of capitalist systems and its insistence that it guide our education and cultural trajectories, often leading to their deaths, is no more real than at Melbourne Polytechnic, as we see the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing—a program that survived just short of 10 years—come to its end.

What's next? Write on! Read on! The seeds are being spread; our contributors to the final edition of 'The Last Word' guide us to both the end and new imaginings.

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The Last Word **anthology** *introduction*

Liddy Clark

So aptly named.

This the final anthology to be created, designed and produced, by the students of the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing.

As most contributors know, the BWAP degree has been unceremoniously ‘axed’. I encourage the powers that be to read the ‘Last Word’ and appreciate the work and the talent that has gone into it and for them to feel regret at their lack of investment.

Many students of this degree have gone onto to be published, have become writers and editors.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge the commitment of the lecturers, especially those left standing.

To my fellow students: congratulations on this publication, it is a testament to your collective talent – I am in awe.

Contributors were asked to submit work that encapsulate the theme ‘Next’. What a great read. Enjoy it and weep (or laugh).



Illustrated by Ash Jolley

Only a Monday

fiction

George Leigh

I want the woman from Rough Trade to get here so I can pee. I'm in bed and it's so fucken cold I can't fathom moving. Let alone twice. She will be here soon and I will greet her at the door and then I will pee and I will come back here and I don't know why my body is so heavy today, or my head at least. I wish I had the willpower to start the heater. I don't even have the willpower to masturbate, not even to move to masturbate. Not even a hand to my groin to see what's going on. And I'm on my period. I never want her to come. I never want to move.

The doorbell rings and it turns out it was really easy to move. I give her the box. There is nothing in the box and she thanks me, she needs the box to move a sculpture. I smile and we both notice the dried blood on my hand. I guess I already masturbated and forgot. The woman is grateful and tries to talk to me, but I am outrageously stoned. My face is hot on the side where I was lying on it. God, I need a massage, I am so tense, even lying back in bed, my shoulders burn. I should go get the Shiatsu Master. It would do me good. My feet are just so cold and I am so sad. I guess I'll go to work tonight, stay in bed for now.

Finished work. Was sober. 2:30am at The Tote. I couldn't put that beer in me, I was far too conscious. Went to the party anyway, tried more booze and drugs, just felt period pain.

Pretty defeated in my relationship, need cries. Been holding them in all night. I told

myself I was too angry to cry. I used to be angry at boys who used me, never lying, always omitting. I didn't mind being used, I was the self-proclaimed rebound queen. It's them who don't trust me. They don't trust me to understand: no trust, no respect. I used to be angry but now I am sad. I miss angry. Home again, cold toes again, I want to wash my hair, but I don't want to wake my housemate.

My housemate's alarm goes off, am I saved?

I went outside to pee at the party and then I left because the blood was everywhere and the pain was too much. I went outside because I didn't want to talk to anyone lining up for the toilet. I found a gun when I was wiping my hands on the grass. I left my underwear in the street and walked home. It was heavy in my bag, straining my already burning shoulders. I always say I'm not one to suffer periods. I say it about once a month.

In the shower I taste MD in my nose. I blast cold water and try coughing it up. Like the spaghetti trick. It's weird knowing what's going on behind the scenes.

The gun looks sexy in my sexy underwear drawer. But it takes up most of the space, so I put it in the other, more useful underwear drawer. The sexy one is mostly for show. Waiting, waiting to show it off. Showing it off to myself mostly. I'm okay with this.

I saw my neighbor on the street. He has a kind and genial face. He's never looked me in the eyes. He wears flashy jewelry, but discreetly, and has a light Eastern European look about him. Confidence is why I wanna fuck him, I guess. I don't know for sure but I think his house is the one with the orange tree.

Maybe I'll ring the bell and ask if I can pick an orange from his tree. I'll ask as I walk into the house and find the living room and I'll sit on the couch and he will sit next to me. I'll spin and put my knees either side of his hips. He won't have noticed my light pink set with the push-up bra is only loosely covered with an unseasonal dress. But he will, from this angle. My boobs are so soft he could even see them ripple when he breathes on me and when my heart beats hard.

I'll ask, 'Why don't you ever look at me?' He won't know what to say and I'll run my finger from behind his ear to the tip of his chin. Or I'll grab him by the back of his neck and say, 'It's just that I really wanna fuck you'. I don't know where I could hide the gun though. Maybe I don't take it the first time? Maybe he will tell me he never looked at me to make me jealous? And he's always loved me. I'll fuck him crazy and he'll let me move in with him and once a month we'll go out to a show and I'll show

him off and he'll be all confidence and I'll be so proud.

People will talk. 'She's always gone for freaks,' they will say. They would be right. I just want to be worshipped.

I dump my shopping in the spotless kitchen. I even cleaned out the fridge in preparation. I only bought loose vegetables and glass and tin. There is plastic on my salmon, when I realise I feel the sharp pain in my neck. I handle the vegetables gently, placing them in the fridge crisper. The door closes by itself as I walk back to the bench. I need a free hand to open it. It takes me nine trips back and forth from the table to the fridge.

I like having lots of space in the house, it's easier to control. I take out the Tupperware container from its place under the sink and peel the lid from my dolmades. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. I'm not ready to eat one but they won't all fit in the container. I'm amazed how many they packed in, I lost track of what I was doing for one second and FUCK. I fucked it.

It's okay. I can pause this situation.

I go to my bedroom and put on my running gear. No wait. I'll go to the laundromat. No, I'll do both: I'll run to the laundromat and do push-ups in the park behind the train tracks while my sheets dry. I feel confused and uncomfortable jogging the busy backstreets. People flood past me on their way from the station to the supermarket. I'm glad the hot guy I saw here one time isn't here again.

There are three old men waiting in the laundromat when I return. They read and do sudoku, spread far apart from each other. Strange demographic. I smile at one as I leave and it feels safe. I'm bad at interacting with strangers in the last few years. It seems all the strangers I meet are men.

I think it's the violence. I forget that it can be okay and it shows me the way the divide is made. I run home with my laundry. My bed is made. I smoke a cone and run to the bottle shop. I want wine but I buy beer. I get home and stretch and shower and return to the kitchen table. I open my beer and suck it down. Then I lift a dolmade from the tin. It breaks apart. The first one always does.

I think about the person in the next room. Precisely three drops of rosehip oil massaged under the eyes, and then diluted to the nose and chin. Talcum powder, rose scented to match her soap, gently applied on a pubic under-arm. Argan oil for the calves and bridge of foot.

I hurriedly shove it in my mouth as it disintegrates on the short journey from tin to

tongue. It begins. Relaxation. I have earned my food and I take another dolmade and go to my room.

I look in the drawer to see if the gun has any bullets in it. I have no idea how to tell. I use private browsing to look up the make. Then I worry that it's even more suspicious in private. Maybe private browsing is the only thing they're tapping? Too hot. I don't even know what to look for.

Waiting for something to happen. There are people hanging out in the lounge room. I go on Reddit to find something interesting to talk about. I should just take it out there. Point it at someone. It would be funny. They wouldn't think so and I would convince them it was. 'Haha!' Or just put it on the table. Wait for someone to say something. They wouldn't.

They talk about it but they don't know like I do. I wouldn't kill my rapists. I would kill the right man though. He wouldn't even have to be bad. It would be a tragedy. A perfectly innocent man. Maybe when those men are scared there will be change.

I say I'm going to the Northcote Social Club. I take everything out of my backpack and put it in my handbag, the one with the short straps with the pockets that sits close to my armpit. I practise taking my gun out of the handbag. I'm really good at it. I'll just fucken kill the next one I see.

But now I'm on the street and it's no good. Especially not just outside my house. I have no idea how loud it will be. I can imagine how excited my housemates would get. It would be too much even for them. I consider taking it out to the factories for a test shot. But maybe I only have one bullet?

I think about catching the bus across but I know Northcote and Westgarth too well and there's nowhere discreet there either. There is nowhere discreet anywhere in Melbourne, what am I thinking? Besides, it's much too early. Feeling stuck and lost I just go to the Northcote Social Club anyway.

Everyone is here. Fitting really. Feels like fate. It starts falling into place, all these ugly faces, forcing memories. Happy memories, where I was free from anxiety, where I was comfortable, confident. Now people look at me, they won't articulate why in their inner dialogue, but they will get the feeling, the urge to avoid me. Or speak in guarded words with darting eyes for excuses and escapes. The brave and the lonely will greet me, ask a follow up question.

I am used to being an outcast, my 'fitting in' didn't last long. I don't mind it though, there is a superiority in it that gives me great pleasure. I have learnt to enjoy it when

they squirm, the ugly ones. They have great posture and candidness and I watch them shrink when they speak to me. Sometimes they try to be flippant, but I make sure I catch them wavering, I make sure they know that I know. They are scared of me because they know I am smarter than them. That I am right. That they are ugly, they know that. They try to hide from reminders I'm sure, else how would they carry on each day? Hypocrites.

They will stand for Eurydice but they will stay friends with *him*. Them, my 'friends' they will go to *his* shows, buy *his* merch, they 'like' and 'share' his fame on their timelines, hoping to catch in the updraft.

Kris approaches me as I'm rolling a cigarette and he sits next to me and rolls his own. I didn't expect to see him here. I don't think about him much anymore, not compared to back then. I thought about him constantly and thought about my future of thinking about him. I pictured myself one day: married to another man at 45, making breakfast for my two children, thinking about him because I still thought about him every day. No, not anymore. I miss it though. I miss the early days when I treasured the moments I could steal to think about him. It was all I wanted to do. Catching trains was my greatest climax and I would arrive late or early to school each day, avoiding my girlfriends at the station for these precious moments alone.

We talk about music, literature and photography. I tell him a theory I have been working on, a manifesto, about how the meaning of life is art. He seems to like it a lot. He seems to miss me. It didn't work out with her and I think he genuinely regrets hurting me. Or at least how it effects all his subsequent relationships.

He seems kinda broken and I wonder if he thinks about what it would have been like, if he didn't have the affair. Or if he broke it off and tried with me. He was too weak for affairs, the guilt stank on him. I was tired of feeling crazy, I was so happy when he told me.

I reach in my bag to find a lighter and I grab the handle of my gun. *My* gun. I guess it's mine? If I find a jumper at the tram stop it's mine. I wanna pull it out and shoot him. I don't really, but it would be cool. But no, he is already too broken. I want a full man, a strong and complete man.

He holds out a flame. I accept it, remembering tipping the entire contents of my bag on the grass in front of the call center carpark. Privately hoping the cute Greek boy who was always smoking in his skinny jeans and Dimmeys backpack would offer me a light. He did and that was it. And this is now and it's the same but it's so different.

It's different because now I have a gun and he is ugly.

The band ends and Kris shies away. I am sitting alone and I roll another cigarette and glance around, vague and expectant. I'm going for: 'waiting for someone but not too much to look like I'm taken.' I flag down an outcast and they join me gratefully. I am filled with immediate regret and I hurry to finish my drink as an excuse to leave. I wonder if they notice me do this like I notice the ugly ones do. I decide I don't care because they probably don't care just like how I don't care. We get used to it.

I find my crush at the bar and have a short and awkward conversation. I am becoming drunk and I wish the next band was already playing so I could hide in the dark. I decide to go upstairs and see if the green-room is free, it is only a Monday after all. It is free. I check the fridge and it's empty, expected but I would be fool not to try.

I open a window to smoke the cigarette I rolled but abandoned earlier to escape. I reach past my gun to find a lighter and I watch people on the street below. A tram stops directly below me. I can see people sitting on the tram, laughing. I recognise them. I wonder if I could shoot them from here? Is it hard to aim? Does it have enough power? It seems like a good vantage point, at least a popular one in movies and history.

Maybe I need to do it in a crowd. During the next band I'll just get real close to someone. Maybe my crush. He seems happy enough to die. I'll pull the trigger and I'll scream and drop the gun and fall in the other direction. I'll look around madly while people huddle around him. Is that blood or shadow? And me, are we ok? Or will they flee in panicked confusion, desperate to continue their ugly lives.

I finish my drink and am about to go downstairs when the door is opened. I recognise the faces, I'm not sure if it just from seeing them on stage, or if we were once friends. They smile and pull a familiar face. I say sorry I was just taking a moment and he says that its okay, you can stay. I say that I need a drink anyway and he pours from his jug into my glass. Thanks, I say, sitting again and I begin to roll another cigarette. They sit on the couch and talk about the setlist and some people and things I don't hear or understand. I'm glad they don't try and include me in their conversation until they ask if I know Jules. I say yeah. They told me he was downstairs, fucked-up and trying to get on the kit. I ask if they want me to take care of him and they say no.

Shame.

I go downstairs to say hi. I get another beer from the bar. I worry about getting too drunk. I find Jules and he slaps my back and tells me to get a job, and I tell him to get a haircut, and he says he loves me and still wishes he could be my boyfriend. I tell

him I'm too busy and he says all he wants to do is lie on my bed while I work at my desk, he doesn't even need to fuck me, he can't cum when he's high, he just wants somewhere to be, someone to be with. Or next to. The first time he asked me I was young and flattered and confused. I'm glad I didn't fall for it then and no way will I fall for it now.

'You already have a girlfriend' I tell him and he says she's just his VCA girlfriend and he wants a real one. I wonder what makes me real? Is it because I am sad, or damaged, or addicted, or broken, or romantic, or angry? I say I gotta pee but I skull my beer and leave. I walk back towards Brunswick, having decided on Princess Park. Walking down toward Westgarth I stop on the steps of Rucker's Hill and watch a man below me take the bins out. The yard is untidy but in a fresh way and the car seems like it fits a family. Should I kill a dad? If I don't I'm discounting a large portion of my demographic.

Should dads be out this late alone? Surely it is only bad dads that are out this late alone, ones who have made bad decisions and deserve to die. They aren't the dads I want to kill. This dad is only taking out the bins he seems like a good dad but he is already back inside.

Oh well. Next man I see I will shoot. I reach into my handbag to make sure the gun is in place. I look around for cameras and other people. There is light traffic. No more men come out onto the street for a while and I get impatient. Then a man, I think. In a wheelchair. I wonder if he deserves it? The wheelchair I mean. If so has he paid his dues? If not, this is the perfect one, the perfect innocent.

He is coming up the hill, it is incredulous that he would try. I watch him working, hard, his arms punching the ground with furious turns of the wheels and I wonder if I should do it sooner so he need not suffer the burn of Rucker's any longer? He stops. I wait for him to roll backwards, he does not. A car pulls up and a woman gets out. She is angry at him and getting him in the car from the steep angle looks frustrating. He doesn't protest, excuse or complain. They are still some distance from me. Is killing a mean woman just as good? No. It must be a man. The next man.

He pulls up next to me suddenly, there is no traffic. He tells me to get in I and oblige. He seems startled. They never know what to do when they get it. He asks me what I'm doing and I say I'm just watching. Me too, he says and I smile, looking out the window. I already don't recognise where we are. Yes, I am very drunk.

I don't feel for the gun but I feel safe knowing it's there. Excitement grows. He

pulls up at a warehouse and I get out and head for the door ahead of him as he locks the car and checks the back seat. Inside there are two chairs and some abandoned tin and wood boards leaning against corrugated walls. Walking in behind me he pulls out a gun of his own and I smile. Funny? I pull my own. Very funny indeed. He throws his on the ground and I hold mine steadily in his general direction. He walks toward and past me and I don't move. Coming up from behind he reaches around me and flicks a switch on my gun. The safety? He shuffles it, something else clicks. I feel his breath on my neck and I get even more excited.

He reckons he wants to die and that I seem like I wanna kill. I say I don't want to kill a dying man and he laughs and he picks up his gun, clicking it and aiming it at me. 'I'm gonna die either way,' he says and so I shoot him. His face says he wasn't ready. I'm surprised I made the hit because I didn't try to aim. I hit his shoulder and I walk closer to finish. He is pleading with his eyes. To die? Not to die? I shoot him again and I feel unsatisfied.



Illustrated by Jessalyn Henson-Hatton

Next life

fiction

Chelsea McPherson

The first life I had, I didn't last very long. My parents were loving and warm and the best parents a new soul could have. Mama was always there, Papa working to support our tiny family. It was happiness, bliss, peace. It all ended when the nanny failed her duty to watch me. It was a single coal but it was enough.

The fire took everything, and I hoped I would never burn again.

My second life was vastly different. I grew old, so very old; wisened and grey with many children and many more grandchildren. Life was long and filled with cheer and love. As I lay on my deathbed, my large family grieved. They wept as they said their farewells and kissed my cheeks, my forehead, my lips. I was not afraid to go, and smiled, and said, "Until the next life."

The darkness took me after that. I hoped my next life would be as fulfilled as this one had been.

My third life was mundane. I was a worker, a spouse, a parent. Not a grandparent, I didn't last that long. And I was not happy. The emptiness inside consumed me and I was known to be a troubled one. My parents constantly worried, always calling, checking up on me. They never knew about the alcohol, the drugs, the bite of sharp metal. I tried to keep a brave face for them.

It was the bus that took me that time. I hoped that next time; I would not hide my anguish.

My fourth life was vastly different. Four legs, a shaggy matted coat, hunger and loneliness and pity from people. There were cold nights and flea-ridden blankets, scrabbles over scraps of old food, and there was injury, pain, no treatment, no love. It was the first time I'd never felt love and it scared me even more than fire.

When the cold took me one winter's night, I hoped I would never be unloved again.

There were lives after that. Lives where I learned. Where I feared. Where I loved and was loved. Where I hated and was hated. I had rushing water caressing my scales and my skin, the wind under my wings and through my hair and fur, the grass under my hooves and feet and paws. Lessons came with all of them, lessons that I took with me even when my conscious mind didn't recall them. Fears and ideologies, hopes and dreams, all if it followed along into my next life.

As I drift through the starry sea between life and death, I oft wonder, 'Where will I go next? What will I be?' The answer is never the same. I have had many lives and none of them have ever walked the same path. I always ask, 'What is next?'

And the call is heard, the call that I am ready to live on. But this time, as I open my eyes, I see myself beneath a new sky and I can't help but smile.

Welcome to the next life.

An ode to...

poetry

Arie Huybregts

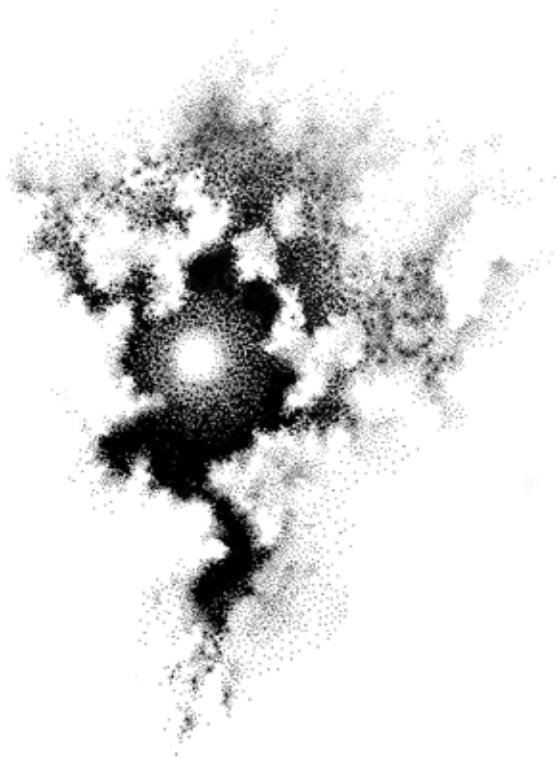
Someone In Particular,
I'm sure.

I know people, I promise,
There are definitely people I know
And I'm very happy with them.
Every
Single
One...

I've never gotten into an argument
With someone I know
Not once, it's never happened,
I promise. I've never
Had to extricate someone
Entirely from my life
Because of an argument,
I promise.

I've never tried to explain something
To someone: who doesn't want to know
To someone: who doesn't care
To someone: who
Doesn't take me seriously at all
Everyone takes me seriously
I promise.

I've never tried to articulate
Myself and made a mess of it
Never embarrassed myself
Trying to sound smart. Never,
I promise it's never happened.



Illustrated by Marc Eggleton

poetry

Dark

Evelyn Lewis

The night is
Dark.
Moonlight hits no face
Hidden behind clouds
Trying to push through
Push
Push
But it can't.
The clouds are too much
Their dense water trapping
Her behind them
When she shines
And boy does she shine
There's nothing that can stop her
But one night she's there
Bright as ever
And the next she's
Dark.



Illustrated by Jess Crossman

Water & waves & the last train home

non-fiction

Sarah Irene Robinson

I swipe to check the Next 5 trains to Belgrave. 34 minutes, it says. Thirty-four. That seems a bit much. I refresh the page and even though it's been a full minute it still says 34 minutes. 34 minutes it is then. You and me, Flinders Street Station. Maybe I could find a soft surface to nap on. When I was a teenager and I got stuck in the city, I'd go sleep by the Yarra or under the waves at the arts centre. They are solid waves, but they have a softness to them you can drift away on. I was never by myself, there'd be at least three of us. Once, we woke up to someone photographing us all sleeping.

They run the trains all night now, so you don't have to find somewhere to hide out until morning. And they worry about kids being on iPhones too much. It's changing their social habits, apparently. Like being on a computer can be social. I don't think anyone's thinking that. They should be worried that kids are running out of room for adventures – with trains running all night how will they know the soft, safe crevasses of a city? And the people you meet on the first train out are always a smelly adventure. I once saw Benny from For Amusement Only, one of my favourite bands as a 14-year-old. We laughed about his band, they were very much a year 2000 band and wouldn't make it into the new millennia. The wrong brand of emo punk. He lived in a caravan in his mum's backyard. We spent the first train home playing a shooting game with our fingers. I wish I remembered how it went, we laughed a lot. I had a Texta and I covered his arms in little love hearts, so he would know that he once had fans. We later

realised that it wasn't a Texta, but a permanent marker and he would know he had a fan for weeks to come.

It didn't always work smooth, the first train home. Cause if you fell asleep too deep you could end up anywhere, bloody Lilydale normally. Now, bloody Lilydale isn't all that bad, cause there's a bar at the station. You heard me right, a bar nestled in the train station. On the platform. Touch on, one beer thanks, cheerio. And the drinks are like \$2.50 a pop. When I was twenty, my brother's band had a gig there, so I decided to have my birthday party at the gig, at a pub in a train station. Just 'cause it was so strange. I wish I had a picture. There were all these men racing their toy trains in a shed just across the rails, like they did every Friday night. They were wearing train driver hats, they slid the wooden door closed to the shed because they didn't like us watching them. We weren't making fun, it was just funny to see.

Then there's just missing the last train. That one is the worst. 'Cause then you have the most amount of time to figure something out. Sometimes it's the best though, 'cause you have the most amount of time to figure something out. One night The Distillers were playing at festival hall, they were opening for Queens of the Stone Age. I was in high school, I don't know what year but I remember I had school the next day. Me and Ada and Dima caught the train in, we couldn't afford tickets, so we just listened from outside and then stood with the die-hard fans and waited for Brody Dalle to come out of the stadium. That was a wild night. We met all kinds. Brody never came out and we missed the last train home, even though we ran so hard to Spencer Street Station. Dima wanted to stay in the city all night, sleep on a bench, but I couldn't do that to my mum. I imagined her awake all night, worrying. I had done it to her before and I didn't want to again. I hailed a cab and it cost 60 bucks, 20 bucks each. We were ripe and ready for school the next day.

32 minutes now and I watch the seagulls, how far is the bay again? I never associate Melbourne with salty water, only river water. I'm on my way out to Dad's. I should have checked the trains before I left, made sure they lined up. But I didn't. It feels a lot longer, this train trip, now days, longer but calmer. Maybe because I'm going the other way. Heading up the mountain is surely the slower direction.

