FRACTURED

AN ANTHOLOGY OF CREATIVE WRITING FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SUNSHINE COAST

2014
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AN ANTHOLOGY OF CREATIVE WRITING FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SUNSHINE COAST 2014
They say it’s always the quiet ones. They say you’ve got to keep an eye on them. That when you’re not watching they just might do something utterly unexpected. Exceptional, even...

That’s how Fractured became.

Three months before now, I looked around at this year’s editorial group and saw a bunch of quiet ones – twelve unsuspecting students who now had something to make, and soon had something to say and prove and found a voice and a way to make it heard. It’s true that I only needed to turn my back for a moment and Fractured materialised in all of its digital glory: shards and discards of the literary kind collected in the shape of short stories, micro fiction, poetry, and excursions into the draw-backs of book-buying and the writing process.

Without doubt, the production of this year’s anthology was the most efficient yet. The stories were proficiently selected from the most submissions received so far, the editors got them edited, the designers went about smashing glass and mirrors, and in a mild state of anxiety the writers found their keyboards. The publication manager snapped her whip-like tongue, the proof-readers proofed, and the desktop publisher laid it all out on the page somewhere between Brisbane and Singapore. To the 2014 editorial collective and our solicited writers, I thank you for opening your minds and your mouths to find your voice. Without you, Fractured would not be such a remarkable testimony to USC’s creative writing talents.

October 2014
It’s Always the Quiet Ones
by Jade Dor

“Sometimes, you read a book and it fills you with this weird evangelical zeal, and you become convinced that the shattered world will never be put back together unless and until all living humans read the book.”
- John Green, The Fault in Our Stars.

Oh, hi.

I’m glad that I caught your attention. If you wouldn’t mind, I’d really like to introduce myself to you: my name is Fractured. I have fifteen different personalities. Now, I know what you’re thinking: I’m weird, mental, or even crazy. Well, maybe you’re right and maybe you’re wrong. Let me explain. You know that feeling when you can’t sleep at night because you have too many voices in your head telling you everything at once, and it makes your head hurt? Well, I don’t just have that at night. I have it all the time. My friends Intense and Kaleidoscope have come before me, and they were great at introductions. So, here are a few interesting things about me: I like casinos. Have you ever been to one? You really should. It’s like heaven. And family. Family really means a lot to me. Family consists of relationships with people who you can connect with. But, I don’t like airports. Not one bit. You know why? Because they’re cramped and full of people. People from Australia, people from all over the world. I have no idea who they are, why they’re there, or even where they’re going. And the worst part is that when I relate family to an airport all I can see are images of them crying. Airports make me feel claustrophobic even at the thought of them, with so many sweaty bodies… Oh, I’m rambling. Sorry.

I like clichés. You know those sayings that creative writing teachers tell you not to mention in stories? Yeah, I love them. I’m going to let you in on a little secret. One of my all-time favourite clichés is to never judge a book by its cover. Have you ever been to one? You really should. It’s like heaven. And family. Family really means a lot to me. Family consists of relationships with people who you can connect with. But, I don’t like airports. Not one bit. You know why? Because they’re cramped and full of people. People from Australia, people from all over the world. I have no idea who they are, why they’re there, or even where they’re going. And the worst part is that when I relate family to an airport all I can see are images of them crying. Airports make me feel claustrophobic even at the thought of them, with so many sweaty bodies… Oh, I’m rambling. Sorry.

I like clichés. You know those sayings that creative writing teachers tell you not to mention in stories? Yeah, I love them. I’m going to let you in on a little secret. One of my all-time favourite clichés is to never judge a book by its cover. Oh, I’m one to talk, huh? See, a cover could mean so many different things. It could fit in with the publication’s body, or it could represent something completely different to what you’d expect from the story. So, I like this cliché because it is true and relevant. You’ve seen my cover, yes? Well, I think it’s amazing. Really. I love black. It’s my favourite colour, if you haven’t already noticed. It’s like I’m a deep, dark hole full of emotions that have the possibility of instantly shattering into tiny, sharp glass shards that get stuck in your feet when you try to clean them up… Okay. Too graphic. Too off-topic. Now, the reason I like this cliché is because I believe that a great cover, such as mine, compliments a great book. Without my cover, and without my body, I would not exist.