We used to come up with games for the long train trip, and if we were drinking we always had to make a piss stop at Box Hill Station, half way point. One game was to come up with a different version of a train station's name and everyone would guess. It was usually real easy, so it was who could guess the quickest really, that was the

game. If we were stoned, the whole thing was more challenging. For instance, I'd say 'science-fire-no feel' and they'd say 'Laburnum' and we'd laugh. 'Cause its like Lab-Burn-Num, get it? Or someone would say 'phone-dick' and it'd be Ringwood or if it was one of the boys they say 'phone' and point to their dick. It got to a stage where we would interchangeably use our dumb descriptions as town names. My favourite was, 'sounds like bitchin'.' And you know what? Every time I pass Mitcham these days, I hear someone from ten years ago asking that. And I laugh, cause it doesn't even rhyme. Someone would say back, 'It sounds more like bitchin' than any other station.'

I remember all those long-ago train rides so well, but barely any since. Now I just head the other way. Up to Dad's for a short visit, a couple of hours maybe. With these old jokes with people I don't see, making up the fundamentals of my brain. They have been on the trains with me for so long, I think it's the only place they still exist for me. Waiting at the station, wondering who got in the most trouble last night. Is anyone still in this state or country or still alive? I'm the last survivor, laughing at Mitcham train station.



Illustrated by Ashleigh Pollard

A poem by Anon

poetry

Anonymous

His hair was the colour of true love,
his hands laid lines that flipped my insides.
There was something lame about the corners of his mouth,
the part of his lips,
 -permanent in size-
draws a breath distinct in sound,
 preceeding each sentence,
 he allowed,
to part with.

I felt nothing of his touch for months,
 but all of me,
Oh yes, why not take all of me?
 for all of me, was encompassed by his love.



Illustrated by Amelia Bowen

What next

fiction

Robert Bennett

Gerry Cardashean was in deep shit. It was not deep enough to be life threatening, but certainly deep enough to be lapping at his knees. It was all too familiar territory for Gerry. An important assignment was due by 9am the next morning and somehow Gerry had not really started on it. You see, Gerry was a serial procrastinator and more than a bit of a plain lazy bastard.

He had started his degree at Melbourne Polytechnic with ambition and confidence. But those admirable qualities had receded like the tide in the face of regular pressure to prepare for classes and get assessment tasks done and in on time. Gerry had also discovered the almost boundless freedom made possible by living away from home on campus. It was a freedom enhanced by his mechanically-sound late-model car. Thus armed Gerry had entered to the highest echelons of the student social scene. Free bands, Parma nights and happy hours were grist to his hedonistic mill.

Gerry's present situation was almost the culmination of dreams he had harboured since his teens. Almost. In truth, the course work threatened to make big inroads into Gerry's social life. It was an uncomfortable truth. As a result, Gerry was constantly struggling to find a balance between scholarship and partying. Partying, however, seemed to weigh more heavily on the scales.

Scholastically speaking Gerry was flying by the seat of his pants and those pants were wearing arse flashing thin. Gerry had had more extensions than a prisoner on

death row. He knew that his senior lecturer, Adam the Merciless, would tolerate no more flimsy excuses. On the last occasion Gerry had submitted late work the Merciless One had flourished his claw-like fingernails and cocked a sinister eyebrow as he intoned the words, '*no more excuses*'. In Gerry's eyes, Adam sometimes appeared to embody the worst qualities of both the Hanging Judge and Darth Vader. God alone knew what Adam might morph into if this assignment was late.

A full month had been allowed to complete the assessment. It was worth 40% of that semester's marks. Unfortunately, these facts had not registered deeply enough in Gerry's consciousness. After all, he was the kind of guy who had to be smacked in the face before he recognised that a deadline was looming. Even so, Gerry had noticed the empty seats at the pub last night. Something was seriously wrong. It was enough to persuade him to consult the timetable in his course handbook when he got home. He got his smack in the face.

Now, with the sword of Damocles descending towards his neck, Gerry had decided that he was going to get the job done. Today, he was biting the bullet to the exclusion of all other clichés and metaphors that might be lurking about. The next step was to actually get started.

Fortified by several mugs of coffee, Gerry hit the switch of his home computer. The blessed machine opened with its usual noisy fanfare and brought up the games menu. Reluctantly he quit the games menu and the computer was momentarily stuck for ideas as to what it should do next. Briefly, it queried whether Gerry was a guest user.

Outside, the day was cold, wet and windy. It was a day that matched Gerry's mood. He had in fact, a little time, off and on, designing the required magazine cover and contents. Unfortunately, Gerry's design process was long on ideas but short on actual physical presence. If it could be said to exist anywhere, the magazine project lived in the ether of the internet and Gerry's mind.

As its circuits cleared, the computer decided to go through its programmed warm up routine. Meanwhile, Gerry took a slightly crumpled sheet of paper from his desk drawer. On it was a sketch plan. As sketch plans go this one was pretty sketchy, even for Gerry. Yet, it still contained the faint genesis of an idea. Gerry was certain the concept would be a winner...perhaps, maybe.

Despite his sloth-like approach, Gerry could produce minor miracles when he got going. Nearly all his assignments had been late. But, they had been good enough to pass, after the necessary penalties had been applied. The trouble was that Gerry was

harder to get started than a 1960 VW bug. Jittery and impatient at the best of times, Gerry was also inclined to get ahead of himself as he tried to produce the perfect result. A result that would be admired. That was his way. He couldn't help it. He also failed to notice the irony. Gerry also lacked many technical skills. He hoped that this failing would improve once the learning was complete. Besides, nothing worked out perfectly first time. He knew that this was true from bitter experience.

Gerry had to make a real mental and physical effort. He had to stay cool or walk the dreaded Adam's plank, with the lecturer playing the death march on his banjo as his treacherous classmates hooted themselves silly. So, in the manner of a French aristo being led to the guillotine, Gerry took a deep breath, sat up straight, shrugged his shoulders and stretched. He repeated these exercises a few more times before turning his attention to the keyboard. *'Strange things keyboards'*, thought Gerry, *'Compared to joysticks and other games' controls.'*

Soon it all started to come back to him. A virtual torrent of fundamental information coursed through the dimly lit labyrinth of Gerry's mind. Open new document, next, select dimensions, next, hit the create button. *'All done, no worries'*, thought Gerry. Thirty seconds gone and counting. He was not quite in the groove but the shit seemed to be lapping just a bit lower. Progress, any progress was a major event in Gerry's world. He felt the confidence of an adult being reacquainted with a pushbike.

'We have liftoff,' he announced to himself. Mentally, he punched the air. Then he giggled. He could see it all clearly in his mind's eye. The magazine would be heavy on satire and humour. It would be clever, very clever. Its main objective would be to poke fun at pseudoscience and all the other crazy stuff that so many people still believed in. Stuff like flying saucers, ghosts, the Loch Ness Monster, Donald Trump and other such nonsense. Gerry thought he had identified a genuine niche in the seemingly niche free magazine market.

Settled in like a Formula One driver in his racecar, Gerry gazed at a framed photograph of Hugh Hefner. Gerry smiled. He looked around and noted that his surroundings could rightly be called cramped and chaotic. It was a rather pokey room dominated by a neglected and ancient desk. The chair Gerry sat on had a wickerwork seat with a hole in it. The walls were wallpapered and otherwise festooned with event posters, timetables and post-it notes. In the years to come, his biographer could truly write that the great magazine entrepreneur's empire had sprung from humble origins. Just like Hef, his publishing hero. With difficulty, Gerry snapped out of the warmth of

his daydreaming. It was another of his bad habits.

Gerry had decided that each issue's cover would feature a single attention-grabbing image. He already had ideas for the covers of the first six issues. But the first one had to be special. It would be a real beauty. The covers also had to complement the magazine's content. It was content that would include articles on spiritualism, ghosts, goblins, hauntings and other paranormal phenomena together with photographs and illustrations. Gerry had distilled what he called the truths of publishing from Hef's biographies.

Yesterday afternoon, he had been trawling through the Internet when he accidentally came across several images of what purported to be real ghosts. He had been especially attracted to a photograph of 'The Brown Lady', a spectre that was said to haunt Raynham Hall in Norfolk, England. The photograph showed a full-bodied apparition descending a magnificent staircase inside the stately old house. Gerry had copied the photograph to his desktop. He was glad that he had paid some attention during those lectures. It was also something of a bonus that Brad, the practical skills lecturer, was a much softer touch than Adam.

With the new document file opened, Gerry began to draw a picture box. Next, he selected the photograph and dropped it into the box. A moment later he had adjusted the picture so that it filled the box. It looked great. The resolution was perfect.

'If this is a fake, it's a bloody good one,' thought Gerry.

Next, Gerry selected a font and created the magazine masthead. When this was in place the cover looked almost complete. Gerry was delighted. He wanted to finish soon so he could email the final masterpiece to some of his friends for comment, but then he paused. He would need to consume a vast quantity of coffee before he would reach that lofty station.

'Easy does it mate', he counselled himself.

After another hour or so of intense concentration, Gerry had managed some good work. But his neck was aching. His whole body screamed for more coffee! Gerry stood and wandered down the hallway of the terrace house he shared with three other students. It was a gloomy passageway. He farted and looked out the side window. The rain was still bucketing down and showed no signs of letting up.

Soon, Gerry was downstairs and rummaging in a kitchen cupboard. It was a repeat performance of the domestic tragedy classic, 'Looking for an unchipped mug'. Least chipped mug selected, he boiled the kettle and set about making a strong, flat white.

Yes. He was well aware that his coffee preference seemed a bit contradictory, but he had long ceased caring what anybody else thought. It wasn't a soy latte! One teaspoon of raw sugar later he was in caffeine heaven. He dropped the spoon in the sink and headed back to project central. The resident cockroaches scurried back out of hiding.

Upstairs again, Gerry sat gazing at the screen for some minutes as he slowly swallowed his liquid reward. He was feeling pretty pleased with himself. '*Now for the content details, issue number and price*', he told himself. He drew another text box. Then he selected a font and commenced to type.

'Looking good!' he thought.

Lastly, Gerry selected the completed text box and moved it into a better position. He smiled. But the rain rattled his study window with fury and the air in the room went noticeably colder. Gerry shivered and slipped on a fleecy vest. It made little difference. The room became as cold as a grave with white clay all around. It was a scene that only needed a raven to appear and say '*Nevermore*'. Gerry felt his insides turn to water. He was scared. The hair rose on the back of his neck and he looked about him. He saw nobody.

Gerry turned back to the screen and gaped in horror at what he saw.

'Where's the frigging text gone?' he shrieked out aloud¹.

Despite his fear, Gerry angrily chose the select tool and clicked on the spot where the textbox had been. Something started to materialize. The box was still there, but all the text had vanished. Gerry took another stiff slurp of coffee and began to retype the content details. Soon everything was as it had been.

Gerry slumped back in his chair but as he did so, the text again started to disappear, before his very eyes. The rest of the work soon followed, piece by piece. It was like a striptease. Then the stage was empty. And there was no applause.

'What now?' Gerry thumped his mug down and coffee sprayed across the desk.

'Bugger it!' he shrieked.

Gerry roared again as the rain continued to hammer at the window.

'What's fucking going on?'

Like most ordinary computer users, Gerry thought that the machines had minds of their own. He also actually believed that there were creatures called gremlins, living inside the CPU that just waited for a bad time to upset and frustrate their supposed

¹ Author's note: *This is a common student's lament that dates far back into antiquity.*

master. Gerry contemplated throwing the whole bloody thing out the window; an age-old and proven cure for technical deficiencies. However, as lightning started to fork across the sky, Gerry was suddenly struck by the notion that in the present circumstances, the throwing manoeuvre would not be a wise idea.

Gerry's momentum was further arrested by even louder rain striking the window. It seemed nature was in a rage to match his own. Gerry stood shivering and stared once more at the screen. The rogue text was flashing on and off, changing colours as it went. Next the masthead began to float about the page, disintegrating as it went. Next the dreaded beach ball appeared. Every Melbourne PolyTech student knows what that means. It's akin to the pirates' infamous black spot or a witch's curse.

'Geeze, the whole friggin thing's gone off the deep end', thought Gerry, who was now at the limits of his technical knowledge.

The pounding on the window kept up and suddenly a brilliant flash of yellow lightning seared across the sky. Gerry jumped backwards. At the same time, the computer screen went completely black.

'Oh, that's just bloody wonderful'.

Gerry was breathing hard and his heart was pounding more than the rain. He was scared, really scared and out of applicable expletives.

'Get a grip,' he admonished himself.

Suddenly, the rain started to ease and the thunder began to roll away. Everything seemed to be coming good on God's green earth. The computer screen slowly came back on. But the images were not of Gerry's making. Weird, sinuous forms were performing what could only be called electro-gymnastics. They appeared out of the infinite depths of the screen, stretching this way and that, before abruptly disappearing. Gerry's throat was dry so he finished his coffee.

The eerie ballet went on for several more minutes. Oddly, Gerry started to find the rhythm of the strange dance was having a calming effect. He was breathing more regularly and his heart had ceased pounding. But, and it was a big but, Gerry sensed that his ordeal was not yet over. He was quickly proven right. The image of the proposed magazine cover came back spinning like a Catherine Wheel. Then it stopped and reset itself. The image was complete in all respects and in focus. It was perfect. Perhaps his instincts had been wrong? Gerry dropped his guard.

'Great, it's really back! I've lost nothing!' He told himself.

Gerry sat back down and examined his work. It was good, very good.

'Better save it, quick'. He reminded himself citing one of Brad's golden rules.

However, as Gerry reached for the save button the cover began to break up again; first the contents, and then the masthead. Next, as if on cue, the driving rain returned and all the house-lights went out. But this time, the screen stayed on. It gazed out at Gerry, like one of the bouncers at his local. Gerry was close to panicking when the ghostly image of 'The Brown Lady' herself rose out from the screen and floated high above the desk. Gerry leaned back and went arse over tit on the floor.

As the floor-bound Gerry went into full panic mode, the lady grew larger and almost filled the tiny room. Gerry could make out her aristocratic features. She came closer and closer. Gerry cowered. He had simply nowhere to go. He was trapped like a rat. He shook and sweated involuntarily. As the full horror of his predicament overwhelmed him, Gerry closed his eyes tight and silently begged to be somewhere else. Anywhere else!

'Gremlins should be the least of your concerns young man,' said a soft, well-educated female voice, *'You should not be so disrespectful of your elders and betters. My image is not meant for your childish magazine! I refuse permission for you to use it.'*

Gerry could say nothing. He just wrapped his arms about his body and dared not do anything that might further incite the spirit. Just the same, he could not help thinking that she seemed to be a nice old girl. Things abruptly quietened down. When he eventually found the courage to open his eyes, the lady was gone. Gerry was not certain how much time had passed.

'But it must have been a long time?'

The rain was positively gentle now and the clouds were much lighter than they had been before... Gerry stole a furtive glance at the screen. 'The Brown Lady' was no longer a part of the magazine cover. She had been replaced by a very nice flying saucer. All the text remained and Gerry managed a weak smile as he saw that the text had been suitably corrected to accommodate the new image.

Gerry stood and looked nervously about before heading to the kitchen. Once there, he turned on the radio. He wanted to let the music create an aura of normality. Next, he made another mug of coffee. Then he remembered that his other cover ideas included flying saucers, as well as monsters and shipwrecks. In the light of his recent experience, the potential for other terrifying scenarios hit him like a freight train.

Gerry followed the coffee with a large whisky. He followed that with an even larger

whisky. The alcohol and caffeine medication soon worked its magic. As his nerves settled, Gerry began comparing his ghostly visitor with Adam the Merciless. Who was the more frightening? Which of them posed the greater threat?

Gerry reasoned that with luck and some slick editing another visit from the lady could probably be avoided. But, Adam was a different kettle of fish. He was the master of Gerry's student destiny. It was not hard for Gerry to make a decision.

Damn the spooks! Damn the monsters! The aliens can all get stuffed!

He would press ahead with the magazine project. He would pull out all stops. He would even submit his first assignment on time.

'After all, what could really happen next?'



Illustrated by Jess Crossman

Must moments

poetry

Anna Bilbrough

i look to the left
see myself
eyelashes sparse and tangled together
the machine whirls
i'm waiting for the beep
the next moment

water over edges
and i curse the day
erupted skin
hunger shakes
meaning means nothing

one skip ahead of myself
must keep abreast of myself
must stay aware of myself

send it through the throat
nourish the body
quiet the mind

i've come around to skin on skin
lips pout
eyes widen
everywhere i look, i am

Napkin

poetry

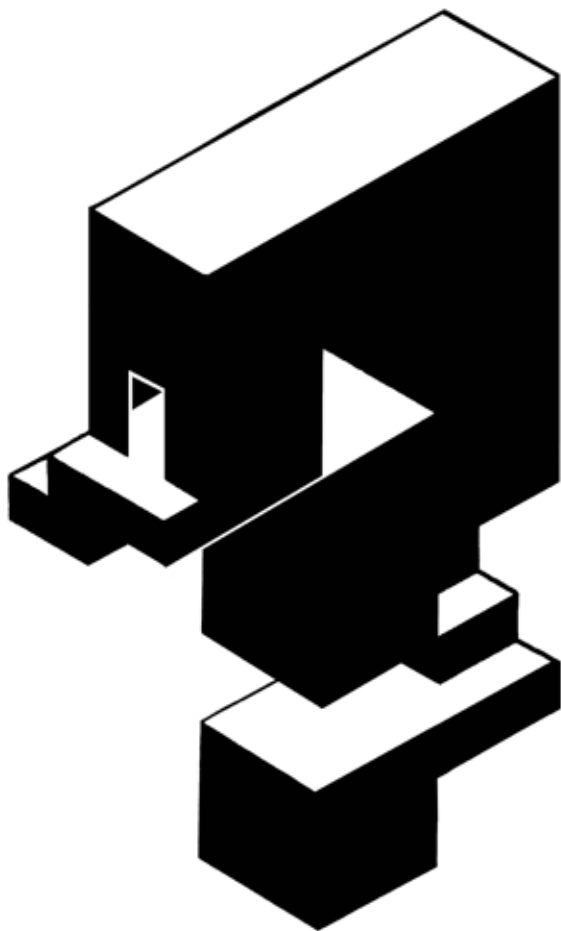
Ty Liebelt

This is what it is
TODAY of all days
unfortunately
I feel like a chewed upon napkin
just casually
just the general nerves one gets from being **alive**
some of the time
Imagine *that*
imagine it NOW
...please...
why
Why do we do this thing?
Every night
Hoping it will be different
the next episode
when the credits roll
and music predicts itself
Why should we feel any ***different?***
We know what we signed up for
if we'd taken the time to *think it through*

Not that it FELT like signing up (at the time)
More like blinking
or 'smiling'
Saying yes because it feels **nicer** than saying NO.
And what of the *candlelit rose petals*
swimming in a bath of moonlight and **dinner**
You only enjoy it because that's what they *told you* would
happen
<don't want them to be wrong>
If they're wrong...
then what are we doing?
What could we be doing?
we could look for things that don't exist
we could laugh at things that aren't that funny
we wade through the chaos and explosions of the universe
and **we do it together**
napkins in hand
And we enjoy this without realising
By accident
No one *tells you* about the accidents
They always forget to mention that little TITBIT
Too busy looking in the <back of the book> for **some** or
even ALL of the answers
Regardless of how out of **date** they might be



Illustrated by Ash Jolley



Illustrated by Marc Eggleton

Wilson Fisher's last day on Earth

fiction

Andrew O'Connor

Wilson dreamt. He dreamt of his birthday. His mother, a young woman at the time, had been working at The Production Facility after his father's death of heat stroke, a common affliction across the New World. She took work off on Wilson's special day, and gave him a gift that he had only heard of in stories. Wilson's mother gave him a single square of chocolate. He dreamt about the feeling of the food in his mouth, exploding on his taste buds, like nothing he had ever felt before, and nothing he would ever feel again.

Wilson sprung from his slumber, sweating. He closed his eyes, taking three breaths. His mouth was parched and dry, as it always was. He stumbled out of bed and hobbled down the hallway. Wilson entered the bathroom and lit the candle on the basin, creating a warm, eerie glow. He opened the cabinet, retrieving a bottle of lubricant. Wincing, he sipped the liquid, sloshing it around his mouth and gargling it into the back of his throat. The lubricant created the illusion of hydration, without the need for water. Its effects were subpar, and its taste rotten. He spat into the archaic sink, a useless artifact in these times, when water did not run freely. The taste clung to his mouth.

He entered his bedroom, glanced at the clock on the wall and sighed, knowing that he would soon be expected at The Production Facility in New Glasgow to pick. The pain of hunger, common to such a vast majority of humankind was further exacerbated by the constant smell of food at The Production Facility. He accepted

the hunger, because this was the way it had been for three generations. He didn't know any different. Humans craved food as an instinct, but that instinct had rapidly, forcibly, been subdued by circumstance.

Wilson pulled a book from his shelf - a 20th century cookbook that he purchased at an antique auction. He fawned over the beauty of the dishes in the book, fascinated by the tastes he could only imagine. Meals and real food were fantasies to him, and the rest of humanity - aside from The Feeders. Resources like food, electricity, and freely running water still existed, however only for those privileged enough to be welcomed into The Feeders, to live in the mansions above the enormous Production Facilities around the New World. They were a largely faceless group, who never left their eden-like artificial worlds. Of course, anyone was welcome to become a member of The Feeders, as long as they had a spare hundred million dollars lying around. One could purchase specific food items from the right people on the black market; but not for any less than thousands of dollars – an amount foreign to the majority of the poverty stricken global population.

Wilson stared at himself in the mirror, and witnessed the all too familiar weariness emanating from his hollow face. His cheeks were sunken and his skin leathery, appearing as if it was falling off his skull. He sighed deeply, defeated. In generations before his, there was overwhelming social and economic development, new discoveries, entertainment and ideas. But now there was only hunger, lethargy, the never-ending thirst, and a looming desire for it to all end. Suicide rates amongst adults were at an all time high, hundreds on a daily basis in New Glasgow alone.

He wandered into the hallway and gently knocked on his mother's bedroom door. He was dressed in his work overalls, ill-fitting and made of heavy synthetic material.

"Mum? Are you awake?" he asked, easing the door open.

"Yes darling. Make sure you go to The Dispensary this morning. My pills are running low, and you know I can't get there myself," she mumbled from her bed.

"I know mum, I'll make sure I get your rations."

"Thank you. My order is on the nightstand." Wilson felt around in the dark briefly, until his hand found the card.

"Okay mum, I'll see you tonight. Look after yourself, please." He planted a kiss on her cheek and headed out the front door, picking up the daily leaflet on the doorstep. He quickly skimmed the lead article; 22/08/2215 – *Water Rations have been increased! Due to the opening of a new de-acidification centre, and a new desalination plant,*

each household in New Glasgow will receive an additional litre per week. Your next delivery will be an eleven litre tanker! It didn't really matter to Wilson – he only had a glass a day, as his mother needed it far more than he.

He stepped on to the familiar street paved with solar panels, all used to power the Production Facility, and waited for the shuttle in the sweltering heat. He noticed black clouds looming in the distance. He hadn't brought his umbrella, but it wouldn't be the first time he found himself caught in acid rain. Many people shared the tell tale scars on their hands, faces and arms.

The shuttle arrived twenty-two minutes after he had requested it on his Device. As he boarded, the familiar smell of sweat, bile, and rust filled his nostrils, and he tried to breathe as little as possible as he took a seat in an empty row. There were no windows on the monolithic machines, so Wilson would just stare at his boots, and try to shut his journey out. The shuttles were never silent, always an insistent yammering of voices, cries of children, and the conductor's cold, dry voice through the speaker system. People were known to get easily lost, not recognising any of the streets or venues read out by the conductor, and flying into a panic. Wilson was not one of those people. Through his years of shuttle travel, he had learned the streets of the city like the back of his hand.