Fifteen different personalities are a little difficult to define. But, if you’ve read this far already, at least I know you’re willing to give me a shot. Once you find a publication, you want to know what it’s about, right? So you’re looking on iTunes and see a cool cover, click on it, read the blurb, check how big the writing is, count the pages. You even may think about how much time you have to read it, if you’ll be reading it on the train or on a plane. As you should know by now, I’m not one of your average publications. You don’t necessarily have to read me from page one in a linear order. No. I think that’s boring, so my creators have made me different. Yes. So different, in fact, that you can start by experiencing how much I like casinos, and finish with knowing my least favourite colour. See? Isn’t this exciting? It’s like a Goosebumps novel where you can choose your own adventure.

I want you to read me for yourself, and see where it takes you. But before I let you go, I’d really like to ask you just one simple question: What do you think of when you see the word fractured? Is it a broken relationship? Shattered glass? Maybe it reminds you of when you fractured your arm as a child. Well, my friend Dictionary describes fractured as the act of breaking, or the state of being broken. I am Fractured. Maybe I’m broken because of all my different personalities. Maybe you believe I’m broken just because of my cover. Well, maybe I am. But, I believe I am a part of something. I make this book, and each one of the personalities inside me, whole. So what if I’m a little crazy and broken; why does that matter? The thing that I am 100% sure of, and immeasurably confident about, is that I am a publication, held together by each of these fifteen personalities; my stories, my words, and my pictures. And, to give me a real purpose, I need you.
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You know how it is: stuck in a mid-morning traffic jam on your way to a long day at work and sipping from a four-bucks-fifty hot mocha from Starbucks. Knowing all’s good for you and your hubby; you got a boost in your pay last fortnight and want to try for a child soon. Actually, your situation’s not half-bad – it’s smooth sailing, dammit – and you don’t want it to go away.

But your warm, fuzzy thoughts can’t stop a small but strong nag from surfacing; a nag that claws at you in a similar way to how your cat Mindy claws at your shin. Thing is, this nag ain’t going away – you can’t run from it. No, no. It’s that bad.

All that you can think about is this constant nagging within your mind. This is what that nag is signalling: a small but important part of what I’m saying is missing. Missing, you ask? Ahuh. Think: a card short of a full pack.

You know you can’t focus – can’t focus at all – until you work around this hitch in your path.

As my words sink in, you start to grasp at what I’m saying. Or actually, how I’m saying it. You might know by now what’s up – what’s missing – or you might not. If you don’t, that’s alright. That’s okay. A part of you also might know what I’m about to say. Or actually, how I’m going to say it – and what I won’t say – that’s important. That is most important.

Words: funny things, don’t you think? Just a bunch of scratchmarks, if you think about it, symbols that shouldn’t signify anything for us; but boy, you look at a word and your brain flips. You can do all sorts of amazing things with words: talk, think, laugh, fly, soar; you can do anything at all.

Not many folk think highly of words, you know. Folk ain’t that mindful of what words accomplish, which is a lot. It’s only at a point such as right now – with your non-stop nag, and knowing that a truly important part of what I’m saying is missing – that words float into sight in front of us and sing.

But only if a part is missing.

Do you know what it is?
What is it supposed to mean? That is the common question asked when someone finds themselves confronted with one of Anonymous’s pieces. Anonymous is not a self-applied alias but neither are the numerous others given to this artist. It is out of necessity to have something in conversation to refer to the artist in question, to question whether they are in fact an artist. There is no background on Anonymous and nothing in their work gives clues as to who this person — or possibly collective — is. The pieces are never signed and the connection between them is often theoretical. Copy-cats are common, especially when such attention is thrown towards the originator.

It is difficult to list the supposed collective works chronologically. Plenty of debate has occurred over this, with many claiming their theory is the theory. However the proof is often scarce or based on credentials or name recognition. I am whoever, head of whatever at wherever, therefore, what I say must be true. It is almost universally agreed upon though that certain things credited to this unnamed entity gained notice before others. None of the pieces have titles and need to be described each time when referred to. Here are some examples of the works of Anonymous.