"Third Street approaching in ten seconds," the conductor muttered in his dry, metallic tone. Wilson stood up quickly, and made his way to the door of the shuttle, knowing his stop was approaching after Third Street. The vicious sound of the brakes screamed as the doors squeaked open. People flooded in and out of them in a whirlwind daze until the three seconds were up.

"Dammit!" bellowed a thick built man in a government issue construction uniform as he punched the wall next to where Wilson was standing.

"I never seem to be able to get off this damn thing! Every bloody day, I just miss the three second window."

Wilson shrugged unsympathetically.

"Well, you know what they say. Know the streets, make the stop. When he called Elmore Street, you should have been ready, because on Tuesdays, he never stops at Fourth. Straight to Third," the man scoffed at him dismissively. He looked Wilson up and down, noticing his signature overalls.

"The Production Facility. Must be nice eh? All that food, rubbing shoulders with

The Feeders...”

Wilson laughed. “We don’t get to eat it. Hell, I don’t even see any of the other food items outside my farm. I just pick berries. I’ve probably seen as many members of The Feeders in person as you have buddy. None.”

“Berries, huh?” the man replied, scratching his chin. “Hey listen fella, do you reckon maybe if I slipped you a few hundred bucks you could get me one or two of those, eh? I think I’ve heard of them. Little red things, huh?”

The conductor’s tinny voice came in through the speaker,

“First Street. Dispensary.”

Wilson stepped closer to the door in anticipation.

“Look buddy, I’d love to help you out, but I really can’t even talk about the facility outside of the facility. Treachery. You understand,” The doors opened, and Wilson slipped off the vehicle immediately. He walked towards a large and menacing grey building - The Dispensary.

A hundred years ago, The Great Shortage was officially declared. Bizarre weather happenings took the world over. Tidal waves, flash floods, raging fires, extreme temperatures, tornadoes, and blizzards ravaged The Old World, and when they eased, things were never quite the same. The entire Equatorial Region became uninhabitable. Deserted wastelands and rubble was all that remained. Sea levels rose rapidly, causing many cities to be obliterated as continents shrunk. The rain that was once precious water was now acidic, and undrinkable. Food and desalinated or deacidified water become dangerously scarce – and expensive. Those who could still grow food had to do so inside synthesised farm environments, early versions of Production Facilities that were not cheap to run and did not produce enough to go around. Soon, lower and middle classes couldn’t afford to eat. The New Nations, the united countries that survived the catastrophic events, declared the opening of global Dispensaries.

Scientists tasked by The New Nations developed a small pill, which could be taken daily to provide nutrition, fat, energy, vitamins, and all of the other essential elements found in consumable food. Eating had become redundant in the New World. While providing the substance of food, the pill could not cure hunger, or cause the taker to feel full. The feeling of starvation is ever present, but the miracle pill keeps the danger of it at bay.

Wilson stood in the looming shadow of The Dispensary’s cast iron doors, waiting

patiently for his rations. The Dispensary would only let one person in at any given time, to ensure order inside. A disk like robot approached Wilson, bringing him his number in the queue. A metal arm extended to Wilson's eye line, holding a thin white card between two rusty metal clamps. The thing screamed in a shrill, robotic voice.

"3462!"

Wilson yanked the card from the arm. Eventually, his number was called, and he clambered up the stairs towards the doors. They opened slowly, and he was greeted with The Dispensary's familiar hospital-like glow. He walked slowly, each footstep echoing as he approached the vending machine, and he was acutely aware of the dozens of New Nations guards watching him.

"3462 – Fisher, Michael Wilson," the machine's electronic voice boomed at him. There was a whirring sound as a small foil encased pill dropped into the tray at the bottom of the machine with a dull clang. Wilson cleared his throat, and grasped the small microphone.

"I would like to request a family order in addition to my own order." The whirring begun again.

"Please insert the Proof of Order," the metallic voice replied, coldly. Wilson inserted his mother's order into the machine.

"Processing order now," the voice confirmed as Wilson tapped his foot. The noise subsided and it produced his mother's pills.

"Please proceed to the exit," the machine advised Wilson, as the side door opened. Wilson stepped through and it slammed shut behind him with a metallic thud.

"Move along, sir," said a voice from next to him. He turned and acknowledged the New Nations guard, holding a large gun, and dressed in head to toe body armour.

"Must be hot in there hey? Lucky it's a cold week, I read in the bulletin it would only be fifty seven degrees on Thursday," Wilson said casually. She raised her gun in response.

"Move along, sir," she said more sternly. Wilson let out a deep sigh and stepped away, hands raised.

He removed his Device from his pocket and requested a shuttle. A warning arrived on his screen. *LONG DELAYS EXPECTED.*

"Typical," Wilson sighed as he sat on the curb. It was now 7:45 and lockouts at The Production Facility started from 9am – he still had time. He sat motionless in the same spot, watching people pass him with their usual gaunt expressions and tired eyes,

dressed in ill fitting ancient clothes, generally oversized singlets and loose underwear. Temperatures were never suitable for much else, after all.

Wilson experienced familiar hunger pain in his stomach, like someone twisting a steel rod through his insides, tying up his organs into tighter and tighter knots. He groaned, and took his pill. The only thing that stopped hunger pain was ignoring it, and for Wilson that was particularly hard, due to his line of work. Not that he could ever tell anyone and risk Treachery, but he would often, carefully, smell the berries he picked and try to imagine how they would taste, what it would feel like to have them in his mouth.

Eventually the shuttle pulled up. As the doors sprung open, a sea of people flooded toward The Dispensary. Peak hour in full effect, Wilson battled through the throng, determined to reach the door in time. He pushed past children and the mothers desperately trying to hold them. He shoved men twice his height and half it, until at the very last second, he squeezed through the gap in the closing door. People who missed it moaned and hollered, crushed together like sardines, sweating.

“Now approaching Production Facility, New Glasgow” Giddy with relief to be off the shuttle, Wilson forced his way through the mad crowd, and pressed himself firmly against the doors. They opened so quickly that he almost fell out, but he was glad to feel fresh air again, and as the metal beast slipped away he gave it the finger, took a deep breath, and turned to face The Production Facility.

Spanning two hundred levels and covering seemingly endless square footage, The Production Facility loomed menacingly. It was almost impossible to see to the top, but at the right time of day one could make out the shapes of the homes, buildings and plant life that stood on its roof under a protective dome. Another world in itself, obscured by clouds and shimmering heat, home to The Feeders and high-ranking members of The New Nations.

Wilson approached the first checkpoint, a body scanner manned by a New Nations guard. They nodded at one another politely, and Wilson stepped through, continuing to the pat down search and the interview with another guard speaking in a robotic tone.

“Do you, Wilson Fisher, have any thoughts of consuming the products you harvest at The Production Facility?”

His pulse monitored by a velcro armband and his brain waves monitored by

electrodes stuck to his forehead, Wilson replied, "I do not."

"Do you now, or have you ever, had thoughts of stealing from The Production facility, The Feeders, or the New Nations?"

"I do not now, and I have not ever." Some checking of computer screens, some discussion between guards.

"Proceed." The doors of The Production Facility opened. Wilson checked in on the touch screens that lined the walls, and proceeded to the furthestmost elevator, generally the one with the least traffic. He boarded with twelve other people, and punched in his floor number. He pottered down the hallway of Level 38, and reached his warehouse entrance: *38Y Blueberries*. After having his identity verified for a final time by the retinal scanners outside the door, Wilson entered his farm.

He gazed down the aisles lined with blueberry bushes. Wilson always felt humbled to witness the beauty of plants, let alone fruit, unfamiliar to the New World as it was. Where he stood in the doorway, he was invisible to the security camera that monitored the entire farm. Wilson breathed in through his nose, allowing the aroma to dance inside his nostrils. The artificial temperature was carefully controlled, and it was far more comfortable in here than outside. Foreign, but pleasant. Ensuring he wasn't seen to be taking in the smell, which could be considered Treachery, Wilson casually stepped into the line of sight of the camera, picked up a steel box for his pickings and began his day of work.

The workers would strip an entire bush dry in a matter of hours, carefully removing every berry, ensuring not to squeeze too hard, placing each of them gently into their basket, and repeating. The grow lights above them hung from platinum chains and emanated a sickly white glow. Each contained a microphone and camera, ensuring every bush was monitored. Wilson worked tirelessly, focused on his task. After five hours, a loud clanging bell throughout the farm indicated a dedicated 20 minute break.

Wilson exited the farm, making casual conversation with one of his coworkers whom he didn't know by name. It was best not to fraternise with members of your farm, as you're more likely to discuss what it is you harvest, which would be Treachery.

"I heard it might be cold on Thursday," Wilson said politely.

"I heard that too. Exciting."

"Yes, and an increase in water rations must be good for the family?"

"Most certainly."

His momentary companion departed, and Wilson waited outside the door of 38D: Strawberries for his closest friend at the facility, Long Balen. Wilson and Long had known one another since childhood, their mothers being friends when they had both worked at The Production Facility themselves. As Long emerged alone, Wilson tapped her on the shoulder,

“Howdy, motherfucker,” he said with a grin. Long beamed in response.

“Hello, hello! Didn’t see you yesterday. Mum?”

Wilson sighed and replied, “Yeah. I thought it might be last legs. She pulled through though, tough old bird she is.”

“Mmm. Break room?” Long replied. Wilson noted that she seemed distracted, worried.

The pair walked towards the end of the hallway where the staff room was located, and obligatorily nodded at the guards on either side of the entrance. Wilson glanced at the giant screen on the break room wall:

You are unmonitored in this room – Production Facility staff are the lifeblood of the New World. The Feeders and the New Nations respect your rights to privacy in personal time. Look forward to Christmas Dinner! Your chance to sit and eat an Old World meal with members of The Feeders and the New Nations, as a token of our appreciation!

The Christmas Dinner was anticipated by every employee each year, but only a select few were ever chosen. If chosen, these people were unable to reveal that they had participated, or ever discuss the nature of the meal outside of the Banquet Hall at all, as that would be an extreme case of Treachery. Wilson thought it likely that the Christmas Dinner never occurred at all.

He sat opposite Long at a metal table. The break rooms were often not awfully busy, as some staff found it too cold inside the facility, and wanted to go outside to experience familiar temperatures.

“So how’s the water ration increase, hey? Pretty-”

Long cut Wilson off, her expression one of grave concern, her eyes darting sideways at the New Nations guard every now and then.

“Look Wilson, I’ve gotta talk to you, but I’ve gotta make it fast, OK?”

“Yeah, yeah, what’s up? Is everything-”

“My wife Lynn got cancer. Skin cancer. It’s not uncommon, you know that, don’t look so fucking sympathetic. She’s obsessed with blueberries. Her great gamma’s

favourite food or some shit from back when. She's crying to me every night, 'Lo, I've gotta have some blueberries before I die' and so on. I'm thinking, no fucking way, I'm not risking Treachery, not when Rodgers got busted so--"

"Don't talk about it," Wilson whispered, alarmed.

"We're not monitored in the break room dude," Long replied. She shook her head and ran her hands through her thinning hair and down her gaunt face before continuing,

"What I'm about to ask you to do is fucking Treachery anyway."

Wilson stood up; ready to walk away, but his friend grabbed his hand with a pleading in her eyes and said,

"Hear me out? I have to do this for Lynn. I have a plan."

Wilson continued his shift like any other. Picking the berries, placing them in the container, and repeating. There were eight bushes between him and his nearest coworker, more than enough space for them to not be able to see what he was up to. He glanced at his wristwatch – 3:25. Time was running out. He struggled with not knowing the whole plan, and didn't understand how Long would get out of the heavily guarded facility unnoticed, and with the cargo in tact once Wilson had dropped it into the vent.

He made sure to not glance at the camera above him, made sure not to breathe any louder and risk the microphone picking that up, and made certain that his behaviour was entirely normal, working as he always would. He pushed his hand through the bush, out of sight of the camera, and rapidly grasped four berries with his thumb and forefinger, tilting his hand so they slipped down his sleeve. He felt them slide along his skin, soft and cool, and they landed in the groove of his elbow. His heart rate increased rapidly, but his expression was unchanging, lest he risk being uncovered. He left his box on the ground, and made his way to the door, speaking into the intercom.

"Wilson Fisher. Five minute personal break." There was silence for a moment, for longer than usual, and his throat tightened. Had he been found out? Already?

"Wilson Fisher break. Accepted." The doors opened and he stepped towards them, out of sight of the camera for a brief moment. He darted his eyes along the floor and saw the vent, extending his arm and letting the berries fall in.

As the hours passed, Wilson's confidence rose. It was almost eight o'clock, the end of the working day, and nothing out of the ordinary occurred.

He was halfway through removing a berry from its stem when the cool white

lighting of the farm turned to an eerie red. Wilson's heart froze in his chest, while his eyes widened and his entire body stiffened. A voice cut through the silence.

"Treachery has occurred on Level 38. Please stay at your posts."

Wilson felt a jab in his neck that came from nowhere, and then there was nothing but darkness.

He awoke to the sounds of a roaring engine and gasped for breath as he sat up, entirely naked. He was in a cell of some kind, surrounded by metal bars, a dozen armed New Nations guards perched around him. He looked at the nearest guard with a desperate plea in his eye.

"Welcome to the Equatorial Zone, Mr. Fisher," she said in a monotone.

Before he could utter a word, Wilson felt the floor slide away from under him, and began to free-fall. He fell for what felt like an eternity, and as he looked up, he briefly saw an enormous black aeroplane, something he had only ever seen in pictures from the Old World. He hit the ground. Something had broken his fall. The heat hit him first. Crippling, heavy, thick. The smell hit him. Death, decay. The burn hit him, as he felt his skin climb to an unimaginable temperature, sizzling. His organs were heating up.

Wilson attempted to rise to his feet, but he collapsed almost immediately, his body weak, his mouth more parched than ever, and he was unable to even sweat due to the sheer lack of fluids in his body. With great difficulty he raised his head, and though they were drying out rapidly, he managed to open his eyes. The source of the smell and what had broken his fall suddenly became apparent - Wilson was crouched over a mound of bodies, limbs entangled, flesh charred and burned, some skeletal and some fresh. As far as he could see were bodies, piled up in this flat desert. He tried to breathe, but the air burned his lungs, causing him to choke. His throat was closing. Wilson collapsed onto his back, surrounded by the bodies of other Treacherous individuals. Quickly he succumbed, cooking in the equatorial heat.

Next

non-fiction

Akay Kennedy

‘What’s next?’ I ask.

‘Toronado,’ he replies. ‘It’s just far enough away to work up a thirst.’

Toronado is also one of his craft beer pilgrimage sites. With around 50 beers on offer, making an informed choice from the board can be tricky. The grungy bar has been in the Lower Haight for over 30 years, which equates to 200 in craft beer years. Once past the amenable door bitch, we find ourselves in a small bar covered in beer ephemera, neon signs and tap-handles – works of art in their own right.

After our first round, we are feeling peckish so Steve goes next door to check out the grilled sausages on offer: beer sausage, cheddar brat, weisswurst, chicken habanero and more, including a choice of three vegan options. I’ve made a friend by the time he comes back with a spicy Italian pork to share.

‘Steve, this is Brad,’ I say, as the men eye each other cautiously.

Hand outstretched, Brad smiles while Steve hands off the sausage in a crusty roll to me, wipes his hand and meets Brad halfway.

‘She is always making friends,’ Steve says, looking at me out of the corner of his eye. We spend the next drink or two chatting easily while Steve drills the poor man about possible further craft beer destinations. At one point, Steve checks his phone and announces, ‘How about our next stop is the Tonga Room downtown?’

Steve and I have a dirty predilection for Tiki themed places. Umbrellas in drinks,

hollowed out coconut candles, Hawaiian shirt clad waiters – what’s not to love?

6:41 PM

955 Oak St, San Francisco, CA 94117, USA

MILES 2.55

TRIP TIME 00:13:33

FARE BREAKDOWN Base Fare \$2.00

Distance 2.93

Time 2.98

Subtotal \$7.91

Booking Fee \$1.55

Total \$9.46

Driver – Crispin

Atop Nob Hill, the view as we step from the Uber is worth the fare itself. The Tonga Room at the Fairmont Hotel is a tourist and local destination alike. I duck in to use the restroom before we queue for the Tiki bar. It’s everything I can do not to trip over the mermaid sprawled on the floor getting into, or out of, her costume. I like this place already.

Dressed for the part, Steve is wearing his polyester, retro Tiki shirt with tribal mask motif. Party lights hang from the grass table-umbrellas, there’s a band playing upbeat 80s and 90s tunes on a raft stage floating on the pool. I’m hoping we get to stay until it storms and rains. I hover by the pool rail as my man goes drink hunting. Small groups gather around the few bar tables but I’m happy to people watch from the edge of the bar area.

‘Were they ever really mainstream, do you think?’ I ask Steve in between sips of my rum-heavy, zombie cocktail.

‘What do you mean?’ he asks, over the top of his Mai Tai in a fake coconut.

‘I mean, have Tiki bars ever been more than a kitsch, romanticised idea of a time passed?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘Probably not.’ I suck my ceramic Tiki mug dry. ‘So where to now?’

Next stop is Rogue Ale House down near Washington Square halfway to the waterfront. We’ve lucked in – or out, depending on which way you look at it – as it’s

Trivia Night at this gastropub. A quick scout for a table proves fruitless so we join the line at the elevated bar for drinks. Rogue is known for growing their own grains, hops and other ingredients on their Oregon farm in the Willamette valley. This 'we grow beer' attitude gives them control over purity and quality throughout the process. After collecting a couple of large tall glasses of the amber stuff, we retreat outside, away from the hubbub. The ill-lit rear courtyard is more smoker's concession than vibrant beer garden. A few wooden picnic tables with fairy lights wrapped around umbrellas do little to offset the massive spotlight glare.

From the brand-heavy, laminated menu we choose fried tater tots with ranch dip, chicken wings with hot sauce and fried cheese-curd with jalapeño jelly. Piping hot fried finger food makes up the bulk of the menu, though the odd vegetable does make a token appearance under the guise of salad. Service is perfunctory without being rude. I'm sure the beer nerds who attend to us all home-brew on the side, dreaming of taking their hobby next level.

'If you're still hungry, you can have dessert. They've got beer floats. Chocolate stout over vanilla ice cream with whipped cream and a cherry?'

'Yeah, nah,' he says. 'Think I'll skip it this time.'

Placing his now empty glass on the table, he says: 'But I could go another.'

We up sticks and go inside, determined to find a corner to perch now that the evening has cooled off and the wind picked up. Thankfully, the trivia quiz has reached its conclusion and the bar is emptying out. I find a slightly sticky table and push the dishes to one side. Although there are guest beers on tap, Steve and I have a philosophy of 'when in Rome' so it's a Rogue double chocolate stout for him and a Rogue barleywine for me. Slightly higher in alcohol, we sit a little longer on these smaller tipples and watch the bar in action around us. Television screens showing sports we don't understand blare from the corner. Crowded tables of college kids raucous in their laughter. Large groups playing board games on other tables. It appears we are not their core demographic.

'Fancy a bit of a stroll and some fresh air?' I posit, as our glasses are nearing empty.

'Don't mind if I do,' he says, taking my arm in his and we gratefully step from the bustling bar onto a darker, quieter street. Heading along Columbus Avenue, a broad road that cuts a diagonal swathe through the street grid from the financial district to the waterfront, we pass pizza joints, sushi restaurants, closed cafes and Indian eateries. I think we are aimlessly wandering but of course Steve has a plan and it turns out to be

an excellent one.

I'm not one for gimmicky tourist attractions, and if I have a choice, I avoid them. Our visit to the hundred-year-old Buena Vista is not a choice, though an Irish coffee was an inspired idea to cap off our evening. A cocktail of hot coffee, whiskey – Irish of course – topped with a thick head of whipped cream is what The Buena Vista is rightly famous for. Located in the ground floor of a three-storey building at the terminus of the Powell-Hyde Cable Car, it is ideally situated to capture the tourist dollar. Waiters in stiff white jackets with bright eyes and broad smiles choreograph their customers with ease. Momentarily, I feel like a teenager asked on her first date when he offers to bring us two Irish coffees. Of course the answer is yes. How could I possibly refuse?

I know we had a second Irish coffee but there's not much more I remember about that evening. In the Uber ride home, I don't hear Steve and our driver make small talk. All I can think of is how warm I feel inside.

Cheap wine in Chinatown

poetry

Anna Bilbrough

I.

Cracked booths at dumpling houses
Nine dollar cider, five dollar wine
Nonchalance brews
'I met his dad the morning after
my hair was a mess and I needed a piss'
Old friends, no news

II.

'I'm a selfish person
I accept that flaw'
Conversation akin to slogging uphill
Searching cavities for a seed to sow
Silence is a silent killer
She quietly pays the bill

III.

An engagement and a reunion
'I think I'm having a mid-life crisis'
Arms out windows as they drive the streets

Old haunts and sticky floors
A quick drag for old-time's sake
'I believe in our next life we'll meet'



Illustrated by Amelia Bowen

Compression

poetry

Alex K.

Gang stalking refers to the practice of unseen entities with nefarious intentions stalking someone and planting messages to make the person think and act like they are going crazy, I think I'm being gang stalked by targeted ads and by the people I follow on Instagram

In 2009 a couple in New Zealand tried to name their newborn child '4real'

Audience engagement rapidly decompresses

Lone wolf attacks

Growing my wealth

Resilience.

Please follow me

Literally biding my time until I hit the wall and have to try and find a beta who can fuck me and be my boyfriend. I will breathe a sigh of relief.

KILL IT WITH FIRE

Trojan backdoor

Asbestos in the home.

Asbestos is scary and exciting in the same way as nuclear radiation because you can't see it or feel it at first and its effects on the human body seem spectral or supernatural.

Codependence day culminating in a mutual lack of interest

Summer of impotent rage

My iPhone is always unlocked and my laptop never goes to sleep. Everybody is looking at me and everybody is talking about me, and, I imagine, laughing at me. When I don't vape I sweat.

Happy Birthday

fiction

Sammy Pascoe

In the middle of the dining table sat a small, chocolate cupcake – bought cheap in a pack of six at the Coles down the road – on the black-and-purple painted plate her brother had made for her in high school, with a single green candle in its centre. Olympia tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as she stared into the tiny flame that danced and flickered before her. Closing her eyes, she blew out the candle; she didn't make a wish this year.

For the rest of the night Olympia remained curled up on her bed, re-watching episodes of *Doctor Who*, eating last night's leftovers. By the time it hit ten o'clock Olympia was fast asleep, her laptop forgotten on the other side of the bed, Netflix open, automatically playing the next episode on and on. The following morning at six she was woken by the sound of someone knocking at the door. Half asleep, she hauled herself out of her room, her feet dragging. She stood and stared at the door, wondering if it was worth the emotional strain to open it and deal with whoever was demanding her attention at such a ridiculously early hour. Through the peephole she could see a man dressed in a suit and tie. Olympia contemplated opening up to see who he was and what he wanted, but as it was she was severely lacking the mental and emotional capacity to handle talking to another human being. She had yet to fully recover from the exhaustion of being forced to socialise and feign friendliness with people she had never met before when she would have preferred to be home alone, binge-watching

Netflix, wrapped up in her fluffiest blanket.

“Miss Carter, I know you’re in there. Open the door,” the man outside said, his voice oozing with cocky confidence. Olympia already knew she would not be dealing with him until she was emotionally charged. “I’m Shane, I’m a friend of Joe’s. He wanted me to come by and tell you he is really, *really* sorry for what he did. Oh, and he also wanted to know if you’d been getting any of his texts or calls?”

Figures.

Silently, she slithered back to the safety of her room, put in her earphones and drowned out the sound of Shane’s unyielding knocking. It seemed that no matter what she did, Olympia could not escape. She had moved two cities away in the span of three years, so as to not risk running into him in the streets. *I guess it’s time to move again.*

8 o’clock in the morning and Olympia could taste blood as she examined her nails, chewed down to the nub, flecks of dried blood peeling off her fingertips. She got out of bed, wrapped her fingers with bandaids and put on her favourite black jeans, boots, and the long maroon sweater she could wear as a dress. She wore her hair down in front of her face like a mask and put on a beanie to hold it all in place. It had been an hour since the knocking had stopped, and Olympia needed to buy herself dinner for the next few days. At the door she stood frozen, she could not bring herself to open it for fear of seeing the man she had been running from all these years.

She wouldn’t let him in again, for her own sanity, *never again.*

Taking a deep breath, Olympia tried her best to calm her trembling body as she opened the door. No one was there and she let out a long sigh of relief only to look down to find a note at her feet with a name, Shane Harris, an address and a phone number. Annoyed and tired, she stomped on the piece of paper and did her very best to grind it into floor beneath her foot. With a huff she grabbed her bag and her keys, made sure to lock the door and double checked that it was, in fact, locked. She didn’t need the stress of a break in.

The streets were unsurprisingly packed, being an early morning. Olympia shrunk into herself as much as she could, not wanting to take up any more space than necessary as she navigated her way through the thick, chaotic crowd of scrambling mothers, uptight businessmen, rowdy and anxious teenagers and everyone in-between. She wished she was back in the warmth and safety of her own home.

The market was packed with people rushing and pushing and shoving and shouting

and snatching and rummaging. God, how she wished the world could slow down and be still, just for a moment. Olympia wriggled through the sea of bodies, over the years she had mastered the art of getting out of the way, and managed to make her way to the front of her favourite fruit stall. This particular stall was her favourite not because prices were lower, but because the quality was the best. It saddened her to think that should she be forced to move again she might never come back to this stall again.

“Ah Olympia! What can I get for you today?” asked Majid. He was the owner’s son, and easily the friendliest clerk in the entire market.

“Just the usual, Majid,” Olympia said.

Majid quickly filled her bags and she paid him, plus a little bit extra. She would have stuck around to chat, but the fussy woman beside her was making it painfully obvious that she was *still* waiting and in desperate need of assistance lest she die where she stood. Olympia rolled her eyes as she walked away and glanced back to give Majid a sympathetic look before vanishing among the sea of people. It took longer than anticipated for Olympia to finish her morning shop before she was rushing home again. She had to leave for work in two hours and she wouldn’t have enough time to make breakfast or lunch to take unless she got home soon.

Rounding the corner, home was just a few steps away when she felt a hand fall down heavily on her shoulder. She spun around, her fists clenched and shaking. “Sorry miss,” said the beggar as he took a step back, “could you spare any change?”

Olympia felt her body relax and the tension wash away. She smiled and offered him all the coins she had. He thanked her and was gone in moments. Turning back, she continued home. At her front door, she felt something was wrong. Hesitantly Olympia opened the door to her house and walked inside. The heavy bags that held her groceries fell to the floor with loud thuds as she looked around at the mess her living room was in. Furniture turned upside-down, her belongings scattered across the floor, some things broken, her dining table had been broken in half straight down the middle and every one of her photo frames had been smashed.

Why?

Every room looked the same, her bedroom worst of all. Her mattress was missing, her laptop had been ripped apart, her clothes thrown around and scattered throughout the room, some torn and cut up, others thrown a heap on the floor reeking of piss. A note was stuck to the back of her door.

Dear Olly,

Please, take me back and I'll replace everything. I swear. Things will be different this time, I won't hurt you like that ever again. I was in a bad place, my mental health was terrible, you should know that. I didn't mean those things I said, and I am truly sorry for throwing you out. But you broke my heart, Olympia. Without you I am a broken man, please take me back?

Love,

Joe

Her blood turned cold, he had found her. Again. He had broken into her home and destroyed everything, leaving only an empty promise to replace it all if she took him back. *Like hell I will*, she thought and, finding strength in fear, she began packing her bags with whatever was salvageable.

Two suitcases later, Olympia had moved everything into her car, which too often she had found herself living out of, and now it looked like she would be going through it all again.

She did not wait for fear of finding Joe waiting outside, ready to attack from the shadows. No note, no message to her boss, friends, or neighbours, Olympia packed up and left. She knew she'd have to call, explain she wasn't missing. But those formalities could wait until she was far enough away that she felt it was safe to breathe again. After driving in no particular direction for an hour without rest, Olympia pulled over to the side of the road and slumped in her seat, head hitting the steering wheel. The trembling in her hands had spread throughout her entire body. Her chest felt tight and her face was hot. The tears started and soon Olympia was in hysterics, her grip on the steering wheel tightened until her knuckles were white. Grief turned to anger, and she slammed her fists into the car's horn to drown out the sound of her screams.

There was a knock on the driver's side window and Olympia jolted upright in her seat and looked at the man who loomed on the other side of her door. Olympia unclenched her jaw, her fists. She lowered the window a crack, just enough that she could hear the guy speak.

"C-can I help you?" Olympia asked, there was no attempt made at hiding her nervousness or her tears. She was too tired.

"Please get out of the car," said the looming man. He made no move to step back, instead choosing to slam his fist into the side of the door when Olympia shook her head. "Ma'am I a police officer and I am ordering you to open your door."

“Show me your badge,” Olympia placed one hand on the steering wheel, and one on the key that was still inside the ignition.

“Open the door now.”

“You’re not a police officer. I don’t have to obey any order you give me.”

“I told you to open the door!”

Heart racing, Olympia shook her head. Shane, who she had not recognised at first, turned and called out to someone in the car that was parked behind her own. *I never noticed them pull up behind me.* The passenger side door of Shane’s car opened and out stepped Joe. Just the sight of him made Olympia’s stomach churn. While Shane was distracted, she started her car and slammed her foot on the accelerator. The two men were quick to begin their pursuit, chasing no matter how long she spent on the road, no matter where she went, they were always right behind her.

They were getting closer to the next town, the next town where there were other people and real cops waiting. The other car sped up, slammed into the back of hers.

It only took seconds for Olympia to lose control of her car. It only took seconds for her car to roll. It only took seconds for Olympia to realise that she wasn’t dead, that she was hanging upside down in her seat held in place by her seatbelt with blood in her hair.

Disoriented, Olympia did not fight whoever opened her door. She did not fight whoever pulled her from the car. She did not fight whoever sat over her, fists clenched. She did not fight him when she felt the impact of his fist to the side of her head. Again, again, until someone ripped him off of her. There was yelling somewhere in the distance.

Olympia never heard her phone ring. Never saw the text her brother had sent her.

Happy birthday Olly. Love, your favourite big brother, Cameron.



Illustrated by Zoe Clare

Brintellex

poetry

George Leigh

I am so afraid of change,
I am not so afraid of change.

All is stagnant, all is in vain.

both extremes at all times;
when I look at the sky I see nothing but stars

I am happy
But is happiness
What I desire?



Illustrated by Ashleigh Pollard

The Next

poetry

Lucia Valeria Alfieri

Now I know,
what was next:
the abyss

*The fear—till now held back—
pumps into the veins;
explodes on the surface
with the coming of the day,
with a scream.
And the fear plagues and overwhelms me.*

*Here it is, the abyss,
whose perception I have pushed and chased away
so many times.*

*Someone shouts your name
and you are not here anymore.
In front of us the abyss.*

Now I know that there is a Before and a Next.

*I love and have loved the Before.
Nothing I know about the Next,
and nothing I want to know about it.*

*I want the abyss to wrap me
and to take away also myself.
Instead, it leaves me where I am,
forced to learn what is the Next.*

Now I know.
The Next is made of regrets,
of memories and dreams
where I find you and deceive myself.

It is an annoyance that comes up suddenly,
for not being able to chat with you,
to enjoy your glance, your laughter,
or simply staying in silence together with you.
It is an annoyance that comes up suddenly,
when I'd like to share a thought with you
and I realise that you are air.

The Next is an annoyance for a reality that I'd like to change,
but I can't.
And thus I'd like to scream.
And I scream, in silence.

The Next is made of courage.
Or it is only inertia that keeps me going?

The Next are glances to the past and yearning for having it back.

They are wrinkles that scratch our faces, but not yours.

“Why?”

That question ties the Before to the Next,
but it doesn't find answer.

The Next are boxes of your clothes,
stuck to the trend of that time.

Magic boxes

they open to bring me back to the Before
and relive you.

The Next are your perfumes
sprayed to the air to breathe you.

They are books flicked through and read knowing that
there your hand has passed,
and you have sailed in those stories.

The Next are endless moments like these,
in which you come back to stay with me.

The Next is awareness that nothing is forever,
yet awareness of the luck I had to live you.



Illustrated by Marc Eggleton

Document 12

non-fiction

Mladen Milinkovic

I was sitting reading a chapter about a son contemplating his father's failures, when I was snapped from my stupor by the dial tone ending and a hello that I can only process in the form of a mental hieroglyph.

"Hi, my name's Mladen..." I fire into it like a reflex. "We're conducting a survey on insurance providers, are you interested in taking part?" At the end of this sentence my senses fade back in; the beeping, chirping and chatter of the call centre, the cold conditioned air and the stiff chair, the white text on black screen, on white, on white, on white.

"OK," a very subdued voice replied, a voice I'd missed the first time. I'm snapped again, into the call. I can hear thin music in the background. It sounds like Billie Holiday, it's beautiful. How long has it been since I spoke? I start asking questions and getting answers, every response in an indifferent calm monotone. The singing in the background is emotional. Is that slight reverberation? I'm picturing them being in the bath. Questions and answers hum on. My physical surroundings are distant again. They sound so calm. It sounds so nice on the other end of the line, why are they still taking this survey? I'm convinced they don't want to. The singing in the background is nearly making me cry. Question, answer, question, answer. The thought crosses my mind that they're going to commit suicide. That they've made their peace and they're comfortable; that doing this survey to them is as holy an experience as any, and I'm

right there with them.

The singing crescendos and I let my emotions break loose like a dam, but they wash over me in an instant and I'm back in that same state of static indifference. Except now I'm in the bath too, and I'm not planning on getting out. Ever.

Then suddenly a hearty laugh cracks through my senses and snaps me out of my stupor. The laugh came from the person I'm interviewing. I look to the screen to see what question I just asked;

"How much do you agree that Allianz insurance is good value for money?"

The person is giggling

"Haha, well no insurance is good value for money!"

I snap again. The singing sounds more like Cher now, I am confused. Same reverberation but I hear their pacing footsteps now, and figure they're in the kitchen. Their responses suddenly seem wildly energetic relative to before. I feel the white text on black screen, on white, on white, on white. Stiff chair, cold air. I'm back. I wrap up the interview and ask if they'd like to be contacted for future research, and they say yes. Then just like that the call is over. The empty dial tone is back and I'm sitting here staring into space. Where was I just then? Who was that person and where did they go? I'm the kind of shocked and confused that I can't even contemplate.

In the end I decided they had their perfect death in that bath. In the end I decided I'd been left behind for a reason.

Our Eldritch Friend

poetry

Ty Liebelt

There's a monster in the phonebook and everyone knows
it's there;

crouching in silence

in quiet

in unwashed clothes that they've all seen before whether
they like *it* or NOT

Not that they would say anything about *it*
ever mention *it*

find the right words to communicate how they feel about *IT*
Not **they** - *IT*

'*It*' as in not an object but rather an un-describable
an undesirable un-describable

- that which is not desired on account of *its* inconvenience
when trying to be placed into a box

(for safety purposes, you UNDERSTAND)

Though despite this, they see *it* as mostly harmless
as most things are **mostly** harmless;

the difference being that *it* has the fact stamped on *its* wrist
so that *it* might return to things it had once left,

due to disinterest or anxiety or phone calls or bladder trouble

or anxiety
or any of all manner of excuses made to escape the volume
of the world;
that specific volume of that specific part of the world
from loud **LOUD** to slightly less loud **LOUD**
lacking crowds of flesh and being stuck with crowds of
THOUGHT
This is why *it* isn't invited to things -
to soirees
to orgies
to nights rather than days
to tenements of haze and noise that all other life on earth
seems to ENJOY
They feel that this is for *its* own good:
we must protect the un-describable
the undesirable un-describable
for it will only wish to leave
in the end
happiness makes *it* SICK
It is mostly harmless
but we're wary of *it*, all the same
we're wary that *it's* allergic to fun
that *it* doesn't wish to enjoy *itself*
- *it* doesn't know how, *it* seems
“*it* won't **emote** for me”, rather *it* points out the words that
I said
- which order and what spelling
as if what we say to each other is important
instead of emitting foggy clouds of sound and sweat
and laughing smiling spiritual energy

and unexplainable bonds of SAMENESS

It is repelled by these things, our eldritch friend IS

These things that make the world grow round

these things for grown-ups to know that they've grown UP

You know *it* might be less of an *it*, if *it* tried

if *it* stops complaining about things just because they cause
it pain

cause *it* agony

cause *it* to smash *its* head against the mirror in the hopes one
or the other will eventually break

or rather stop

stop talking

stop making sound with *its* very loud and incessant

EXISTENCE

If *it* tried a little, perhaps *it* would be less *IT*

But we're not sure how *it* can try when we don't invite *it* to
THINGS



Illustrated by Ash Jolley

Death did us part

fiction

Cheyenne Berandi

It was my photo, but it wasn't. It wasn't the one that stayed pressed tightly between the pages of the diary I had kept that year, the one that I took out to look at so often the edges had worn thin. But still, it was the same picture. His eyes shone bright with life, and his smile lit up his face. I could still vividly remember taking the photo – the way I had teased him and snatched the camera from his hands, dangling it out of his reach, taunting that if he wouldn't let me take his photo I wouldn't give it back until our trip was over. He had laughed and tried to appease me, but he hadn't taken it seriously – this image, my favourite, must've been one of at least 20 I had taken. I'd managed to luck out and capture a genuine moment of happiness as he and I danced around the park.

It was later that night that he had asked me to marry him. He hadn't planned to, so he had no ring, but I didn't care. Something I had said, stupid and inconsequential all these years later, had made him decide he wanted me to be his wife. He didn't hesitate in asking, and I never hesitated to say yes.

Yes, this image was the same, but it was a new print. It was surreal to see it without the creases from being folded over and over, or the small smudges from where my fingers had rubbed so frequently against the ink. In this copy his face was smooth still, where mine hid his youth behind aged ink.

A knock at the door broke me from my thoughts. When I peered through the

peephole in the hotel door I saw my mum beaming. I could hear her through the heavy wood, but not distinctly enough to discern her words. As I opened the door her off-key rendition of *Going to the Chapel of Love* filled my ears and made me smile. She gripped my wrists, forcing me to spin with her while she laughed through the last lines of the chorus before coming to a dramatic stop in the middle of the room. I fell into her arms, giggling like a child as she rocked me in a joyful hug.

We almost fell to the floor when my best friend and Maid of Honour, Melanie, crashed into us shouting, “Group hug!”

The three of us erupted into giggles as we broke apart. We settled down at the four-seater table, preparing to order room service. Mum’s laughter stopped as she noticed the photo of Leigh on the table. Her face slackened as she reached out, gingerly touching the edges of the print. I held my breath, unsure how she would react. Would she be sad to think of him? Disappointed in me for dwelling on the past on what should be such a happy day?

“He had such a great smile,” she said wistfully. Her eyes were brimmed with tears I knew she wouldn’t shed. I breathed out heavily. She looked up at me. “He only ever shared it with you though.”

I smiled softly, unable to form words for a response.

“Did you want to have him close today?” Mel asked, her eyes showing no disapproval.

“It was here when I woke up,” I managed, unable to explain myself any further.

Mum picked it up, something I hadn’t dared to do yet, and turned it over. The reverse side of the glossy print showed soft, scrawling handwriting. Without reading it, Mum passed it to me.

Addie,

I thought you might need to know that your guardian angel is watching over you today - just like always. I’ve left you a gift by that tree you loved in the ceremony garden - take the photo with you when you go. I hope you like what you find.

Love always,

Justin

I wasn’t surprised that Justin had sent a gift to my room - I had done the same thing for him. I’d sent him a pocket watch - something he had wanted for a while - with a

note about counting down the moments until he would be my husband. So far, his gift had blown mine away.

Mum, who had shifted to read the note over my shoulder, placed her hand on mine.

“Do you want to go down now?” she asked softly, passing me the photo.

I looked into Leigh’s deep brown eyes, swallowed harshly, and nodded.

The garden had been decorated beautifully with string lights and natural wood furnishings, ready for today’s nuptials. I didn’t want to make the comparison between my wedding today, and the one I’d had twelve years earlier, but I couldn’t help noticing the differences.

Where Justin and I had booked a garden venue in a fancy hotel, Leigh and I had settled for a small gathering in my parents’ backyard. My mum had decorated with paper lanterns and sheets she had draped in a way that had only been *moderately* tacky. We hadn’t cared. The guest list had been elite, only those who approved of our young marriage to attend. At 20 years old, it hadn’t been many. Now, Justin and I had invited almost everyone we knew, and spared no expense for our venue and decor. It was going to be no small affair.

Shaking off the bittersweet memories of my last wedding, I took the time to look around the garden. In lieu of chairs, we had long bench seats made of a natural red wood, with flowering vines twined around the backs. The ground was a carpet of dewy green grass which dampened my slippers and was the reason I had chosen to wear flats as my wedding shoes. At the end of the isle a brilliant arch of flowering vines created a picture-perfect altar. I felt overwhelmed by the beauty of it all, suddenly unsure if I had actually woken up, or if I was still living in a dream.

But no. Dreaming never felt this strong.

To the side of the garden, which was relatively flat and clear, was a mid-sized Australian Willow Tree. It was well maintained, with delicately draped branches, trimmed to a height that made it easy to walk beneath them.

This tree was the reason I had wanted to get married here. It had seemed like something from a fairytale, even without being made up elaborately. Today it was truly magical. Each branch glowed with the soft white fairy lights that had been carefully twined through the limbs, extending seamlessly down the trunk. This was where I found the rest of my gift from Justin.

A small, natural wood board carved with cursive lettering hung above a simple but touching display. Small pegs held photos to the string of the lights, scattering images across the face of the tree trunk. Some of the people I recognised - my grandparents and my uncle - but others were strangers to me. In the centre of the gathered images was an empty space, marked only by a photo-less peg on the string above it. This was where I was supposed to put Leigh. I looked to the sign, reading the delicate words through misty eyes.

*Those we love don't go away,
they walk beside us every day.
Unseen, unheard, but always near.
Still loved, still missed, and very dear.*

I suddenly felt like I couldn't breathe. I could feel the way Mum and Mel were looking at me – expectantly and with a lot of pity. I wanted to say something, but I couldn't make myself. It was as though there was something caught in my throat and I couldn't push sound past it. My hands trembled where I held the photograph of Leigh.

It hurt, hanging his photo among the other dead we cared for, but I had been grieving for eleven years, and knew this was an important step in that process. My hands shook as I pegged the photo in the empty space, but once it was there it seemed to belong.

It was larger than the other photos on the tree, something I'm sure was no accident. Justin wanted to reassure me that grieving my late husband was something he understood and would help me through. I loved him for that. He felt no jealousy at my lingering emotions, only sympathy for my loss. He loved me enough to accept that I would always love another.

I wiped at my tears as Mum and Mel once again embraced me before leading me away from the garden and back to my room to prepare for the ceremony.

I hadn't struggled to smile as the photographer took pictures of us getting ready. Mel and I had erupted into laughter as she tightened the corset back of my dress – the air being forced from my lungs had only had me more hysterical. The more somber pictures were the harder ones to get, where the photographer wanted us to look serious instead of jovial. Now, as I stood in the room adjacent to the garden area, preparing to

walk out and down the aisle, I couldn't have laughed if I tried. My stomach swam with nerves, and I could feel beads of sweat on my palms beneath my bouquet. I had known this would be hard when Justin had broached the subject of marriage, but I loved him too much to deny him. After Leigh, I had sworn I would never get married again - that I would hold onto his last name as my own forever. It was the only piece of him I got to keep. But life keeps going, promises get broken, and people fall in love.

That was the thing that had surprised me more than anything else.

When I had met Justin, I hadn't thought for a moment that we would ever end up where we had. He had been a friend and a confidant, but realising I loved him had taken a long time, and admitting the feeling - first to myself, and later to him - had been one of the more difficult things I had ever had to do. He had been patient and kind through it all, which had only made me love him more.

The opening lines of *I Choose You*, by Sara Bareilles, snapped me out of my thoughts, signaling the start of the processional. I waited, watching the wedding party file out when their times came, until I was left in the room alone.

My dad had understood when I said I didn't want him to give me away this time around. He had already done that with Leigh, and it felt wrong to negate that. Even though I would be walking the aisle alone, it would be Leigh giving me away this time. That thought brought a sad smile to my face, but I refused to cry before I made it to the end of the aisle. When the line that signaled the start of my walk came, I stepped up to the doors and out into the sunny garden. The moment I did, all sad thoughts washed away. All I could see was Justin, waiting with loving eyes at the end of the walk, and I had to remind myself to take slow, deliberate steps, instead of rushing to him. When I finally reached the end, I passed my bouquet to Mel and instead took Justin's hands. They were warm as he squeezed mine ever so slightly, conveying all the things he couldn't say. Looking at Justin, I almost forgot to listen to the celebrant as he welcomed everyone, but I tuned in somewhere near the middle.

"...all here for the same reason. To celebrate the love of Justin and Adeline. It's a love they've shared with each and every one of us here today, and I'm sure we're all very excited to be here to witness as they bind themselves not only through that love, but through the promise to stand by one another for the rest of their lives."

His words hit me hard and I closed my eyes against the memories.

"*'Till death do you part...*"

That line had always haunted me.

Justin squeezed my hand, drawing my eyes back to his. His smile conveyed all the love and understanding he felt. Again I had to force myself not to cry. My love for Justin and grief for Leigh constantly fought a battle, but today was one of the hardest I had faced. I glanced across at the tree where Leigh's photo hung, pulling strength from the happiness on his face.

"...this marriage will be more than signatures at the bottom of a legal contract. It will be the unending support and love these two give to each other, and the promise to never give up on one another."

As the celebrant continued with his speech and built momentum, I couldn't help but think of how lucky I had been in my life, to have found not one, but two people I would truly love for the rest of my life. Losing Leigh had hurt - it still did - but no amount of hurt could ever lead me to regret the love we had shared. And Justin... his love surprised me every day. Where I would feel turmoil over my unfaithfulness, he would remind me that to love and be loved was something no one should be denied.

"The vows spoken here today are more than just an item on a checklist, that once completed brings you one step closer to legally being husband and wife. They are the promises you make to each other - the words that will shape your future together and keep you walking your paths side by side." The celebrant paused and turned his attention to the audience. "Justin and Adeline have made the choice to write their own vows, so I now turn the floor over to them so that they may share with us the true meaning of why we are gathered here today. Justin," he prompted as he stepped away.

I could see the nerves showing on Justin's face, and feel the slightest tremor in his hands as I held them. This I understood. No matter the circumstances, public speaking was always nerve wracking.

"Adeline—" he faltered, taking an extra second to compose himself. "Addie. The day we met changed my life, even if it took me some time to realise it. Without trying, you made me fall in love with you, and I haven't managed to find my feet since."

I couldn't help but laugh softly at that, and as I did I could see the anxiety over speaking in front of everyone fall away from him.