On a busy day in Queen Street, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, a man who is part of the river of people flowing towards the centre of the shopping district stops walking. This is all he does. He does not hold a sign. His clothes are plain and undistinguished. The expression he wears on his face is neutral. At first, people pay little attention. Polite passers-by offer ‘excuse mes’ or ‘pardons’ as they make their way around him. A few less patient patrons tut or offer blunt commentary on this person’s intelligence. This person never replies or makes any suggestion that he has heard any of these comments, or notices that he is causing any inconvenience.

It is unclear which citizen was the first to show concern. Many reported to have asked the man if he was okay, to which they received no response or even the recognition required to be ignored. Those asked reported that it was as though the man was unaware of all that was happening, and there was no malice in the lack of response. A crowd soon began to gather to watch the nothing that was occurring. The hum of many murmurs went through the audience, like ripples in a recently disturbed lake. A passing police officer noticed the gathering and made his way into the middle. He asked a few audience members what was going on, and was answered with shrugs and grunts that when translated meant ‘I dunno’. The officer made sure his gun was visible before approaching the man. He asked what the meaning of this was. The man didn’t appear to hear the question, and the officer decided he had to do something. He thought of charging the man with public disturbance, but has admitted he wasn’t sure if it wasn’t the crowd that were causing more of a disturbance than the man himself. During this moment of professional crisis, a medium Sprite purchased from McDonalds hit the silent man in the back. The officer saw the culprit and decided to arrest him instead. The man doing nothing seemed unmoved by the cold beverage soaking into his clothing and, no doubt, dripping down his leg.

As the hours drifted by, the crowd grew. The public opinion remained divided on what was going on. A reporter interviewed a couple of spectators for the six o’clock news. One local said that the man may have mental issues. A middle-aged woman agreed and said he may be dangerous, and that if she were a terrorist, she would probably do something like this. A young male, who was studying Arts (the network decided to label him “Unemployed”), commented that the man was clearly making a statement about society. When pressed on what this statement might be, the student hesitated and replied that it will probably become clear in time. There was suspicion that this was all a publicity stunt or a prank conducted by a local radio station. Said station had recently made headlines for a stunt, where they told new fathers the baby wasn’t theirs and then recorded the reaction. At first the radio station was ambivalent about their involvement, before eventually admitting they were not responsible for the stunt. As the television report continued, it showed people having their photo taken with the man. Some simply stood there; others wrapped an arm around him or gave him bunny ears with their fingers. People with a cause had noticed the publicity this man was getting and showed up with a picket-sign that summed up their position in a snappy slogan. This included ‘Save the Whales’, a sign proclaiming the Prime Minister was a fascist and the rather open-ended ‘What Would Jesus Think?’ next to the much more direct ‘Homosexuality = The Apocalypse’.

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Not all of those who posed with the man had a political agenda. A group of young women gained notice by standing in suggestive positions around the man. The final in their series of photos had one girl wrapping her arms around the man, kissing his cheek, and appearing to grab his behind. Another was bent over in front of the man with her skirt pulled up and her backside pressed against his crotch. The final girl simply stood beside him, mouth open, flashing her breasts to the many people now taking pictures. It was at this time, the police in the vicinity asked the young ladies to move along, much to the dismay of many onlookers. Despite being the envy of many male audience members, the man showed no visible reactions to these photos or the actions of those around him.

The man remained standing there throughout the night. Police decided the man was not a terrorist or planning any harm and determined the best course of action was to protect him from unruly members of the crowd. Photos from the night show people praying in the Queen Street Mall, people hugging and laughing, some crying. Some are intoxicated and yelling out both encouragement and discouragement towards the centre of attention. It has been noted that in many of these pictures money can be seen at the man’s feet. It is assumed onlookers placed it there believing the man was a busker of some kind, perhaps one of those living statues you read about.

The sun rose the next day, and the man had still not done anything beyond blink, breathe and other involuntary movements of the body. He had done nothing of note, apart from the fact he had done nothing of note. It was alleged that he had been there for around 24 hours by a few observers. At this point the man raised his left hand, looked at his watch, and began walking. He made no statement to the crowd and did nothing except walk away. Some in the crowd followed him for a while, hoping he would lead them to something significant. When he reached the road, he raised his hand for an approaching taxi, which pulled over and let him in. The taxi drove off, leaving the followers with no explanation and at a loss as to what to take from their experience.

It soon became apparent this was not a one-off event, with similar acts occurring around the world. In New York, London, Mexico City, Tokyo, Dublin, Paris and Rome to name a few, a person simply stood, did nothing, and got noticed for it. One incident that occurred in Auckland gained particular notice, as a dog was photographed marking his territory upon the motionless person’s leg. This spread over the internet and became a popular means of satirising and/or showing outright derision for the work of Anonymous. These events still occur from time to time. It is debated whether or not these are imitators, and the recent performances have not attracted the attention of the first few. It is hard to establish how these acts are connected, but it seems too much of coincidence if at least some of these are not related. Connections to other works are even more tentative, but it is a popular conclusion that Anonymous has a role in some way.

‘The Speeches’ were seen as another performance piece constructed by Anonymous. This is believed to have started at open mic events, with people expecting another amateur stand-up or musician or poet to desperately get their attention. Instead they were given a person who was introduced without a name, simply standing before them. They gave an aura of comfortable silence, unlike some previous performers who were speechless due to nerves. The performer of few words would leave when their allotted time was over, or when they were forced to leave the stage.

This soon went beyond small clubs and started to occur at organised rallies, public meetings, and televised Q&A sessions. Notable incidents included a supposed guest lecture at Harvard University consisting of a man standing before the crowd, saying and doing nothing for two hours. This happened at other educational facilities as well, until guest lectures began to be discontinued by many institutions. How these fake lectures were organised is not entirely clear, as most college representatives are reluctant to discuss the matter.

‘The Anonymous Speeches’ came to a head when a person representing their client, who claimed to be the artist behind these works, volunteered to give an interview to a journalist on the condition it would be broadcasted live and be allowed to be rebroadcasted internationally. The other condition was the interview must last for the entire two hours and not be edited or abandoned due to content. A concession was made that profanity or nudity could be censored if this were to occur. It was also made clear that any act of violence or terrorism would be punished to the full extent of the law and the interview could be ceased under these circumstances. The interviewee was a woman, who when asked questions, said nothing and gave no sign of being aware of anything happening around her. The interviewer at first tried friendly banter, but became frustrated and started to disparage the work associated with Anonymous. The interviewer persisted for a while, gave up, and then eventually tried again to no avail. Throughout the interview the woman didn’t even smile, or sigh, or provide interesting snippets for news programs the next day. At the end of the two hours, the woman stood up and walked out of the room. The interview was a viral sensation on the internet and was among the most watched televised events in recent years. The network who conducted the interview admitted they didn’t pay for the privilege of the interview. They further stated, though, that any attempt to discuss finances was ignored by the other party and that no bank details or contact details were ever given to them. They declined to comment over whether they charged
Work attributed to, or suspected to be the doing of, Anonymous is not limited to performance pieces. In various locations, one-thousand-page novels have been discovered in bookshops, libraries, and waiting rooms, which bear no title or any claim of authorship on the cover. The cover is in fact blank and the cliché, “you cannot judge a book by its cover”, is here proven wrong, as when the reader flicks through one of these novels, they soon realise every page is blank. Not even a blurb, copyright notice or page number can be found, with any marks present added by more active readers. Three prominent directors in Hollywood are currently battling for the film rights of this novel.

The item that is making headlines at the moment is no doubt the most controversial piece in a selection of controversial pieces. An untitled painting is polarising critical circles, some decrying it as ‘anybody could have done this’, others exclaiming it will be remembered as a monumental moment in artistic history. The piece is simply a regular, blank, white canvas, framed and hung on a wall. It is difficult to remember the last time a “painting” was discussed at such lengths. Some have taken it as an insult that belittles true artists, while others have defended it as a definitive statement. Others still claim that the point of art itself is to inflame emotion and, therefore, this work is more artistic than anything the detractors have ever done. The emotions inflamed, however, engulf a wide area of different terrains.