"You are the person who most deeply frustrates me, and most easily pushes my buttons, but you're also the one whose smile can change the course of my day, and who knows exactly what to do or say to calm me down. I promise, with everything I have, to love you through all those frustrating times, and cherish you for every moment of the life we will share together. You have always been easy to love – even

before you knew you could love me in return...”

My breath caught as Justin looked over towards the tree where Leigh’s photo hung. I bit my lip to stop it from trembling as I listened to the words that followed.

“Leigh Jacobs was more than your high school sweetheart. He was the man who taught you what it means to love, and I know losing him hurt you deeply. I know you think you have to move on from him to embrace the life we’ll build together, but maybe the most important promise I can make to you is this: I promise to never try to replace Leigh in your heart. I promise to build and nurture a space of my own and be there for you through any grief you feel. I promise to give you space when it’s needed, and to watch you grow and thrive. I promise to love you, not in spite of your past, but because of it.

“No matter what life throws at us, I promise to stand beside you and hold your hand through it all. I promise to strive every day to be the man you believe I can be. More than anything else, I promise to love you, wholeheartedly, for the rest of my life, and longer.”

His words had left me in silent tears, my heart waring between my grief and the all-encompassing love Justin had just given to me.

“Oh, and I promise to learn to use the washing machine!” he added hastily.

I couldn’t help it – I laughed loudly, ruining the atmosphere the rest of his vows had created. It was the best reminder of the main reason why I loved him - no matter the rollercoaster of emotions I experienced at any given time, he had *never* failed to make me laugh.

I glanced over the tree and saw Leigh’s face, and this time it wasn’t hard to believe he would be happy for me.

I looked down to where the heavy gold band with accentuating diamonds sat on my finger. It was worlds away from the simple, thin golden one that normally hung on a chain around my neck, but I supposed that was to be expected. Like people, no two relationships were alike. Leigh and Justin were as different as two people could be, and yet I loved them both unconditionally. I still felt guilty over loving Leigh, but Justin had eased the hurt so many times today. As always, he soothed me and reminded me how easy it was to be in love.

Changing my name had been the hardest choice to make. I had wanted so badly to

cling to the name Leigh had given me, but I knew it was one thing that I needed to let go. Still, it was hard to give it up.

The reception was held in one of the hotel's large function rooms, with a bar at one end and a dance floor at the other. Justin and I had barely had a moment apart, but when his friends had dragged him to the dancefloor, I instead stumbled across the floor, sans shoes, towards the bar.

Maria Jacobs was a small woman who always styled her curly hair in a way that gave her an extra inch of height. When she stepped up beside me I wasn't entirely surprised – I had invited her after all – but I was caught off guard.

"Adeline," she said, her voice clear despite the mist of tears clouding her eyes. "You look absolutely stunning, my dear."

"Th-thank you." The guilt was rising up again. Mrs Jacobs and I were close, but not as much as we had once been. I truly believed she was all that got me through losing Leigh – having someone that shared my pain – but I sometimes felt like I was doing the wrong thing by moving on with my life. She never seemed to be doing the same. Yet, the way she looked at me was filled with only love and acceptance. "I'm so glad you could come today," I said sincerely.

"Me too, dear." She placed a delicate hand on my upper arm. "Leigh would be so proud of you – you chose well." She looked over to where Justin and his friends threw their arms in the air to *Y.M.C.A.* and smiled. "If someone had asked me what would bring my tears today, I never would've guessed it would be his vows. He's special. Hold on to that."

My throat had closed over again. When I went too long without responding, Mrs Jacobs squeezed my arm and kept speaking.

"Moving on isn't easy – maybe that's not the right phrase anyway. You don't really get past something like that – losing someone you love." Her tears were starting to affect her voice. "But you do learn not to let the hurt of the past hold you back. The time you've got, you cherish it. You look back fondly on the memories, but you don't stop making new ones. Leigh wouldn't have wanted you to be sad forever, neither would anyone else. I can see that you're beating yourself up every time you feel happy – I do the same thing—" She paused, collecting herself before pushing through. "We both deserve to feel love and happiness. I suppose I just wanted to tell you that you helped me feel that today. Knowing you wanted to share today with me, it made me feel truly loved." She stepped forward and pulled me into a hug with more fierceness

than I would've imagined she could possess. "No matter what happens, you'll always be my daughter-in-law. That's something that will never change."

She stepped back, holding me at arm's length, and though I still couldn't form words for a response, I knew she could see the happiness she had brought back to me.



Illustrated by Ashleigh Pollard

Half Baked

poetry

Alex K.

Everything sucks in
Letting go
This is a fucking human thing to do, but whatever,
The cumming insurrection
The invisible hand of providence
Why are there no female school shooters?
Progress progress progress

Flossing my teeth until I taste blood, enlightenment now
Finally a place for leisure and consumption
The world's first sex robot with opposable thumbs and
dandruff
My content's nobody's content but mine, you run your own
content let me run mine
Have a heart

I wish I had:
The right Sennheiser headphones designed to work with
Apple iPhones
A case that has a circle cut out so you can still see the Apple

logo

The right stickers on the case to express my personality

Effort without finality

Voice of people today. Quiet and industrious,

Final bitchy resting place

The end of a perfect day

I'm full of hate and I love it

It stops buffering



Illustrated by Samuel Milkovits

Summer days

poetry

Anna Bilbrough

I'm getting nostalgic again
For cool summer breezes
Mangoes dripping down chins
Dull throbs of a driving bass line
I sip iced water from a straw

I hear the children next door
Playing basketball in their yard
Missed shots thud against the backboard
Disgruntled murmurs and satisfied laughs
Boys against girls, they play in teams

The hedge of next door is bright green
Ice-cream clouds drift above
I want to preserve the colours
Record the exuberant children
It cannot be captured perfectly



Illustrated by Samuel Milkovits

The pit in the mountain

fiction

Arie Huybregts

Liri Srenta woke to rain rattling on the canopy above her and pattering on the waxed cloth of her bedding. She was cold and damp, tired and sore. It took a moment to realise that it was not the canopy rattling, it was the mountains to the east, it was the rattling and rumbling of a rockslide that had woken her.

For about twenty seconds, Liri considered trying to go back to sleep, but the rain was no fabrication of her mind, nor was the cold. With a dramatic and lengthy sigh to the fleeing birds, she peeled herself out of her sleeping bag and stood and stretched until her back and shoulders clicked.

She hooked the bedding over a low branch to drain, found better shelter and peeled open her pack. On went her gambeson and padded leggings and oiled leather jacket. She tipped her quiver over to dump out the water collecting in it, rubbed down her bow with more wax, ignored her lacquered scabbard and started rolling up her bedding to strap onto her pack.

Then she paused and frowned to herself. She could still hear the rumbling and rattling up on the mountain. She could still hear the screeching of birds and animals fleeing the landslide. Strapping on her bow and quiver and short sword, Liri scrambled up the tree on which her bedding was hanging.

She was in the oldest part of the farmed human forest and the tree was tall enough to see to the mountain. A huge gash had appeared, a sheet of rock slowly disintegrating

as it slid down from near the top of the mountain. A deep, black cave stared out of Iradel and Liri felt the mountain was angry with her.

Liri looked around, a wave of birds was fleeing behind her, headed west even kilometres away from the mountain and the noise. Liri started to slide down the tree when there came a tearing noise below. Little animals first, like rabbits and foxes started sprinting through the clearing in which Liri had camped.

At first she was worried, her bag still sitting at the base of the tree, but even as deer and dogs and then cats and wolves and all sorts of animals running from the mountain came through the clearing they ignored the bag and the bedding and the tree.

Then came tearing and crashing and screaming and rustling and Liri looked toward the mountain through the forest and saw the screaming ape. Great long arms and thick corded muscles and matted black fur and empty, glassy eyes. It swung from branches and crashed through trees and pulled itself along the ground and screamed and screamed and screamed.

The ogre slammed into the tree in which Liri hung and her heart stopped and then the ogre kept going. Liri tried her utmost to take deep breaths, tried to rationalise that it was an animal and not a monster and it would not be coming back and she could not make her breaths deep and she could not relax her white-knuckle grip on the tree.

And then came the spiders.

Rustling and skittering and silent came the spiders: some the size of spiders, some the size of dogs and some the size of horses. They skittered and rustled through the trees and over the ground and Liri reached for her sword as the first one approached and dodged nimbly away from an awkward strike and just kept going.

Spiders and spiders and spiders just like everything else ignored Liri where she clung white-knuckled and hyperventilating midway up a tree. None touched her but countless spiders came within centimetres of her arms and legs and face.

The rustling faded away to the west and Liri's breathing slowly calmed, her hands slowly unclenched. Body aching worse than when she had woken, Liri climbed slowly down the tree, checked on her pack and her sleeping bag and found them untouched, not even footprints marred them. She tied up her sleeping bag and hefted her pack and...

Breathing a little too fast, hands a little too clenched, mind somehow still and racing, Liri stood in indecision. She could run home to Samara and hide in her bedroom and try to forget the sight of a literal wave of spiders. Or she could go and look, now that

the rumbling had subsided but for the odd shift and rattling of dislodged stone.

And then she turned east toward Iradel and started walking, rain pattering down on her hood and her pack and the canopy above. It was maybe an hour before she came to the deep groove in the ground that marked the border between Nemar's forest and the troll's territory and she paused and considered her options.

Liri remembered an ogre, screaming and screaming and screaming in fear, tearing through the forest. She figured, or hoped, that the trolls wouldn't be too vigilant if the ogres were coming through their forest as well.

Cautiously, Liri stepped over the border and when she wasn't immediately crushed or slashed to pieces she hurried onward, east toward the mountain. The forest here was thicker, heavier. Branches high above were trimmed and straightened, but the undergrowth had been left rampant since the treaties had been signed.

Even with the sentries absent, Liri did not feel confident enough to cut through the undergrowth. But she was in a hurry and she had no fear of scaring animals away as she crunched her way through tangles and snarls of plants.

As she went east the going got easier. The ground got rockier and hillier, the trees spread out and the undergrowth became sparser. A few hours after the trees started to thin out, the sun starting to set behind her and the rain easing to bare mist, Liri came to the collapse.

Huge shards of rock and piles of loose stone littered the ground around the roots of the mountain. The paths Liri had seen and used before had been sheared off the face of Iradel, caves collapsed and new caves exposed and then, far above, there was the gaping black hole.

Again she had to stop and consider her options, she had brought no climbing gear, the closest she had was some rope and a small grappling hook on an arrow. For a few long moments, Liri stared up at the scoured face of the mountain and despaired of finding a way up.

Then she gave a dramatic sigh to the empty mountain and sat down and dug some dinner out of her bag. Dried meat and rice and beans made a hearty enough meal as she considered her way up Iradel.

Night had completely fallen by the time Liri had finished eating. The moon would be full tonight, but it had yet to rise. It would be shining on the far side of the mountain and Liri figured she would be able to see well enough to climb and she could rest until the moon rose.

Liri was woken by a soft touch on her shoulder. She opened her eyes and for a moment she was in her room at home, and then she made out of the shadow of the mountain looming above her. She rolled over and froze solid when she saw who had woken her.

Though crouched, Sentry looked just like the mountain behind her, his eyes shone oddly and his teeth were menacing in the darkness. His dark green fur made him little more than a shadow.

Liri could feel her heart speeding up, her breath getting shallower and she couldn't quite make her eyes close. She didn't want to see the strike coming. If she had thought about it at all, it would have occurred to her that he was not here to kill her.

Sentry hid his teeth, shifted his weight back and stood. Like most forest trolls, his arms hung almost to his knees and his face was not furred. He wore lacquered wooden armour and carried a hooked spear.

Liri sat up and immediately spotted the rest of the trolls behind him. There were close to 20, all armoured and holding some kind of polearm or bow. Some had longbows and spears, some had more armour and glaives or hooked spears.

Liri stood up and looked up at the trolls and waited for something to happen. Sentry towered over her, the trolls behind him towered over her and Liri felt small and strange. She wasn't supposed to be here.

Faint shadows started to form around Liri and the trolls and the trees behind. She watched the trolls for an extra moment and then turned to see the moon starting to rise to the south of the mountain, pale white light spreading out before it.

For several seconds, Liri considered Sentry and the other trolls and wondered what she should be doing, why they wouldn't talk to her. She suspected they were letting her go, but she wanted to go into the mountain, she wanted to know what was going on.

And then the screaming started. High, thin, pained screaming emanated from the new pit at the top of the mountain. Liri took a deep breath and packed up what little of her camp she had laid out. She started hurrying, though slow enough to avoid breaking her ankles on the loose stones, toward the roots of Iradel.

Behind her was a short growling, whispered exchange in a language Liri did not know. Then rustling and rattling and in moments the trolls had caught up and passed her. It wasn't Sentry who slowed to keep pace with Liri, she didn't recognise the troll who opened their mouth, paused and clearly considered their words for long moments.

In Issaik, the troll spoke haltingly. “We will take you... up the Iradel.” The voice was feminine, though the troll looked almost just like the rest: she was not shorter or paler or finer of hair, her face didn’t look so much different than Sentry’s.

Liri nodded. “Thank you.”

The troll reached out and with her huge hand gripped Liri around the body and lifted Liri onto her back. It was an effort not to scream, and then the troll sped up and she had to dig her hands into the fur around the troll’s shoulders so as not to fall.

Liri leaned forward, into the troll’s soft fur, close to her ear and whispered. “My name is Liri Srenta,” she said. “It is nice to meet you.”

The troll was silent long enough that Liri wasn’t expecting an answer when it came quietly in halting Issaik. “It is nice to meet you... Little Hunter,” the troll said. “I am Nerl Balla.”

Liri felt herself smile as Nerl loped over the loose stone and dug fingers and claws into the scoured rock sheets of the mountain. She had never learned a troll’s name before, even Sentry was not a name, it was just what she called him because he refused to introduce himself.

As they climbed, Liri wasn’t sure if the sound was getting louder or if they were just getting closer. Still, Liri found herself smiling as she clung to Nerl’s back.

The wind was cold, the night was clear now but Nerl was warm and it normally took more than a day for Liri to climb even halfway up the mountain. She couldn’t remember ever climbing this high before.

As they climbed higher and higher, the screaming got louder and louder, slowly new voices joined in, high and thin and pained. The trolls above Liri and Nerl started crawling over the ledge and into the black pit in the top of the mountain.

Nerl whispered, “get behind.” She reached up and pulled herself over the ledge. Liri freed herself and dropped beside Nerl as the troll stood and towered over Liri again and started into the darkness.

Liri could not see into the cave and the screaming was near deafening. Then she saw Nerl step through a wall of blackness and completely disappear from sight. Her sigh was quiet this time, was not theatrical. She drew and strung her bow and started flexing it as she stepped across the ledge and up to the wall of darkness.

Yet another voice joined the screams, much deeper.

Liri took a deep breath and stepped forward. It felt like walking into a spiderweb, sticky and resistant. It made her skin crawl and she could not see anything and it felt

like an eternity before it was gone.

Liri's eyes were already adjusted to partial darkness, but there was only so much her human eyes could manage. From what little she could see, she was happy to not be able to see more.

The screaming was louder in here, and gradually more voices joined in. The light was shed from small fires set on hide tents, illuminating a large cavern with small tents, mostly collapsed, and blood everywhere and what looked like pieces of bodies.

Liri could make out silhouettes of the trolls struggling with something large and somewhat humanoid but not quite. It had too many arms and its head was the wrong shape and there was a faint scraping and rattling and spiked chains swung from its limbs and slashed at the trolls.

There was... something behind the monster, something worse and harder to discern and harder to describe and harder to understand and it was doing something and what it was doing was what screamed and screamed.

Liri tried to scan the room and tried to find some way she could help the trolls deal with whatever the chain-wielding monster was. There were stalactites and stalagmites, there were crevices in the walls and the roof and there were the tents.

This time she saw what happened, but she could not process what she saw as she could not process the thing that did it. And another troll voice joined the screaming and Liri could only stare and she could not understand.

"Human." The voice was raspy and the source was next to her, was not in the direction of the... monsters. Liri looked and she could see a mound but make out no person, could process no shape.

"Human... help us." The voice was deep and raspy and Liri could make out no source and could process no shape. She took a step in that direction, took a step away from the monsters.

Another step and another, Liri approached the mound that seemed to be speaking. Still it was too dark for her to make out details, it was just a mound of something, apparently humanoid. She thought she could see limbs, thought she could see blood, though everywhere she thought she could see blood.

"Human... help." The voice was deep and resonant and made Liri's chest feel tight, made her breath come shallow.

And then suddenly a figure of darkness stood before her, a hand to her chest and a hand to her forehead. Shining red eyes stared into Liri's mind, stared into her, burned

into her like fire.

The voice was deep and resonant and made her teeth hurt as it reverberated through her mind. "Human, you will see and you will despair."

And then there was nothing before her, there was no humanoid figure, no burning red eyes, no resonant voice. Her chest did not feel tight, her breath came easier and with each breath she tasted blood. She felt calm and it was hard to force suspicion through that feeling.

She was not frightened to see what destroyed behind her, she was not frightened to see the chain-wielder and the flesh-sculptor and she could not make herself afraid. She could see well enough in the darkness that she would see the... monsters.

More voices had joined the scream, the rattling and scraping had died down, though not completely. The noise was too loud, the fire was too bright and Liri was too curious, she wanted to know what it was that destroyed.

And so, bow drawn and arrow nocked, Liri turned to look and saw the monsters.

The chain-wielder was a grotesque perversion of human and troll and giant. It stood to perhaps four metres in height with pale, bloodless skin and thick black stitches attaching too many legs and too many arms and its face was like a human's, the size of a giant's.

Its mouth was cut back to its ears but was sewn shut with bright steel wire, its eyelids were missing and bloodshot, misshapen eyes swivelled wildly in its head as its arms flailed and spun. Thick steel loops hooked through skin and muscle in shoulders and sides and elbows and wrists, tethering long lengths of rusted, bloodied, spiked chains to its body.

But behind it... behind it was worse. Behind it was glistening flesh and black stitches and bright metal wire and blood and muscle and claws and needles and knives and rusted spikes. Arms and not-quite-arms worked tirelessly, tore skin and fur and pieces and bones from bodies and bodies and bodies. Living victims screamed and screamed and the arms left throats and mouths and lungs alone and the screaming went on and on.

And then like a snail moving, flesh rippled and stretched and arms and not-quite-arms stretched out and wrapped around another troll, Nerl, and pulled and another voice joined the screaming.

Liri felt pain in her knees as her legs gave out and she hit the ground with a thud. She could feel the bow and arrow in her hands and she could feel the string would still

work and she could see eyes and throats and chests and exposed hearts and she could fight, she could attack.

Wild eyes settled on her, as arms and not-quite-arms tore and cut and living victims screamed. Step... step... step... rattle. And there was a chain the width of her head, covered in rusted, bloodied spikes swinging toward Liri Srenta, who would never make it back to Samara or her darkened bedroom.

The Wikipedia game

non-fiction

Evelyn Lewis

I haven't been in high school for three years. I have not stepped foot through the gates since I was freed from their constraints.

My school was Catholic all-girls school with a nun for a principal. When I was there, there was no freedom of expression, and though they liked to call themselves a progressive and accepting environment, the queer voices were quashed.

In class, in an act of rebellion we played 'The Wikipedia Game'. I'm sure that there are many other names for the same game, but this is the only name I have ever known it by.

This game was usually played during religion class, when *Game of Thrones* was in the off season, and it provided many hours of entertainment. The rules of the game are simple. Open Wikipedia. Click 'random article' and from there you have to click a link to take you to the next Wikipedia page. The aim is to get to Hitler's Wikipedia page in as few clicks as possible.

ONE

I went to Wikipedia and I clicked 'random article'. The page provided is for Rosario, Cavite. The Municipality of Rosario is a 1st class municipality in the province of Cavite, Philippines. It has a population of 110,706 people, according to the 2015 census.

The leading religion of Rosario is Roman Catholic. Fishing is a major economic activity and the Rosario Fish Port in Barangay Spa is a large fishing port of the area.

The images on the Wikipedia page for Rosario, Cavite are of buildings filled with colour and the fish port seems to extend long into the sea. The town hall is a bright green, with coloured umbrellas positioned out the front. There is a welcome arch to introduce people to the municipality.

My high school experience was dotted with interesting people. It's so funny, I thought those people would be lifelong friends, and some have become great mates, but when I'm not seeing them five days a week for 40 weeks of the year, there's not much to say.

I had a friend, I won't name her, who came from the Philippines. She had family there but was mostly raised in Australia by her mum. She was a great friend and we had many inside jokes, but once school was over and we parted ways, the conversations stopped.

I click a link in the introduction.

TWO

The link I click is for 'municipalities', and it takes me to the page of 'Municipalities of the Philippines'. As of March 2017, there are 1,489 municipalities within the Philippines.

Upon reaching certain requirements, including minimum population size and minimum annual revenue, the municipality can become a city.

Unfortunately, I cannot say that municipalities are all that interesting.

I can't just blame my high school friends for our lost connection, I moved on too. High school, particularly my final year, was a hard slog. The school work was fine and my year level was pretty good in terms of bullying, but the school administration was living back in 1857.

I didn't message my high school friends, and I did not start conversations. I worked my arse off to move beyond that school, to block it from my mind, and I had not considered what would happen to the friendships I had formed.

THREE

I click a link that takes me to the page for 'Referendum'. As someone who loves the

systematic nature of the English language, I am intrigued by the etymology of the word 'referendum'. I also know that this page will be the one that takes me to the page for a country in Europe. And once you get to Europe, it's only one step to Hitler.

A referendum is a direct vote in which an entire electorate is invited to vote on a particular proposal. The introduction of the article mentions, 'Australia defines 'referendum' as a vote that does not affect the constitution'. Usually, unless you are specifically looking for Australian articles, we don't get much of a mention on Wikipedia.

Onto the etymology. Apparently, 'referendum' is a gerundive form of the Latin verb 'fero', which means 'to carry back'. A gerundive is an adjective, not a noun, so cannot be used alone in Latin. In English, it is used as a noun.

It is thought to have originated in the Swiss canton of Graubünden, as early as the 16th century. Switzerland has held almost 600 national votes since it became a modern state in 1848.

At the beginning of my final year of school, we were gearing up for our Year 12 formal. I already knew that the school was not going to let me bring a girl as my partner for the formal.

I raised my hand to ask the question I already knew the answer to. I was pulled aside after the assembly and told in no uncertain terms would the school allow me to bring my friend.

I started an online petition, I started a physical petition, both were signed by hundreds of people. I surveyed friends to see how their schools had handled the queer youth, and most other Catholic girls' schools had no problem.

The principal forced me to take down the petition, but the damage was done. I was allowed to bring my friend to our formal and we had a fucking great time.

And with that, I click onto Switzerland.

FOUR

I am very aware that by clicking into Switzerland I am bringing the end of The Wikipedia Game very close. Any person who went to school will be able to tell you at least a little bit about the role that Switzerland had to play during World War II. And as anyone who has been to school will be able to tell you, if you are neutral in situations of oppression, you take the side of the oppressor.

My high school friends, especially throughout that first month of shitstorm with the formal, were some of the most supportive people I have ever met. They backed me up every step of the way and they signed and signed and signed everything that I put in front of them.

We used to sit outside at lunchtime, on the concrete with nothing but thin pale blue dresses separating the pigeon droppings from our skin. Our time sitting out there and chatting for 50 minutes made the high school time worth it. We had each other's backs through period leakage and petitions.

At no point were they ever neutral.

I scroll down to their modern history section, and there in blue, is an amazing link to 'Nazi Germany'.

FIVE

It actually took me to 'Nazism', but I'm not worried because that will get me to Hitler just as fast.

Which is why I find it so frustrating that my experience of high school has tarnished those relationships. Some friends I have intentionally pushed away, because they were rude and sexist, and I just didn't want them in my life. But some, we just grew apart.