Since whoever created the piece has never made their intent known, other groups have been more than willing to put forth their interpretation as the true meaning. An example is a black rights activist who claims the white canvas is a representation of the domination of white society; how both literally and metaphorically, minority issues are whitewashed over. Paradoxically, a representative of a Neo-Nazi group claimed the painting was a symbol of white power and a positive endorsement of ethnic cleansing. Religious groups say to whoever will listen that it shows the purity of the soul, while Atheists passive-aggressively state how this is a statement that there is no higher being; there is nothing but us. Some take a nihilistic view and say the painting shows that nothing matters, while others say the painting shows that even nothing matters, therefore, everything has a certain beauty. Critics are divided on whether or not the work is an ironic comment on pretention in art or a sincere endorsement of artistic expression. Some claim to like the early works of Anonymous but that now they just weren’t the same since they’d become well known. These people were, you know, they were now much more interested in this artist you’d probably never even heard of. Masses of people believe the painting is good because everyone else likes it; not realising, everyone else likes it because everyone seems to think it is good. The only thing that seems universally agreed upon is this untitled piece makes for an easy symbol for everything that has come before, and has been placed under the Anonymous umbrella.

So much of this work is out there and, despite the attention it is receiving, no one seems to be sure who’s behind it. It is often attributed to one person but there is no real proof of that. It could easily be the work of a collective. Actually, there has never been evidence beyond speculation that shows these works are connected at all. Often the difference between rumour and fact is a matter of time and willingness to believe by the masses.

I have seen the infamous painting more times than I care to admit. Last time I visited, I had to make my way around a bunch of people who were just standing in the hallway. I know better than to attempt conversation with these folk. I tell myself I visit for scholarly reasons. I am not caught up in the hype. I’m an intelligent person trying to figure out humanity, so it’s only natural to be attracted to something like this. I have to know what it means… for the good of us all. However, despite the research I’ve put in, I don’t know what I think the meaning behind it is. If I am honest, I’m not sure I want to know. If it had been obvious would anyone care? On the other hand, if you were to offer me the conclusive evidence that wrapped everything up, for better or worse, I’m not sure I’d be able to resist. I guess we’d all be willing to throw it away to have a single answer, which is a shame. Answers have a way of limiting the limitless and transforming mysteries into obscurity.
Disconnection
by Bianca Millroy

You once told me there are four things you could stare at forever.

I have just over an hour of time to kill before the departure. Navigating my way through the crowds, I force myself to concentrate on where I am going and not where I have come from. It is an in-between world; a place of beginnings and endings, hellos and goodbyes, the lost and found. The only thing setting the real world apart from the transient atmosphere inside is the cluster of people; strangers fighting and loved ones reuniting. I watch as foreigners arabesque in beguiling dress and exotic tongues. Even for a person like me, an airport can seem as foreign as visiting another country.

Connection (ko’nɪk) (ə)n): the scheduled transfer of passengers from one mode of transport, usually an aircraft, to another.

From every direction I see them; the frequent flyers whose sole purpose is to gain enough time between connecting flights for their caffeine fix, the daily newspaper or a hasty cigarette. Looking down at my conservative jeans and blouse, I suddenly feel overwhelmed and out of place. Don’t be ridiculous, Amelia. It is not as if I have never flown before; it is more that I notice people. Entire lives are led by a hierarchy of points feeding their solace and loyalty. Everyone is coming or going, making up for, or running out of time. Nobody looks up as I carve a path towards the head of the queue. I cautiously place my items along the conveyor belt. The sideways glance from security is as penetrating as the X-ray machines they operate. As I bend to pat the detection dog, a look from the security guard tells me to remove my hand. The dog gives me a reassuring lick.

I have always had a stronger connection with animals than people. Nearly every person in the line is glued to an electronic device; scrolling and texting in synchronised fashion. One businessman is cross-legged on the floor, trousers hitched up with headphones in. He is avidly charging every Apple-emblazoned device he can, as though his life is dependent on a charged battery. I observe each techno-savvy traveller; connected, and yet, disconnected from their surroundings. I glance up, finding flight JQ788 flashing across the screen as “delayed”. I feel my shoulders slump with the weight of my bag, as much of a burden as the journey ahead.

Disconnection/Disconnexion (Dισ- kə’nɪk) (ə)n) A [contemporary] term used to describe how social media is distorting perceptions of reality.

I still recall the day you arrived, just weeks after your graduation. Fresh-faced and eager to make your mark on the world. I remember our first dance at the ceremony when you were awarded your wings. You were so proud, so sure-footed in the path we would take. You only had eyes for me, even before you shook my father’s hand in exchange for his blessing. We always made it through the difficult times, the long periods away, missed Christmases, and forgotten anniversaries. But your letters spoke of your first and only true love; a passion which could not keep a man grounded.

‘Business or economy, ma’am? Would you prefer window or aisle?’

Tickets are produced as passengers are divided into classes. My thoughts are interrupted as a lady wearing a turquoise jacket steps in front of me, breaking the physical barrier. For a moment our eyes make contact and I look away, a tinge of pink spreading towards my temples. I make an awkward attempt to apologise and compliment her jacket; however, my words are drowned out by the voice-over. The boarding call is placed at last. The hostess, mustering all of the enthusiasm she can, ushers me towards an aisle seat in row 19.

I flinch at being prodded on board like a herd of cattle. Coming from the far north I have grown up with wide open space. Stowing my belongings, it occurs to me why passengers make a fuss over their seat allocations. I have no expectation, or even want, to be treated differently to any other paying passenger on the plane. I make a habit of sitting behind the wing, closest to the emergency exit aisle but far enough from parents and tantrum throwers. There is bedlam as hostesses settle last minute requests. Passengers complain about their leg-to-tray-table ratio. A man and his wife, the turquoise jacket lady, uproot me from the aisle seat. The husband reaches across to lift the blind, causing the warm afternoon sun to stream through the window. I am perched so close to the woman that the diamantes on her glasses cast rainbows on my cheeks. Already, I feel suffocated by the proximity of their bodies to mine. A recorded voice interprets the actions of the crew members for the emergency brief. Once the seatbelt sign is switched on, we are
You will love everything you see. 'Trust me,' you said. 'Flying is the only way to fully comprehend the beauty of the land."

Processes are acquired through stimulus and response. Con·ne·c·tion·ism (kəˈnɛkʃənˌɪzəm - noun): a theory in psychology where all mental processes are acquired through stimulus and response.

The ground a blur beneath us, I look out at the oval of sky obscured by a layer of cloud. Now that we have levelled out I can return to a normal state of breathing.

The lady beside me turns, her thick American drawl punctuating the air: ‘So are you on the way home or on holiday, honey?’ Her exuberance matches the bright suit and bejewelled glasses. As I consider my response, the lady and her husband lean in.

‘I’m coming home, actually. It’s been...a while. My husband works away so just the dog and I otherwise. Usually, I spend time with my relatives down south. Helps with the distance, you know.’ I say it as a statement, more than a question.

I rotate the band on my finger, a nervous habit of more recent years.

Do you remember how you wanted to take me with you when you went away? ‘Trust me,’ you said. ‘Flying is the only way to fully comprehend the beauty of the land. You will love everything you see.’

The thing is, I already did. I had always settled for less and only wanted for simple things. You had that way about you. Putting in long hours to earn money, respect, and most importantly, a reputation. I was too immersed in my own hopes and dreams of starting a family. You always went further with your career, stayed out there longer than anyone else. I was your wife and biggest supporter, though I felt like I was given no choice. In the beginning we made it work, but now the days grow into weeks and I no longer see my world in your eyes.

‘Time is always by your side,’ you said. But you are no longer by mine. I am broken from my reverie as a hostess with a rattling trolley comes to a halt.

‘Are you a club member darl, or would you like to order from the a la carte menu?’ ‘Uh um...’ I struggle to collect my thoughts.