I caught up with friends during my first year out of high school. We made the efforts and we had stilted conversations, but it wasn't the same as those lunchtimes.

When we were all in it together, we had that looming Catholicism over us, forcing friendships that otherwise would not have been made. Without it, we had pleasantries and fake smiles and checking the time to find an appropriate exit.

Neither party made the effort, but it seems inevitable. You spend every day for six years with someone and of course you become friends, otherwise you're in it alone. But when there are other choices and experiences and closer bonds, something has to give.

I don't have to scroll far before there he appears.

SIX

I click to Hitler. Six clicks is not that fast. Usually, you can get there in under five clicks.

If I wanted to, I could go far back into my Facebook Messenger history and find the group conversations that we had. But I don't want to. I'm still not far enough out of high school that I can stomach the idea of going back. I dropped a lot of those friendships because of the reminders they bring.

That's not to say that I don't have amazing people who have stuck with me through high school and out the other side, but those aren't the same people who I sat with every day.

There is a reunion in two years. I'm not yet sure if I'll go. On one hand, it will be interesting to see where everyone is and how they're all doing. On the other, I don't know if I'll be ready to face the school again.

Either way, what's coming is coming, and I have to make my own decisions on what's next.



Illustrated by Ashleigh Pollard

Hyding

poetry

Ty Liebelt

Wait

...**wait**...just

Wait for a moment

Just a moment

Just minutes

Just some *minutes* of waiting

That's how long the moment should be whilst you **wait**

as I have **asked** you to do

semi-politely

That's all I can manage at the *moment*

not the *moment* I've **asked** for

no, this other moment

The one I'm standing in (for reasons unknown)

this moment

I can't really make *head* nor *tails* of

nor feet nor liver nor birthmark

nor

GNAW

There is a gnawing (actually), I guess you'd call it that

Along the line between what I can follow, what I can't

Right now

I'm not *me* at the **moment**

The 'this' moment, not the **asked for**

not *me*

or rather not **all me**

some of me

a modicum of *me*

A little **taster** before the main event; though we have been
sitting for coming up on 7 **hours**

Just *some of me*

But not the *some* you're used to

Not the some which you may have fallen in love with

Or have made plans to **fall**

considered the **falling** idea briefly, acknowledged the love
concept **respectfully**

When you meet that *some*, I am hiding

But also **shouting bellowing screaming laughing**

grinning from ear to ear to *spinal column*

living 'life' to its full cream potential

99% **fat** free speech

But I'm also hiding

Not hiding

for sake of seeking or **fear** or strategy

Hiding with a 'y'

hyding

That's hyding with a 'y'

(the letter with its **tail** between its legs)

hyding

Like in that **book** that was written forever ago

the one about the *jackal* who *heckles* people whilst standing

on its *hackles*

and it's also on **the board of the faculty**

you *know*...the book?

With hats and canes and mistreated *windowpanes*

It's about anger **and** crying **and** timidity **and** violence

Ill-advised science involving *cocktails* and transparent
identity

It's about crime

perhaps I'll lend it to you

and *things* will get to work on making the *sense* they're
being paid to make

But not right now

You'll have to **wait**

not at *this* moment

this moment is when I'm not sure where I am

And I'd really prefer to be hiding



Illustrated by Jessalyn Henson-Hatton

The Last Next

non-fiction

Saskia Keating

“The more it burns, the less it burns, until it burns so little it hurts.” – Me

I write to you from a place of sorrow and a place of hope. One of deep, unabated longing and of strange, unexplained calm. I know nothing of what is or what may be, bloody hell I only have a very vague idea of what even was. In fact, I often think I know less of what was, than of what will be.

The fact of the matter is, the future has always been and will always be far clearer than the past could ever be. The past is marred by opinion, subjectivity, selfishness, doubt, emotion, other people, and above all: cursed inaccuracy. The memory is far from perfect and no amount of training could ever render it so, but the imagination? The imagination is so devastatingly flawless. It is given a command and then runs away with itself creating the perfect vision, the perfect scenario of ‘Next’. It graces us with stunning detail and accuracy the likes of which simply cannot exist. The future is secured with plans and visions that we know won’t have even the slightest bearing on where we end up. The future is understood to be impossible to understand and that’s what makes it so predictable, the fact that it never will be... because we know our imagined futures are just that, right? Imagined. But what is our past? Did it or didn’t it exist? Did it exist like that? Or was it maybe more like that? Was it like that for everyone else or did I get that totally wrong?

But even with its shortcomings the past is nowhere near as flawed as the present. The eye of the storm is by far the most deceptive part. It traps you in a circle of the unknown, continually moving around you, blurs your view of everything just outside arms reach and keeps you locked in cruel suspense. Forced to stand still for so long you eventually come to believe you're actually paralysed. When really, it's all just a vile trick of the mind: instituted to keep your physical form safe while doing untold damage to your mental one. I am left wondering what to do here, waiting for the next storm and all of the unforeseen havoc and chaos it will wreak with my soul and those around me. Because I know it is coming: it is always coming, and I wake in fear and thinly masked anguish every day, waiting for pain and sorrow and what feels like my soul being gouged mercilessly from my body. Waiting for all of this to rain down on me like fire and gasoline. Waiting to be ruined again and again and again. Every time I stand up, to be throw back down harder than before.

I tire of this routine.

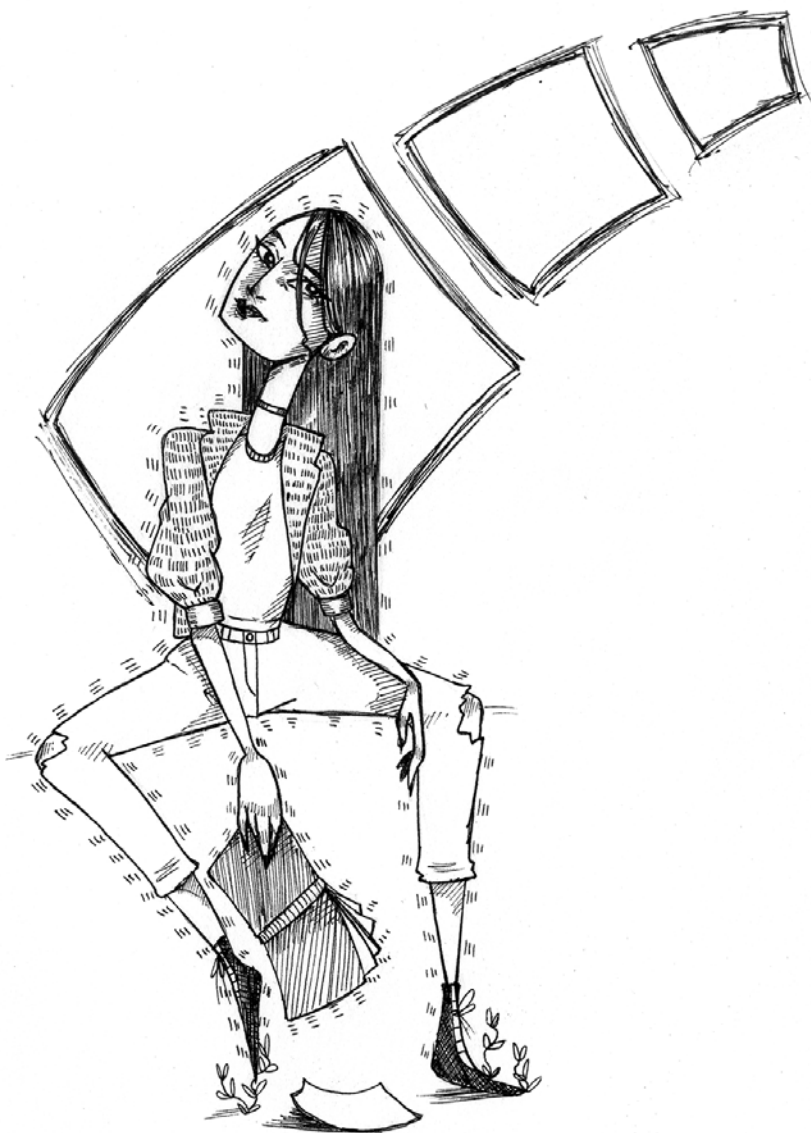
I ache for the feel of uninhibited movement, to make a single step unencumbered by the leaden weight in my heart and the death-grip of my thoughts. I desire most strongly to once again relax in the warm embrace of the sun, to bask in the feel of a slight breeze against my cheek... to relish the strength of a thunder storm and feel electric excitement pulse through my veins at being caught in a heavy rain. I want to know again the simplest pleasures. I want to live in blissful hope and stupid blind confidence that "of course everything'll be ok!" *cue reassuring smile*. I want that warmth of passion and care and safety in my soul once more.

Instead I feel desperately hopeless and I find myself wondering: if one who once felt so deeply and strongly as I, can be rendered so devoid of feeling, is it even possible for feeling to be restored?

I don't know. And of everything, **that** is the worst part.

So what are we left with? A Confused haze, Impossible knowledge, and Fantasies that will never exist. Well, what do we do with that? I guess we pick up the pieces, get back up again and wait for the knock-down blow as per usual... because I don't what else to do right now, but I sure as hell am not staying down. I have too much potential, I am too **determined** to let today be my last Next.

This is the story of a woman who may be trapped in a household of abuse, but she will never be contained by it. **She will be free.**



Illustrated by Jessalyn Henson-Hatton

Beckon

poetry

Anna Bilbrough

I come back from the city with confidence trailing me like a hangover. Something about the country strips it out of me. Maybe it's the pure air, like the salt that falls in reams off the ocean, sloughing dead skin away that then nestles in the sand. If I'm here too long moss might grow betwixt my toes.

The train window curves at the edges, distorting the paddocks outside. It hurts my head. My eyes grow sore. I turn back to my book and I've forgotten the last three pages. I find the last thing I remember and read from there. A baby starts crying, but the family gets off at the next stop. Half an hour away from the city, a woman starts talking on the phone about projects and outcomes and deadlines and I close my book.

Back and forward, back and forward. Like a pendulum, but I can't hold a steady rhythm. Oscillating between before and now, before and whatever comes next.



Illustrated by Samuel Milkovits

We all live lives of quiet desperation *

fiction

Jane Downing

When the traffic comes to a halt she is behind a four-wheel drive. A four-wheel drive in city traffic. Abby damps down her prejudices. She can't see past the behemoth to work out what is happening up ahead. The pause stretches and her engine whines a little before dropping to a half-hearted purr.

Trapped in the car, as in a womb, she fiddles with the radio, taps the steering wheel, stares laser eyes at the four-wheel drive as if it is the problem. Kapow, boom, Avengers-style flip, and it'd be out of the way. And good riddance. It has those little decal figures across the back window doing her head in: advertising family. Mum, dad, two kids, a shaggy dog. The man figure has two white strips in a big X crossing him out. Above the decal man – when she leans forward and squints to make them out – are two words, also in whiteout white. *Position Vacant*. Abby's sympathy is out. Who'd want to advertise the failure of the family unit so publically? Abby hasn't even told her mother about her breakup yet, and here she is driving across town to be interviewed for a share house. He's given a deadline to move out of his flat. Formerly their flat. How quickly the pronouns re-organise themselves.

Someone from within the cabin of the beast has also played with Jeep's 4x4 signage. It seems, as if the road users don't already know the bleeding obvious, that 4

* From Henry David Thoreau: 'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation, and go to the grave with the song still in them' (1854).

times 4 equals 16. The 4x4=16 jerks ahead four metres and stops again. Abby jumps the gearbox in her hurry to catch up. Stalls, reconnects the ignition, creeps forward in line, always behind.

That is when Abby sees her. She is a speck in the rear-view mirror, striding along the footpath. She is a splash of colour on a cold, grey day. Purples and oranges fight it out on a blouse that catches the breeze like a hot air balloon under a roaring flame. After it inflates, the blouse exhales like a deflating goonie bladder. That is not a nice image, but there is something seductive even in cask wine. And as it deflates, the blouse takes on the curves of the striding woman.

It is not as if she is the only pedestrian on the city streets around the traffic jam. There are people going in and out of the shops on either side of the road, there are dogs being walked, and there are disaffected teenagers slouching along like Parisian *flâneur*, completely unaware they could be mistaken for something with even a hint of romance to it. Maybe this striding woman registers with Abby from amongst the crowd because she is moving in a straight line, in a direction and at a pace of her own choosing. Maybe that's what makes her so attractive. She has something Abby has lost. Confidence.

The traffic creeps forward again, crawls on all fours (4x4). As Abby puts her foot on the accelerator though, she keeps her eye on the woman on the pavement. She brakes again. The striding woman, moving in her confident straight line, soon catches up. She is beside Abby's passenger window. Her long thin hand lifts and ruffles her spiky, blond tipped hair.

Abby has never had the guts to dye her hair.

The woman strides on. Overtaking. Up ahead now. While Abby stew; left behind in her car and left behind a four-wheel drive. Stews, like an organic object in a tin, a blobby apricot out at the Ardmona factory. Not a peach. Definitely not a pear/pair, not since Abby's 'other half' told her it wasn't the right time for commitment. It is another little death each time she remembers his words. No amount of daydreaming will change the scene or bring Ben back. He is gone, gone, gone like the daddy figure from the four-wheel drive family still frustratingly blocking the way in front so she can't see what is coming next.

She's almost out of sight now. The other woman. Abby has to bend across the passenger seat to get a glimpse of her perfect swagger. She's going somewhere, surging into a future she wants to get to. Her satchel parumpapumpums against her

hip. She probably had sex last night – that’s how much confidence she’s giving off.

Then she *is* out of sight. Abby chastises herself. It’s rude to stare, that’s what her mother always said. Like most things her mother said, it is only half true. It hadn’t taken long to discover it is only rude if you get caught.

A light, tentative beep intrudes. The face of the woman driving the car behind Abby is a small peony in the frame of the rear-view mirror. She wants Abby to hurry up so they can come to a standstill 10 metres up the road. They make the transition: accelerate, creep forward, and come to the new standstill. Only the shops outside the windows have changed.

The lights are on inside the adjacent bakery – a goldfish bowl effect on the grey day. Abby closes her eyes then snaps them open. She is not mistaken, it is her perfect woman in there pointing at something on the bakery’s back wall. As Abby waits for the holdup ahead to resolve itself, she comes out cradling a Vienna loaf like it’s a baby. It is swaddled in tissue paper. Abby imagines she can smell the hot yeasty air around it. But her old car smells of dust and something lodged under the seat too long.

To add to Abby’s woes, it is now raining. The striding woman cannot keep striding in the rain. She ducks under an awning – a stripy butcher’s canopy. A butcher, a baker, next a candlestick maker? Abby turns on the windscreen wipers, as if this will help her see anything more than a clearer version of the arse-end of the broken family’s four-wheel drive. After two passes, the wipers scrape, rubber on dry glass, worse than Ben’s voice in her eardrums. She has been brave, she has been angry, she has been alone. She is alone. The rain is on the inside of her car now, streaming out of her eyes. Abby knows she is more pathetic than the woman ahead so publically advertising her failure in the two-by-two parade that is their world.

The traffic moves again. Miraculously, the 4x4 turns left – without indicating, like any king of the road – and Abby can finally see what is up ahead. Cars are jammed one behind the other as far as the next set of traffic lights. Red. And then, cars are jammed as far as she can see up the next block too. She cannot see any holdup. No road works, no accident, no flashing lights on emergency vehicles; simply a traffic jam to the horizon. Maybe everyone crawls all the time around here. The thought is too depressing.

The lights change and her heart lifts, and three cars get through. Abby’s is not one of them. She moved forward for a moment, but red means stop, no matter what. The only things moving are her windscreen wipers against the resurgence of a steadier

rain. Canopies over a shoe shop and an optometrist's undulate under the press of the wind. They hypnotise. The woman whose life Abby now envies beyond anything is still sheltering in front of the butcher with her bread. Abby can see her when she does that checking-your-blind-spot neck twist. She has a mobile to her ear, like every young and beautiful woman these days.

Abby wonders if she can still consider herself young. Whether, if she hurries, she can stick her own decal family to the back of a family sedan.

The future looks more bleak than the day outside the stiflingly enclosed car. So she calculates instead the scene in front of her. Abby was good at maths at school, and even if she hadn't been, she'd still be able to work out she needed three more changes of the traffic lights before she'd get through to the next grinding block of traffic. So much for driving your own life. She is stuck. There is no way out.

She has to get out.

The radio is blathering about silly love songs as she opens the door and steps into the rain. The peony-faced woman behind gives a short, pointed beep as Abby brushes between the two cars, bumper to bumper allowing only a side-on squeeze through before making the pavement. The woman in the car behind's shoulders are hunched in a pair of question marks.

Exactly: why?

Someone somewhere once said something about small moments and random beauty reviving the spirits. Abby feels new life in her veins. She has caught something from her new heroine. She lets herself remember the feeling of confidence. Surging. She *can* escape. She can be reborn. She can sing. There is potential ahead now, as she strides back the way she'd crawled. She swings her hips like a model on a catwalk.

And she is coming toward Abby. The woman in purples and oranges is striding again. Abby wants to say thank you. Thank you for allowing me to see exactly where my life hasn't been going. Thank you for showing me the escape of a different way forward. For giving me another chance at what's next.

The lights turn green and the road erupts with the caterwauling of angry cars, drivers winding down windows to scream, hands pressed to horns. Her rebirth is exactly like the first time. There is pain. There is crying. There is a lot of noise.

Their arms knock as they pass. Abby looks up into the woman's face. The woman's eyes are bleak. Her cheeks are wet. Abby tells herself it is only the rain.



Illustrated by Zoe Clare

Faded Fragments

novel excerpt

Mandi Kontos

Melbourne

Parmuthi 2009

I closed my eyes as Hunter shifted gears and floored it. If I couldn't see the way he cruised with ease around the corner at such a high speed then I wouldn't believe what I was really doing, or the fact that I was in a car that could kill me. Better yet, I could be dead right now and floating somewhere, replaying my death over and over again.

'Lucy, you're not meant to have your eyes shut. I thought you said you trusted me.' His voice was like a sweet song in my ears and I opened my eyes to look at him. I couldn't see the smirk, but I could feel it.

'You never said you were going to be *this* crazy.'

I was strapped in tight, Hunter had checked even after the assistant had. I knew, logically, that nothing could happen. I wasn't going to suddenly fall out of the seat or whack my head against the dash and die, but it didn't stop the way my heart plunged into my stomach.

'This is nothing. Watch this.'

No, don't want to see, I thought to myself but he spun the car anyway. We twirled in what felt like a clumsy circle, but I knew he was elegant and graceful, even in this death trap of a car Hunter could make things look effortless.

Why did I agree to this again?

I couldn't say no to a cute boy asking me out, regardless of the fact that he was Devin's best friend.

He straightened up and we went around another sharp turn. I held onto the "oh shit" handle and willed it to finish. I heard him hooting and laughing before the car came to a slow stop. My insides shook and I could feel the love in the way he eased the car down to an acceptable speed. He took off his helmet and I saw his brown hair flicking out in every which way. Helmet hair. My hands shook as I tried to undo my helmet so I could see him but my fingers didn't work the way I needed them to. He laughed again and carefully took over. He pulled the latch out and helped remove the helmet.

'How about that? Look at your hair,' he said as he smoothed strands of my hair as they escaped. I swallowed hard and tried to think of puppies or rainbows. Something else other than his green eyes staring back at me. 'Are you okay?' he asked.

I nodded and somehow found my voice. 'Yeah, holy shit. How are you allowed to even do that?'

He laughed at me again. His laugh was soft and amused, almost like it was a tangible thing. I liked it and wanted to hear more.

I'd had a crush on Hunter for a long time, but Devin had always told me no. No to his friends, which is why I was surprised when Hunter asked me out.

'Practice. I'm just good. You know I don't want you to be here just because I'm Dev's friend. He's not even a factor.' It was like Hunter was reading my mind.

The pads of his fingers brushed against my cheek and we leaned into one another, my heart hammered harder in my chest the closer we got.

'Man, Wyatt, you are a firecracker. No wonder your father was so excited to get you on the track...oh.'

We broke apart and I felt a blush creep onto my cheeks. Hunter chuckled and kissed my cheek.

'Barry always has the worst timing. Outcha get.'

I nodded and let Barry unbuckle me. I couldn't get out of the car fast enough. I turned my attention to the track and let my eyes fall over where Hunter has spun the car out. I couldn't get why people would do things like that, why they would put their lives in the hands of a car that could spin out and kill them.

I felt a hand wrap around my wrist and pulled me around; in the moment before I closed my eyes I saw Hunter. His lips pressed against mine and he cut off any of the hundred morbid thoughts before they started. I could hear faint catcalls in the

background but none of that mattered. When he broke away I looked up at him, he was almost a head taller than I was, and sighed.

‘You were definitely as good as I thought.’

I scoffed and pushed at his shoulder. ‘You didn’t think I was good? Thanks.’

‘Hey, hey. You’re my best friend’s little sister, how—’

‘By three minutes!’

‘Still little,’ he grinned.

‘Shut up,’ I mumbled and brushed my lips against his to try and wipe that cheeky grin off his face. ‘You’re going to have to tell me, some other time, why and how you can get onto a track like this, in a car like *that* and not end up dead.’

‘Shhh. You’re talking too much.’ He kissed me again.

Egypt

Epep 2014

The memory of Hunter and our first date always came to mind when I rubbed my fingers across the bracelet he got for me on our first anniversary. It was now joined by the talisman Meda made for me. Each bead signified a date or a moment in our relationship, and Hunter had enchanted it so that when I touched it I would relive the memory. The bracelet was tied in with my own abilities and those that were his. I didn’t think it would work anymore. We had no good memories left. I was half waiting for a break up charm.

The doorbell rang and I closed The Book in my lap to answer it. I left it on the coffee table and made my way over to the door.

I stared at it and lifted a hand to press it against the door. I could feel Hunter mirror the motion before I opened it. He was wearing a striped shirt, shorts and Ray-Bans. His hair was cut shorter than usual but it was always cut that short in summer.

‘Hello Lucy,’ he said.

I shut the door and leaned against it. All of the feelings I had pushed back under the surface flooded back and I had to close my eyes. He made things better. He always had, but sometimes he didn’t.

‘I do make things better. You’re just good at getting in your own way,’ he said through the door.

‘Hunter.’

‘Yeah, yeah, open the door. I’m melting over here and I don’t want to be a puddle of goo.’

I snorted and opened the door. He looked me over and I resisted the urge to kiss him, I really wanted to. He smiled and the urge rose higher. *Jerk.*

‘Hey, don’t call me that.’

He pulled me into his arms and tried not to break down. Hunter was safe; he was home. He was everything I ever wanted and yet so far away.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked and I shook my head.

In his arms I felt like sleeping with Travis was more of a mistake now.

‘What? You slept with Matthews? That would explain the call I got and why he was so much colder to me.’ He was doing the mind reading thing again like nothing had ever happened; like he’d never broken up with me.

‘He called you? And get out of my head.’

‘Not a chance,’ Hunter murmured and pulled out of the hug. He grabbed his bags and walked down the foyer into the living room. He had been here before, just before we broke up, and knew where everything was. It was refreshing. He was carefully avoiding my question and grabbed some water.

Hunter held out a glass to me. I took it and raised an eyebrow.

‘You look like you need a drink, well you look like you need something stronger but this will have to do for now.’ He took a drink and focused on me. ‘Travis called in the middle of the night and said I needed to be here. Something about you guys needing magic and whatnot. I was half asleep but he said you needed me so I got up and booked a flight.’

He was always ready to jump anywhere I needed.

‘He didn’t say anything. He was actually against you coming in the first place,’ I said before taking a sip of water.