Beside me, a fifty dollar note is retrieved from a turquoise pocket. ‘I’ll take the house white and my husband would like a Canadian Club. On ice. Oh and please put this young lady’s order on our gratuities.’

The hostess beams down at me, offering a selection from the trolley. ‘Thank you,’ I offer. ‘Just a cuppa, please. Milk, no sugar.’ We replenish our mouths; a reminder of the stale air in this artificial environment.

I am unfurling the tea bag and beginning to relax when the tray-table starts to shake, spilling hot milky water across my lap. On cue, the captain makes an announcement that we are encountering minor turbulence. Turbulence. The word triggers little alarm bells in my head. The hostess runs the beverage cart to the rear of the plane, clipping exposed elbows along the way. A polite bing alerts us to prepare for a drop in altitude. The passengers who paid no attention during the safety brief are sticking their heads up over their Daily Telegraph in bewilderment. There is a jolt as the plane hits another air pocket and the captain’s stern voice crackles over the PA system.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, please return to your seats and immediately fasten your seatbelts. I have been advised by the tower that we must remain in a holding pattern until the storm system clears. Due to visibility, it is a waiting game but I will update you momentarily.’ The captain’s voice is replaced by the hum of static and an ominous silence comes over the aircraft. What I think is the tell-tale flash of the wing light is pursued by a clap of almighty thunder. Storms in the far-east corner of Australia are not for the faint hearted. I hold my breath and tug for support at the neck pillow. That was too close.

Disconnection Syndrome (Dισ- kəˈnɛkʃənˌsɜːrθəmεɪn): a term for the disconnection between two regions of the brain, particularly the cortex. Symptoms include a lack of insight to one’s own free will.

The aircraft is a hive of nervous activity; even the fizz of pressurised air from my water bottle is drowned by the lashes of rain and wailing children. Unaffected by the change in flight plan, the Americans next to me clink their glasses in camaraderie with the display of lightning. Something is not right. Unlike my alcohol-fuelled allies, I feel that I am better informed of the situation, no matter what fate is unfolding. Spider webs of rain streak upwards on the glass; a sure sign we are losing altitude.

After a gulp of water, a metallic tang still lingers in my mouth, quite different to the tannin flavour of the tea. Without warning, the oxygen masks drop like dangling innards from a compartment above our heads.

As a precaution, the hostess hands out the life jackets. ‘Place this over your head and the mask is there if you find it hard to breathe. Just sit tight until we get through.’

Sinking lower into my chair, I open and close my eyes in silent prayer that the darkness will cloud over my senses. Absent of a horizon, my senses are heightened, trying to grasp which direction the plane is heading.
I think of the men in their white and gold uniforms. The pilot and his crew are only human but under the circumstances, they cannot afford any errors in judgment.

With a flash of lightning more brilliant than the first, the plane is transformed into a distorted tunnel of black and white. A strobe effect dances off the walls like a nightclub, projecting shadows and snatches of eyes, teeth, and hands. Limbs reach out to steady those who are too late to return to their seats. The plane nose dives and I hear a scream, urging me to yank off the seat belt and curl into a foetal position. Overhead lights start to flicker, shutting off one by one down the rows. In the darkness, I visualise the maze of wires and cables strewn across the cartilage of the plane, lifeless without a spark of connection.

Connection (kəˈnekʃ(ə)n - def. noun.) A wire or metallic strip linking two components in an electrical circuit system, often associated with transforming, conducting or short-circuiting

Forcing my eyes open, I try to make sense out of what I am hearing. A mechanical screeching is just audible over the commotion. Outside, I make out the silhouette of the wing flaps extending to halt the plane’s velocity.

*Perhaps we are descending at this speed for a reason.*

My teeth clench down as the wheels forge a connection between rubber and bitumen.

*You once told me there are four things you could stare at forever.*

*Fire.* You lay in the open field next to me, tasting the sweet burnt remnants of the sugarcane season, waiting for the dawn to break.

*Running Water.* You chase me down the river bank, water splashing on bare skin, fighting the current, our bodies breathless and spent.

*The Night Sky.* You take my hand, tracing the tail of a shooting star, gazing at me with a constellation of stars in your eyes.