‘Because he finally got into your pants and didn’t want to get out?’

I snorted, ‘Hunter.’

‘What? It’s the truth. Don’t make it like it’s not. I think you totally know too.’

‘Oh, look, Hot Legs is here,’ Kali said as she came in. ‘You look better than the time you did when I hit on you.’

‘Kali Shaw, you always fail to surprise me with your wit.’ Hunter grinned at her as he leaned forward to flick my wrist.

‘Aww, that must be why we never made it out.’ She smiled sweetly and I tried not

to choke.

Hunter looked at me and raised his eyebrow. Long story, explanation later.

‘How is Travis?’ I asked

‘Tiring. He just doesn’t stop. It’s driving me to drink. Where is the strong liquor?’

‘I can hear you, you know?’ Travis said as he came into the living room.

‘I know perfectly well you can hear me. I dated you, remember?’ She masked the pain in those words well.

Hunter got to his feet ready to put the glass down when Travis rushed him and decked him. Hunter recovered and punched him back.

‘Ouch. That *hurt*. What is your problem?’ Hunter asked.

‘You’re my problem,’ Travis growled and I watched his eyes bleed to purple and his claws set free.

I jumped between the two of them with my hands up in a surrender stance.

‘Whoa. Travis, back down, now,’ I said.

‘Move out of the way,’ he growled.

‘Claws need to go away. Don’t make me ask you again. You can’t hurt him, *you* called him.’ Just like he’d called Kali here and I hadn’t driven a knife through her heart.

Yet.

Hunter snorted and I reached out without looking and squeezed his wrist. It was a sign to keep quiet. Don’t do anything that the wolf would find close to bait, even if Hunter was laughing at me.

‘I don’t like him,’ he said.

‘I’m well aware of that, Trav, but we need him. We need him to get Lili back. Now. Back. Down.’

Travis growled and didn’t do as he was told. Rage zipped through my veins and it was the last straw.

You know what. Screw you. Get out of my face, go and fuck someone else, get me out of your system and cool down, Travis. I’m not asking you again.

I don’t trust him with you. He said back.

You don’t have the right to call me that. Remember? We’re not a couple.

He put the claws away and grabbed his wallet and stalked out of the room.

‘Well, that’s just festive, isn’t it? You really have a way with men, Lucy.’ Kali threw out.

‘Kali,’ I said. Annoyance dripped off her name. I was starting to feel like she really was my annoying sister.

‘Yeah, yeah. I’m going.’ I looked over to her and watched her exit the room before I caved in.

I sagged against Hunter and he caught me. He always did.

‘What was that?’ he whispered.

‘Me giving up on Travis,’ I whispered back. I turned in his arms and hugged him tight.

‘Fair enough. What is Kali doing here?’

I pushed back and stared at him, my jaw almost dropping. ‘You don’t know?’

‘Nope. What am I meant to know?’

‘Kali and I share a sperm donor.’

Hunter choked on the water he had just taken a sip of and I covered my mouth to stop the laugh that threatened to leave my lips.

‘Your dad? He cheated on your mum? What the hell? That is in-what?’

My eyes drifted to his bicep and my train of thought halted. On the inside was a tattoo. It hadn’t been then when he had walked in the door. Hunter had mastered the art of glamour and covered it up.

‘What’s that?’ I pointed at it.

Fos Kounidon. Lucy-Bell.

He had my nickname tattooed on his bicep.

Hunter remained silent. ‘What is *that*?’ The tattoo was magically gone when I blinked. ‘Hunter.’

‘It’s *nothing*. Okay?’

‘It’s my *name*. It’s not nothing. When did you get it? It wasn’t there a few months ago.’ Which was the last time that we slept together.

‘Just after,’ he said quietly.

My head spun. He broke up with me because he couldn’t do it anymore. He couldn’t trust me enough after Antony, I never told him that he had nearly raped me, because I hoped that I wouldn’t need to. I was too proud and I thought that he would just believe me on account that I loved him.

‘God. I hate you right now.’ I cradled my head in my hands.

‘Lucy.’ He came towards me and I held up a hand and stepped back.

‘Don’t. You broke up with me, told me that you didn’t love me anymore and I’ve

been trying to fill the hole you left, but I can't. You know what? Because I love you and you know it. I feel bruised and battered on the inside and it's all because you left me with some stupid excuse. I shouldn't feel this way, Hunt.'

'I left you because loving you was the hardest thing to do after you cheated on me. Do you know how broken I was on the inside?' He looked at me and I could see his green eyes start to water. God, if he started, I was going to cry.

I had held my silence long enough. 'Antony tried to rape me, Hunt. Dev was in the house and stopped him.'

That made him sober up. He straightened up and closed the distance between the two of us. 'What? I...why didn't you tell me?' he said before he pulled me into his arms.

I shivered, 'I thought I didn't need to tell you. I thought you would have believed me. I never had any feelings for him. Nothing beyond – he was pretty to look at.'

'Oh god. I'm an idiot.'

Something inside me unfurled and I took a deep releasing breath. I sighed and bunched his shirt in my hand.

'I've always loved you, Hunt,' I whispered.

'I know,' he replied and looked down at me. He pressed a soft kiss into my hair and I sighed.

'We might as well watch some TV. Are you hungry?' Deflection from anything that could come. I was good at that.

'Sure. I can help.' I waved him away.

'It's okay I can do it. Sit down. Watch TV. All is fine.'

He blinked and I knew he wanted to do more, but he did as he was told anyway. I could stay away from him and do what I needed without putting myself in danger.

At some point we made it upstairs and I fell asleep in Hunter's arms, I would still be there if the vibration from my phone hadn't woken me up.

'Turn it off,' Hunter moaned and covered his eyes.

I shuffled around to find it and answered it without looking.

'Hello?' I said groggily.

'Looooosaaaaay. Oh Looosaaaaay.' The drunken slur was familiar.

'Travis?' I sat up and Hunter moved with me.

'Looossaaaay. What are you doooooing?'

He's drunk, I mouthed to Hunter. He got off the bed and turned on the light. My eyes were assaulted with the brightness for a moment before they adjusted.

'I was sleeping. Where are you?'

He snorted and I heard something get muttered in the background. 'Don't knooooow. A bar. They gave me drinks.'

'I can hear that. Trav, can you let down your shields so I can find where you are?'

'Wolf is too close to the surface. No can dooooo. He will rip everyone to shreds,' he said in a sing-song voice as he laughed.

'Oh fuck.'

We had devised a fail safe for when something like this happened, but with his fast acting metabolism something like this shouldn't have happened. If I could get Lili on the phone I would be able to find out where she was by breaking down the barrier, but with Nefertiti in charge, that was now useless. I could with Travis though.

'Fuck,' he giggled. Oh god it was like he was 12 all over again.

'Travis, can you see the yellow brick?'

'Oh Loooosaaay. Don't do that.'

'Travis, the brick. You can see it?'

'Yeess.'

'Break it. And just the one, no other.'

He did what I asked and in that instant I could feel where he was. I jumped off the bed and found shoes. I grabbed the keys and opened the door. 'I'm coming. Stay where you are.'

'Looossaaay. You don--'

I didn't hear the rest of what he said because I hung up with him. Kali was up and bleary eyed.

'What happened?'

'Travis is drunk. I'm going to get him.'

'I'll come,' she said without hesitation and I shook my head.

'His wolf is too close. We can't afford to have him hurt you.'

'Lucy,' Kali started.

'Trust me. I know how to deal with this,' I said.

Her shoulders dropped and I gave her a small smile before I made it down the stairs with Hunter at me heels.

‘I’ll wait up. I’m thinking that going back to sleep will be a death sentence,’ he said.
‘Probably a good idea. I’ll be back soon.’ Then I was out of the door.



Illustrated by Elizabeth Costello

The rise of iron

novel excerpt

Brad Webb

Excerpts from the upcoming novel *The Rise Of Iron* which will be published by Trojan Press in 2019.

The First Last Stand

Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara territory (central Australia)

circa 39,000 BC

Barundji pierced his spear into the red dirt. Red. Since childhood the colour had symbolised life. Dominating the landscape, it imbued itself into his everyday being. Red was his blanket. It was his friend. Was. Ever since the creature Mamu crawled out of the nightmares of Tjukurpa, *the dreaming*, red had come to symbolise death – the red of blood mixed with the red of earth. No longer. This day would end the evil cursing his land.

Last night the ancestor spirits had spoken to his people in the dancing flames. The beings did the telling and the tribe understood what needed to be done. Now, as Barundji looked around the barren landscape that hid his brothers, he worried about his family, the women and elders who had been shrouded among the Many Heads. They had the hardest job, saving the children, saving their future. They were safe in the Olgas he hoped, yet he was unsettled. Was he, Barundji, capable of standing

against the coming onslaught? Could *he* do his ancestors bidding?

For the spirits spoke of an ambush and Barundji, tribal elder and head Woomera – wielder of the ancient spear – was the bait. As he waited under the Guloi tree, his warrior brothers had concealed themselves in a wide circle under the shifting sands. The tree, much like Barundji, stood silent and alone. Surrounded by a sea of scarlet it had been revered by his tribe for generations. The Guloi was the tribe's lifeline. In scorching weather its shade protected the tribe and dropped juicy plums when food was scarce. When the rains failed to fall, it never wilted. As the afternoon sun cast its long shadow across the land the Guloi tree seemed to spread its branches even further, enveloping Barundji in what he hoped was a sign of protection.

No one knew what they were waiting for. To lay eyes on Mamu invited certain death. There were plenty of whispers but Barundji tried to ignore them – even as those terrors were silently screaming at him to *flee*. It was said Mamu had come from the south, unearthed from beneath the salt lake Kati Thanda, *Lake Eyre*, and carried across the outback by skin shredding sandstorms as tall as the Olgas, where his tribe now sheltered. Standing perfectly still, with only the pounding of his heart to keep him company, Barundji attempted to clear his mind and concentrate on the coming maelstrom. The sun had many hours left before moving on but the sky had grown suddenly darker and the temperature so much hotter.

Then, total and utter blackness. The sun had simply vanished, blotted out by an umbrella of shadowy corruption. Barundji felt rather than saw Mamu. The hairs on his arms stood on end, as when lightning would streak across the sky during the big storms. There were no bright flashes of light, but there was plenty of thunder. The beast had sensed him. It could smell his fear, smell the warmth of his blood. With eyes squeezed shut to protect against the sand storm Barundji held his spear in front of himself as he backed up against the trunk of the tree. Mamu's vile breath fouled the air. Slick with sweat, Barundji could feel his skin begin to dry and crack where the beast's breath touched him. In his mind's eye he was only seconds away from the jaws of death.

The Guloi tree shook violently, stripping what fruit remained along with leaves and small branches. It dumped them right on top of a startled Barundji until he was lost among the refuse. Then the Guloi *stepped* over him. Through the gloom he could see the tree slam into the side of the beast, piercing its murky hide with its powerful branches which now resembled massive spears. The ground shook, throwing Barundji

backwards into the crater where the Guloi had stood. He scrambled to cover his ears as a high pitched wail was unleashed like a tempest across the battlefield of red dirt. The noise was incredible. It shook him to his very core, rattling his teeth and very nearly sending him insane.

The world seemed slowed. Barundji untangled himself from the debris and scrambled to the edge of the pit. Expecting the worst, he peered over the edge. The Guloi had crippled the beast. Sensing a death blow, Barundji unleashed his spear – a weapon forged in *the dreaming* and handed down through the generations. It found its target, sinking deep into the monster's flesh. He was about to shout for joy when his world was turned upside down. In a rage, Mamu's tail shot around and hit the Guloi front on. The tree exploded into a shower of splinters and sap which flattened Barundji, knocking him out cold.

From the surrounding earth the tribe leapt up as one and slammed their spears into the ground forming a circle around the writhing body of the beast. They began to mouth a necromantic chant at the expanding pool of dark fluid leaking from the shattered tree which flowed around and over Barundji's prone body. A psychokinetic current began to surge outwards from the men. The ochre coloured mud rippled and swirled with blue lightning, dashing itself like waves against Barundji's arms and legs, forcing itself upwards and over until it cocooned the remains of the Guloi and the helpless Barundji inside what was to become the grotesque form of an immense Dingo-like creature. Mamu whirled around as the Dingo attacked.

There followed a battle this great brown land had not seen since it fought its way out of the roiling depths of the vast southern oceans. The clash waged a day and night yet the men stood firm and continued their chant until the Mamu and the great Dingo were both annihilated. The earth rose up in grief at the bloodshed, becoming Uluru and encasing the vanquished in rock which the ancients had prophesied would withstand the ravages of time.

As the sun broke through the dissipating clouds, Barundji stood atop this rocky precipice and called down to his tribe as they continued to circle, with mouths agape, around the monolith – this newborn wonder of the world made physical from the foundation of the shattered Guloi tree. He waved to his brother Kalti, keen to show him that he was safe. Kalti looked straight at him then pulled his spear from the dirt and walked over to join the tribe gathering to the north. Had his brother ignored him? Barundji wanted to grab Kalti and tell him he survived. Suddenly he was standing

next to his brother, his cousins, his tribe. He reached out and made a grab for his brother but his fingers passed right *through* Kalti's arm. As one these warrior men fell upon the red dirt and wailed. It took a moment for Barundji to realise they were crying out his name, singing a song of loss, of sacrifice, of death.

Beginnings End

Glenrowan

June 26, 1880

With his armoured body laying heavy on the blood soaked soil, it was the shouting which finally roused him. Light leaked through a slit over his eyes, he had trouble seeing from where he lay. An icy frost had blanketed him, yet he felt nothing. Remembering back to how he got there, feeling nothing was good. Somewhere, not far off, he could hear muffled gunfire. Closer still, the calls of men bounced off the trees as they ran wildly through the scrub. Their shouts filled the void left by the barrage. As the wounds drained the very life from his body, Edward 'Ned' Kelly, burdened with over forty-five kilograms of iron armour, willed himself to sit up. He felt for his pistol. The grip brought feeling back to his bloodied hand. It was time to make history.

Sixteen hours earlier, the dream of a Republic was but a breath away. Then that crippled schoolteacher Curnow had ruined everything. The armour was meant for a forward thrust only. Once the Police Special was derailed the boys would have donned their protection and moved among the wreckage, securing prisoners. The hostages could then be used to bargain his mother's freedom and, ultimately, declare the region free from British rule.

Now, troopers surrounded the inn where his boys were holed up. Ned had staged what turned out to be a one-man rear guard action to lead the Gang away from the carnage. But in all the confusion they had not followed. After warning off the hundreds of armed sympathisers keen to make this siege a bloody one, Ned had passed out from numerous bullet wounds. Finally conscious, he knew it was time to get his boys. As he readied himself to head back into the fray, a ghostly image passed in front of him. Thinking it to be his trusted cousin Tom Lloyd, who only hours earlier had helped him

break-up the militia, Ned cried out, 'For God sake cousin, leave me be. I've got to get back to Joe and Dan.' But this was not Tom.

The wraithlike figure stood no more than six feet away. Ned reeled, more from confusion than shock. Was this one of the devils that had tracked him through his beloved hills these past six months? He had grown up among the Aborigines and held a deep respect for their culture. It was they who had taught him the art of bush survival. Those skills had always kept him three steps ahead of the bloody traps. The trackers brought down from Queensland had spooked the boys. They easily pursued the Gang night and day, through thick scrub and mountain streams. It was these men, that forced his hand, bringing the push for a Republic to the fore.

Sucking in a painful breath Ned called to the figure, 'By God man, move aside or I will shoot you!' It made no move. Ned's gaze fell to the figure's feet. It was floating at least six inches off the ground. Was he going mad? *Blood loss*, Ned thought, *I must be knocked up pretty bad.*

Voice coming from everywhere and nowhere, the spectre spoke, *Join me.*

Ned slowly shook his metallic head, 'Mate I'm going one way and that's to Hell after I rescue my boys from that bloody Inn.' Then a conversation occurred which Ned realised much later had happened without a word spoken aloud.

Iron from the earth; fire from the trees; sweat from the forge. Your armour, your burden, is destined to be a symbol of hope. A symbol of courage. Edward Kelly, venture forth and follow, for your destiny lies elsewhere.

Ned staggered to his feet. 'Bull shite,' he muttered. 'My destiny was sealed when that judge sentenced my mother to three years hard labour. For me, I died that day.' Without another word, reeling from his wounds, Kelly brushed past the ghostly image. He didn't notice his armour glow briefly from the spirit's touch. Ned had set his target as the Inn. Cocking his revolver, he strode out to meet his fate. Ned began to wildly bang his weapon against his helmet in an attempt to draw attention away from his trapped brother and his mates. The spectre turned and watched the lumbering figure. Reports later described the moment when terrified troopers sighted a 'mythical bunyip' emerging from dawn's mist.

The spectre already knew what would follow. It knew Kelly would no sooner have left his mates as he would steal from the innocent. Its request was never meant as a summons, it was intended to be a test. One that Ned easily passed, time and again. One that would add to his legend and, of greater importance, to the coming battle. And

with each meeting, with each touch, the significance of Ned's armour increased. For a conflict far greater than the one taking place a hundred yards away was approaching. One that would reshape the world.

For even with its ability to curve time it had hit a literal dead end. One moment light, next nothing. It understood all time – but it could not comprehend this Darkness. A darkness, which was coming far too soon for this world. Once it was an ancient. Once it had crushed a tremendous evil. Yet *the dreaming* was many, many lifetimes ago, belief had stalled. Its power was now but a memory, it needed a new guardian.

So Barundji would watch the Iron. He would wait for what happened next. For while the man who made it a legend was not long for this earth, his spirit would always be tied to it. And one day that spirit would awaken. It had to. The Iron, given life from the fires of Ned Kelly's vengeance, was this world's last best hope for peace.

They just didn't know it yet.

Operation Antler

Maralinga

October 9, 1957

4:15pm

Suspended by balloon a few hundred metres above the ground, the atomic bomb 'Taranaki' carried an explosive yield of 26.6 kilotons, twice as powerful as the blast that destroyed Hiroshima, and more than enough to lay waste to vast tracks of the Australian outback. However, to the British aristocracy, the land was already wasted. This was to be their *seventh* major detonation – all of which were conducted under extreme secrecy. Previously, the Australian Government had forcibly removed the traditional owners, the Maralinga Tjarutja people, although a few Pommy officers joked that it would have made the tests more 'entertaining' had they kept them around.

The winds were favourable as the switch was flicked and 'Taranaki' exploded into a massive fireball that engulfed a multitude of tanks, trucks, and other equipment placed around the vicinity to replicate a battle ground. The shockwave shot out in all directions, whipping up the boiling radioactive winds into a cyclonic state. The resulting pressure flattened everything in it's path as the superheated maelstrom

scorched the earth.

At the epicentre the fragmented bomb impacted the terrain like a meteor. The massive underground tremor followed a long hidden path once travelled by the enraged Mamu. The fault line fled north, straight to Uluru.

Fountainhead

Uluru (Ayers Rock)

Uluru Kata-Tjuta National Park

October 10, 1957

The beast that had lain here for nearly forty millennia had awoken. And it revelled in its bloody dreams. A vision filled with the screams of the dying. Billions of souls suffocating, drowning in rivers of red. The nature of the dream gave it reason to exist. It *knew* it would rise.

Lying there crushed in the dirt it sensed change. The bonds that had bound it to the earth were weakening. Long gone were the ancients that deceived it. Mamu possessed the wisdom of the ages, yet it was troubled by a single thought. How did those puny humans trap a being as great as *he*?

Flattened by a mighty fist aeons past, Mamu's revenge was fuelled by the vision of a world it resolved to conquer, to destroy. It seethed. It plotted terrible retribution on the children of the ancients, all the children. Revenge. Blood. Death.

It fed on hate, anger, and most of all fear. As humanity continued to turn on itself, it would grow stronger. And it knew that once reborn into this new world it would never go hungry again. The beast began to slowly pulse, snaking rootlike tendrils into the surrounding fissures. For the ground tremors had created fractures in the once mighty Uluru. Mamu was searching for a way out.



Illustrated by Ashleigh Pollard

When the train doesn't fit the platform

novel excerpt

Liddy Clark

PART ONE

Curtis nestled into the curves of Tash's body; she was staring out of her bedroom window at the green vine she had planted, now weaving its way around the fence dotted with little yellow flowers. A view she never tired of, she would miss it when she flew out to London. The window gazing calmed her but she knew it wouldn't take much for her to go off the deep end.

If Curtis made one wrong move, that is, if he didn't say or do what she wanted him to she would explode. If only she could be clear; open with him like she used to be. They turned over in unison. She kissed his sinewy curves, running a finger down his spine.

"Curtis?" He stirred and turned to face her, kissing her gently. She kissed him back then, moving her face to his chest she inhaled the smell of him. Curtis stretched his arms.

"Have you finished packing?"

She had, but she was hoping he would say, 'don't go I need you, I want you' and she would upend her case and all would be right with the world.

"Yep, now be quiet." She smelt him again and kissed his wiry body. He groaned and sighed then lifted her up to his face and kissed her eyes that were moist with tears.

“You know I’m going to London to preserve my sanity. To cleanse myself of you.”

“Yes darling, I do know that. What I don’t know is why we have to keep talking about it. You have made up your mind and nothing I say or do is likely to change that, is it?”

The question was rhetorical. He knew what would change it and that would mean leaving his wife, something he was not entertaining. “Tash, it’s your decision. I’m sorry I can’t give you more than what we already have.” He drew her into his arms, wiping her tears with the sleeve of his jumper that was strewn on the bed.

They had been together for six clandestine years. It suited them both but it was getting harder and harder with Tash wanting more than Curtis was willing to give. It seemed to her the only way out was to accept the job in London and let time and space do the healing. She knew deep down she wasn’t going to go quietly, acknowledging the childish petulance creeping into her argument.

She looked at him, her breathing shallow, allowing him to dry her face. He kissed her eyelids, licking away the last of the tears and gently pushed her back onto the bed.

She looked up at him and moved to sit up; she couldn’t let it go. She knew she was now in dangerous territory; sabotage. “Do you understand? Do you? I can’t help thinking, six years of my life I will never get back.”

Curtis stared at her. “You know I can’t... won’t leave her.”

“But you can cheat on her for six years”. She knew she had gone too far, but it was out of her mouth before she could retract.

“Below the belt, Tash. It’s unbecoming.”

“Fuck you. Yes, unbecoming. My behaviour is unbecoming. *Our* behaviour is unbecoming and we are going nowhere, so from now on it will change. I would like you to get out of my bed, get dressed and leave. I am going to London and I am having a holiday in Italy. It’s time Curtis, time to move on.

“Tash come here.” Curtis moved toward her, gently taking her in his arms.

“No!” She knew what she was doing, offloading the problem she had created for herself; melodramatic and pathetically weak. She was screaming and close to more tears. She wanted him to go, and she didn’t. When he got off the bed she felt like crying harder.

Curtis moved away from her, quietly picked up his clothes and moved toward the bedroom door. She watched him. He turned to her, his face drawn.

“Hope the trip works for you Tash,” Curtis said quietly, turning away. “Hope you

find whatever it is you're searching for."

The door shut and he was gone.

She sat on the bed staring at the door.

It wasn't her finest moment or the best of farewells. She knew she had handled it badly, but intrinsically she knew there was something wrong.

The foreboding had been hanging over her for the past year, even longer if she was being truthful. To be fair she had tried to end it with Curtis on a number of occasions; just to give in when he rang to see if she was okay. It was like a game of tennis, back and forth over the net with no real winner. She had been taking out her frustration on everyone and anyone who crossed her path, saving most of the venom for her parents. She couldn't work out what had changed. She loved Curtis, she liked being independent, loved her work, loved where she lived. She hated that she couldn't put her finger on why or when the seed of discontent had started to grow. The biological clock crossed her mind and she quickly put it to one side.

She knew she wanted more from the relationship. She wanted to hold hands in public. Was it the picture of happy families she was craving? She wanted and needed to break it off with Curtis to get her life back on track to find the 'happy' girl again. She hated how horrible she had become pushing away the people she loved.

It was time to make a decision, change or accept her lot in life. The offer of taking the show to London couldn't have come at a better time. Besides, who wouldn't jump at the chance to work on a London stage? At least she would be out of the country when the craving for Curtis started again. Then, when the show finished she would go on the trip of a lifetime, meeting her best friend Gem in Italy. She had it all worked out, a time to really look at herself, to look at the world around her instead of being stuck in the mire of her own self-pity.

Curtis was the same age as Tash, thirty-four. He had been married to his childhood sweetheart Lizzie since they were twenty-one. He had started work as a technician in the theatre when he was quite young and had been with the Australian Ballet for ten years. He enjoyed the theatre life. Taking shows on the road was a bit of respite from being at home.

Lizzie had contracted Lyme's disease in her late twenties from a tick bite when they

were backpacking through the countryside in Germany. It meant she was pretty much homebound and relied on Curtis for most things. She tolerated him going interstate with the company. The money was good, he rang her every day and she had the dog, a cocker spaniel, Scout, to keep her company. Curtis was committed to his her. It wasn't the most exciting of marriages, but it was what it was. He had enjoyed a few flings over the years, but when he met Tash it all changed. They met at the Melbourne Arts Centre canteen having a cup of tea before setting up their respective shows. It was a meeting of minds.

Tash enjoyed their talks on world issues, local issues—philosophical diatribes. They enjoyed the cut and thrust of their combative cerebral discourse that led to passionate lovemaking when and wherever they could. She knew about his wife, he had been upfront from the beginning but for Tash they were destined. In reality, unless he left his wife, their relationship was destined to be clandestine. Another fact she pushed to the back of her mind. After all it was her destiny to sleep with married men, something she had inherited from her mother.

Tash was successful as a stage manager and loved living alone in her smart ground floor, two-bedroom garden flat. It was like living in a British Mews, lots of apartments, very little noise, a communal green space and swimming pool in Clifton Hill, an inner city suburb of Melbourne. She had a number of close friends, most of whom were from the theatre world. Her best friend Gem was an Australian who had lived for many years in New York; they met through mutual friends and spent as much time together as they could whenever Gem was in town, which was more often than not these days.

Tash knew that Gem was fed up with her banging on and on about Curtis. Gem tried her best to be tolerant, but she couldn't quite get Tash's inherent blaming of her mother for everything that was wrong in her world.

"Fuck Tash, your poor mother! What if you have been wrong all these years, what if she didn't have an affair? It's as if you think if you say it often enough it will become true." Gem was on a roll and her second Harvey Wallbanger over farewell drinks at the local. "What if..."

"I'm not playing the *what if* game Gem. You should at least be proud of me, that

I'm calling it quits with Curtis." She knew she hadn't told the story of dumping Curtis with much conviction. She needed a distraction. "Let's get back to what I need to pack. It's summer in England, so I guess I'll pack as if it's Melbourne in spring and then Italy in July or August will be sweltering."

"I'm just saying that unless you close the door on all this, you won't attract the right person into your life. And, about your mother - get over it. Be honest! You know your mother isn't to blame. Deep down you don't think you're worthy of anything else."

Tash glared at her. As shocking as it was to hear, it was probably close to the truth. She didn't let too many men get close to her.

"Oh Gem, on the face of it I'm probably being safe. I don't want to get into a relationship with someone who is 'free' in case it doesn't work. Self preservation."

Gem gave her friend a big hug. "It will all work out darling. Don't forget to pack a dressing gown."

Tash knew she was running out of options. She was getting older and ultimately knew it didn't serve her. How many more times could she flee as guilt got its tentacles into her being. The offer to do the show in England was divine providence. It gave her the momentum to tell Curtis enough was enough, and the space of being on the other side of the world to work on herself to heal. Gem had been right; you can't hang on to a platitude to camouflage what's wrong in your life. She had blamed her mother for too many years and it was now time to look in the mirror.

Tash declined the obligatory farewell dinner with her parents, Catherine and Mitchell, opting to drop her car over and a spare set of keys before heading to the airport. She wanted to share the excitement of her London and Italian trip, but didn't feel up to explaining her irrational behaviour over the past year. Her parents were pleased for her, anything that was going to make her happy. They were starting to worry about her short fuse, arguing over anything and nothing.

"Enjoy yourself darling girl. Hope the Brits understand the play." Mitchell was being his playful self as he walked her to the taxi.

Catherine gave her daughter a hug. "Thanks mum, sorry for being such a pain lately."

"You just have a good time Natasha, we look forward to all the stories when you

get home; we will catch up with Gemma before she leaves for Italy in case you need anything. Stay safe.”

The flight to London was both uneventful and long. She passed the time watching the closed curtain between economy and first class, and contemplated her new life as a single woman. She felt discombobulated but put that down to sleep deprivation. Excitement reared itself as they came into land. It was early morning London time and the view was breathtaking. After the initial excitement she went into control mode and attempted to corral her troops, who were exuberant, excited and jet lagged. She lost two of the actors in the space of ten minutes. Finally wrangled, they found their courtesy bus and driver. Another journey, Heathrow to London; everyone was chatting, staring and pointing. It seemed the whole group was on a trip of discovery. They dispatched the motley crew to their appointed accommodation; then it was off to the office for Tash and her stage crew to meet the London management group.

Finally, after what seemed like two days of being awake, it was time to go to her accommodation. She was excited to see it, hoping that it would be cute and beautiful and cozy—a place and a time to heal.

She had organised all the London accommodation before leaving Melbourne and through a friend of a friend she had managed to secure herself a flat near Soho. It belonged to an English director and his writer wife. As luck would have it, they were going to Australia at the same time for a production of his wife's new play.

The driver pulled up outside number 12 Charlotte Street. She got out with her bags, looked up at the handsome building, her promised new home, and liked what she saw.

She stood on the pavement and looked around her. Cafes and restaurants; it was a wide road with lots of traffic; she hoped it wouldn't be too noisy. Even though it was summer there were lots of scarves and jumpers; it made her shiver and do up her coat. She looked up at the presupposing building, took a deep breath and pressed the buzzer for what seemed the only designated flat in the huge red stone building.

She stood in the doorway. A voice intoned above; she walked back toward the curb and looked up. A white-haired man wearing a wide grin was leaning out of the window.

“Hello, you must be Tash, wait there, I'll throw the keys down,” he called, his

booming voice echoing down the building.

Bewildered, Tash squinted her eyes and cupped her hands ready to catch the keys. He leant further out the window, his torso sporting a pale blue jumper then released what looked like a parachute. A man's hankie caught at each corner with string or fishing wire, she couldn't tell, with two keys attached at the bottom. The makeshift key transporter hung in the air and floated to the ground. She had never seen anything quite like it before; it was ingenious. She realised that her mouth was wide open as the parachuted keys landed at her feet with a clunk. A voice broke her reverie.

"Fourth floor, get a run up, it helps," offered the man as he precariously hung out the window. She picked up the parachute hankie and keys and opened the building door to be engulfed in darkness. She waited until her eyes had adjusted and looked for a light. The stairs were heavy wood; she looked up, they seemed to go on forever. She gathered her bag and energy and started the long climb.

By the time she ascended the winding, dark, well-trodden staircase she was gasping for breath. Her excitement somewhat abated from the climb. She knocked gently on the massive red door, which flew open in a second.

"Tash, hello! I'm Richard. Come in, come in, I'll let you catch your breath, the stairs are a killer, as they say," Richard offered with a Cheshire cat grin, kissing her on both cheeks.

He opened the door wider, revealing a lounge room that was warm and inviting. The walls were lemon. There was a wicker coffee table with a glass top and four wicker chairs with red and blue cushions. Under the window there was a small table for two, perfect for watching the passing parade on Charlotte Street. On the other side of the room was a small, functional kitchen. It was a big wide room and very welcoming. Although she was breathless, she felt immediately at home.

"You weren't wrong about those stairs. How do you do it every day? You must be very fit."

"Ha, ha, no not that fit. Welcome, welcome, come in come in, here give me your bag."

Tash was mesmerised by Richard's voice, the way he repeated words.

"So sorry my darling Caro is not here to greet you. Your planes probably crossed at Dubai," chuckled Richard, the pale blue jumper reflecting his blue eyes.

"I'll put your bag in the guest room, it's all made up ready and waiting."

She laughed. Richard was beguiling.

“Thank you so much for letting me stay. It’s perfect, I love it.”

“And you will find the bed is very comfortable, or as you Aussies would say ‘it’s a ripper’.”

Richard smiled again; Tash’s heart skipped a beat.

“As we discussed on the phone I will be here for another week before I fly out to Australia to meet darling Caro. It will give me time to walk you through the idiosyncrasies of the old place,” Richard said with his infectious smile. “Now tea! Then I will leave you for a few hours so you can settle in.”

After numerous cups of tea, beautifully presented in Royal Albert Rose teacups with matching teapot it was all starting to get too much, and she wasn’t sure what the conversation was about; the jet lag was playing with her head.

“...So I told Caro that she should go over first and that I would come a week later.” Richard picked up the pot to pour.

“No, thanks Richard, I’m fine. I’m actually starting to feel quite light-headed, even with tea!”

“My dear Tash, I think I will let you unpack and take in the apartment. I have to go out and will be a bit late home, so have a bath, do what you need to do and I will see you for breakfast. Again, welcome, welcome.”

Richard took the cups to the kitchen, picked up keys, through a scarf around his neck and he was gone.

She stood in the middle of the room, her place for the next four months. It seemed surreal.

She spent the next hour exploring the flat. She had trouble putting a date on it; the building seemed as though it had been standing for centuries, but the main room itself was modern in a quiet sort of way. Sash windows that let in a lot of light, eclectic comfortable furniture, pale yellow walls that seemed to emit a lemon fragrance. The bedrooms, on the other hand, were large with dark masculine wardrobes of a distinctly oriental feel. It would make a great opium den, she thought, or was that the jet lag impinging on her reality? She opened all the cupboards and sat on all the chairs, feeling somewhat Goldilocks.

Finally, desperate for a bath and for the feeling of normality she went into the bathroom. It had a 50s feel to it, green bath with green tiles. There wasn’t a showerhead over the bath. The sink, also green, was solid with silver taps. The bath had a strategically placed bench over it, perfect for a glass of wine and a book; all it

needed was a candle. Matching the walls in the sitting room were big, fluffy yellow towels.

She filled the bath with as much water as she could without it spilling over onto the green and black lino. She took off the clothes she had been in for about 20 hours, dipped her toe into the warm water and then submerged herself.

It felt good; she loved water. She mused about the show going well, she mused about Curtis and her mother until she realised the water had gone cold and she was in grave danger of falling asleep. She shivered and slowly got out pulling the plug, watching the water drain the other way round. Using the yellow bath towel she dried, then slathered her tired body with body cream.

Too weary to read, or think any more about Curtis or home, she fell onto the king-size bed that had been made up for her. Richard was right; it was a 'ripper' and covered with the most beautifully hand-embroidered red quilt.

From the bed where she lay on fluffed up pillows, she took in the rest of her surrounds. There was a brown chesterfield armchair in the corner by the window, a large floor-to-ceiling bookshelf filled with books. As her eyelids drooped she thought of sitting in that very chair and reading all the books.

Tash was the fourth child of five. She thought it interesting that her parents had given birth to five children, given they didn't seem to speak to each other much. Dinnertime had always been animated with political discussions; the kids talking about what had happened at school. Her mum and dad contributing to the lively discussions, but you couldn't say they spoke to each other.

It was in Melbourne when her father Mitchell, a travelling salesman for a farm fence manufacturing company, became quiet. Tash immediately thought her mother must have had an affair. Tash's young fantasy had decided that her father didn't talk to her mother unless it was part of a family discussion. She had no idea what went on behind the closed door of her parent's bedroom. She was tempted to talk to her mother about it, but every time she tried to broach it her mother always seemed to turn the conversation around. Tash wanted to know more. Relationships were confusing to her; she needed to know if her parents had been happy. What she really wanted to know was if her mother had had an affair.

After a family Christmas lunch when Tash was in her late twenties, she was sitting on the deck in the back yard with her mother, while the others went to the park to play cricket. She wanted answers. "How did you know Dad was the one, Mum?"

"He swept my family off their feet."

"You mean he swept you off your feet, don't you?"

"Yes and no. We were both on the rebound—I think that's the term they use these days. Your father had been seeing a girl in Adelaide but she chose one of his mates over him. It hurt him but then he was distracted with his pilot training in London, having the time of his life."

"Gosh, I didn't know. He never talks about that time."

"He's a pretty shy person under the bravado. He had his twentieth birthday in New York."

"A trendsetter; who would have thought? What was the war like for him?"

"I think it was the best of times and the worst of times for your dad."

"When did you come into the picture?"

"We met at a dance on Rodd Island in Sydney when he was home on leave. The dances were a great distraction from the war. It was fun. Of course all the men were in uniform, so our parents all thought they were 'good' boys."

Tash was amazed at how ready her mum was to talk about the early times with her dad, and berated herself for not asking these questions years ago. It was easier than she thought it would be.

"Your father was a very good-looking man, and light on his feet. We got on well. When I asked him home for tea, my brother and your dad clicked—they used to go out and drink beer and talk all night. My parents—grandma and grandpa, really liked him; a good Methodist boy."

"Yes, but did you like him?"

"Of course I liked him, but I was still angry with your grandparents for not letting me marry the boy of my dreams—John. John was in the navy, I loved him—young love; but it was not to be. He asked your granddad for my hand in marriage; he said no. John was Catholic, and that was that. A few months later after we had been dating for a while your dad asked me to marry him. The rest is history."

Her mum was looking into the distance, she wasn't sad, just matter of fact.

"So Mum, your life with Dad—good, bad or indifferent? Sometimes you seem a bit distant."

“It’s had its moments darling girl, but all in all it has been good. I love your father very much. He can be difficult, closed at times, but he is a good man. He has been a good provider and he has been a good father. Don’t be too hard on him.”

Tash didn’t expect to hear that, it was surprising. How had she got it so wrong? She wanted to know more, but her mother had moved on and was asking about her love life, a topic she wanted to avoid. She extricated herself from the conversation on the pretext of joining the others for the annual family Christmas cricket match.

She walked over to the park and watched her father with her siblings. He was having a good time. She wanted to get his side of the story, but the time wasn’t right.

Tash had based her relationship disasters on lessons learnt from her parents’ lack of communication and her mother’s supposed love tryst. If she had got it wrong, she had nothing to blame her own folly on. This was unsettling. It’s much easier to blame than look in the mirror.

A few years later when Tash had gone home for comfort after a particularly emotional standoff with Curtis her father was in the lounge, reading.

“Good book?”

“Fantasy, you would hate it. How’s work?”

“Work is good, it always is. I love what I do.”

“So why are you looking like your dog just died?”

“Dad, don’t say that, it’s awful! A bit blah, nothing really.”

“I worry about you girl, you work too hard, and don’t get paid enough. Cuppa or something stronger?”

“Tea please. Thanks Dad.”

She picked up her father’s book. He was a fantasy tragic -- *Conan the Destroyer*, Book Five of the *Conan the Barbarian* series by Robert Jordan. She flicked through a few pages not quite getting the fantasy addiction. When he wasn’t reading fantasy he was doing maths puzzles. A mathematical mind, not bad for a sales rep turned manager, turned gardener, turned retired gent.

She liked him, for the most part, except when he went into his quiet non-communicative moments.

“Here you go Teesy, Lan Choo. It’s good for the soul.”

“Yeah, right. Thanks Dad. Where’s Mum?”

“Afternoon tea at the school; some new idea being thrashed around. You staying for tea? I’ll get another chop out.”

"No thanks Dad, booked a massage, then having an early one."

She always booked in a massage after a visit from Curtis. It was an excuse to cry.

"Dad..."

"Hmm..." It was now or never. She leapt in.

"When we were growing up, I had the distinct impression you didn't talk to Mum. Her father kept reading.

"Dad?"

Mitchell's face was passive. He put the book in his lap and stared at his daughter.

"What do you want me to say Teesy? Perhaps it would be better if you talked to your mother."

"I have. She said you married her on the rebound. Oh, and that she loved you. Do you love her?"

"Tees, you sound like a belligerent 15 year old, not a 34 year old grown woman. Your mother and I are fine."

"Really Dad? So why don't you talk to her?"

"I do talk to her. And yes, if you want to use words like rebound. Yes, we both went out with other people before we married. I think you will find that phenomenon occurs today. We met while I was in the airforce, we fell in love and we married. We were both young. We have five pretty good children, even if one is a bit nosey."

"Any truth in the rumour that Mum had a fling with a bloke from the tennis club?"

Her father stared at her, his mouth twitching. She wondered if he would hit her, or storm out or... Mitchell burst into laughter. It was an infectious guttural laugh. Despite herself she smiled.

"It's not funny Dad." She suppressed a laugh.

"Yes it is. Is that what you think? Is that what you have been carrying around in that head of yours all these years? Ah Teesy. Your mother had her hands full with five kids when do you think she would have had time to play up, eh? On Wednesdays after the ladies doubles? Sorry Tees my girl, our issues were to do with me, my time in the war. Not her problem, not her doing. Sorry to disappoint, now come and give your father a hug."

Tash was deflated. She thought there was more to it, but she wasn't going to press. Something they will take to their respective graves. She sighed and hugged her father.

"Sorry Dad, sorry. I don't know, I'm just not travelling too well at the moment—boy trouble."

“Rightio Tees, let’s leave it there, eh? Now I’m going to start preparing tea, sure you don’t want to stay?”

“No thanks Dad.”

Mitchell got up and went toward the kitchen. Tash didn’t see the tears starting to well up in his eyes. She picked up her bag.

“See you Dad.”

Tash wasn’t sure where she was when she opened her eyes. It took time to slowly take in the room and bring her body and mind back to the present. She smiled. Yes, she thought, my journey of healing has begun. She heard a crash in the kitchen, and leapt off the bed startled. Then the realisation: oh, yes, Richard. She slowly eased herself off the bed and slipped into her dressing gown, thankful now that Gem had insisted she pack it, brushed her hair and tentatively went into the kitchen. She was greeted with a smiling Richard.

“Good morning, good morning. Bet you didn’t quite know where you were. Tea and toast to set you up for the day. I even have Vegemite!”

“Thanks Richard. Brilliant! The whole setup is brilliant. I slept like a baby.”

“Let me know what time you are finishing and I will meet you at the theatre and take you out on the town.” Richard spread far too much Vegemite on the well-toasted bread.

“Oh beaut yes, that would be fabulous. I will call from the theatre.”

“Have you got your key? If you misplace it, my brother Derek in the showroom downstairs has a set for emergencies. I do hope the actors find their way to the theatre.” Richard turned his attention to the tea-making ritual.

She enjoyed the tea and she wasn’t feeling too jet lagged. She excused herself from the breakfast table to ready herself for the day ahead.

“Thanks Richard, you make a very fine cup of tea. See you tonight.”

“Pleasure.”

Refreshed, scrubbed and map in hand, Tash skipped and hummed her way through Soho to the theatre. She veered past a gorgeous café that tempted her—Café Trelise, with an interior that was “Wedgwood Blue”. She ordered a coffee and a pastry that she desperately needed to counteract the vegemite toast.

As she sat, people watching and devouring the pastry, her mind went to Curtis. She knew he would love a place like this. She had her moment then shrugged it off, paid the bill and made her way to the theatre.

Tash was standing centre stage in front of the actors giving them the stage-management gee-up.

“Come on you lot, focus! We open tomorrow night! Your costumes are in your dressing rooms and we need full makeup and costume for the tech run. This is your half hour call.”

It was like herding cats. Something she adored doing. She loved actors, loved watching them create. They were needy at times, especially in the lead-up to an opening night; that could be taxing, but she admired how they put themselves on the line and took risks. The best part of any show was the beginning, in the rehearsal room watching them become their characters. If only she could transform herself.

The technical run went without a hitch, even the lighting and sound cues seemed to work. All the hard work in Australia had paid off; she could feel the actors were ready to open.

Once she had the London crew organised they would be on track for the opening in two days' time. There was a tangible excitement. Telegrams from across the globe started to adorn everyone's mirrors. Flowers were being delivered.

Tash received a telegram from Curtis. She knew she would, the old theatre tradition was as hard to get rid of as her lover. Even though she had acted abominably, he still cared enough to wish her well. It made her heart skip a beat. She sat down in her office with the telegram in her hand and started to dwell on the good times.

The director interrupted her dreaming; she was needed on stage. She threw the telegram into her notebook took a deep breath and went back to work.

At a break in rehearsals she remembered that she was to call Richard about their night on the town. She used the phone by the stage door.

“Hi Richard! We will finish here about 10 tonight, is that too late?”

“Hello Tash. No, not at all, not at all. It is summer remember, still light until after 11. I have a friend who has a great place just off St Martin's lane at the back of the theatre. I will meet you at the stage door just after 10.”

She was pleased Richard was taking her out. It meant she could push Curtis down to the deep dark recesses again. She was also interested in her reaction to sharing a flat with a married man, testing her theory of the sins of the mother. Although Richard was beguiling with his deep voice and blue eyes he was carrying the extra pounds of a man of his years. She thought he was about 60. He wasn't really her type, apart from the wedding band on his finger.

Thank You

Thank you

The Last Word Anthology Team

This anthology is for our course, for the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing, and for all of us involved in it. It is for the students who worked on this anthology and it is for everyone who helped and it is for the teachers who showed us the way. It is for all those people who brought this book to life, for those who taught us to do this work and to love it.

The Last Word anthology is for all those who contributed to it, whether they gave us their words or gave us their art or gave us their time.

Thank you all, and may good things come next.

The Last Word Eulogy

Thank you

Annie Fitton

Bachelor of Illustration, Lecturer, Melbourne Polytechnic.

In collaborating over the past 6 years, the Bachelor of Illustration and Bachelor of Writing and Publishing students have participated in an important and memorable learning partnership. Working through the relation between text and image gives both cohorts new insight into their contributions and understanding of what is being communicated. With origins in modest (black and white) internal illustrations responding to a story or a poem, by 2014 Illustration students were invited to produce the cover design and the internal images. This has continued to this time, fostering an important real world experience for both groups of students.

Sadly this is the Last, *Last Word Anthology*.

I know that many of the illustration students that have had the opportunity to contribute as a Work Integrated Learning (WIL) project, have found this collaboration, difficult, challenging, yet engaging and important. Many have expressed their sadness at the ending of this project. It has enabled students to work with strict production guidelines, over some very vague and difficult synopses as the completed works; poems, stories and prose had not been finalised. The learning outcomes from this project for the Illustration students has been a delight to watch, provided critical feedback and pushed the Illustration students out of their comfort zones.

I want to thank the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing staff and students for producing a very professional publication.

May the Last Word, now R.I.P.

NEXT?

The Last Word 2018-An Anthology of NEXT

Past editions of The Last Word anthology jumped the gun in assuming that they were the last ones. Unequivocally, this is the absolutely final LAST word.

The course is done now, dead and buried by bureaucracy so we have ended things in the only we know how - with a bang. The theme is

NEXT as an attempt to look out to the future, away from the crumbling debris that is the Bachelor of Writing and Publishing.

This year's edition has spared no expense with contributors from all reaches of Melbourne and beyond, for whom we are very grateful to share this with. We expect you to greatly enjoy this book and if you don't it's because your taste is terrible and no one will ever love you/you will never find true love.

"Last words are for fools who don't say enough."
- Karl Marx



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