*And me.* Our first time flying together, a spectacular eclipse of land and sea.

Before me is a new frontier, where the calm after the storm takes on a new meaning. Patches of cloud have cleared in the aftermath and a starry sky lights up pools of water on the runway. The plane, still battering squalls of wind, ambles toward the welcoming lights of the terminal. With all the composure of a captain, our arrival is announced.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to welcome your arrival to Brisbane. I’d like to reassure you the slight detour was for the sole purpose of your comfort and safety. The time is twenty-two past eight’

The pilot’s commentary is overwhelmed by cheers and clapping. Finding my voice, I offer a comforting smile to the couple beside me. ‘I meant to say earlier, I really like your jacket.’

The first passengers to exit are just visible from the window, overlapping at the luggage carousel in a frantic search for their families; their lost and found.

Had I been an ordinary traveller, I would have made a beeline for the stairs, following in single file like the rest. Instead I remain standing, wondering how a man’s voice can seem so rational and calm under the pressures of work, yet so indifferent to the demands of marriage.

Connection (kəˈnekʃ(ə)n symbol: ¥: an eternal bond between two forms usually forged by a common unity; a loop of indefinite beginnings and endings, the marriage of cause and effect.

Among the trail of bobbing heads on the plane, there is one I am familiar with, standing at the entry to the cockpit. Holding his headset, the pilot brings the microphone to his lips.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, I wouldn’t normally say this, but under the circumstances...’ he falters. A steady *thud, thud* pounds against my ribcage.

‘...For my wife out there in aisle 19, I landed this plane for us tonight and I felt you right by my side. I know my job is my life, honey, but so are you.’

Impulsively, I cling to the place I have locked away all the hurt, the lonely nights and unanswered phone calls.

All things lost can be found, again, can’t they? People stand in the cross section of the aisle, forming a cocoon around me. It is only moments before I must disembark yet I move forward, drawn by the sight of him. His eyes are electric as they strike contact with mine, beckoning. I feel the primitive rush of desire. Time has worn away the foundations yet it is the vast distance of land and ocean that has ultimately come between us.

‘Amelia.’ I feel his hand on mine.

*It is time to come home now; to make the connection.*
You’re going to write a story. Let’s commence. Sit down. Start by looking at the page and you’ll see it stare back. It’s the white of eyes without pupils. You may begin to feel a little uneasy. Just think for a second, and let the apprehension wash over you. If you listen closely, you’ll hear it… What the hell am I going to write about? Now, push your chair back and tell yourself you need to come up with an idea first, and then it will be easy. Now, take time out for a second. Just wander around your house. No, no, it’s not procrastination, trust me. Think of it as preparation. Watch some Dr. Phil (for character development purposes). Make your third coffee for the day (you’ve got to stay alert and aware). For best results, plan your next holiday destination (knowledge is key in creating a believable setting). Book your next dentist appointment, wash the dishes, think about going for a run… And then decide not to. It’s okay; just forget all about this story-writing business. While checking your mailbox, you’ll glimpse an idea. Pay attention now. It’s sitting in the cobwebs of your brain. It won’t be entirely clear yet, but don’t let it slip away. Slowly walk back to your desk. Be careful not to lose sight of the word/thought/thing. Try to coax it out. Gently now, let it hear you croon. With any luck, the idea might introduce itself to you. Then again, it might just sit there. Stop, don’t get frustrated. Just breathe in and try to think of ways to lure it onto the page. Your train of thought may start to wander again. Let it. Have you noticed the lint on your sleeve? Before you give up on writing, try taking some more time out. Leave the blank page and your stubborn idea. Don’t be disheartened just yet. Go clean the washing machine and come back to the story later.

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Notice the lump in a pocket of your dirty jeans. If you dig deep enough you will discover that it’s a small chunk of discarded motivation. Grab hold of this rarity and clutch it tight. Now, march back to your desk and make use of it, before you put it somewhere special so you can remember where it is, but never do. Sit down. Scrawl a sentence and begin to feel like you’re getting somewhere. Re-read the sentence. The newfound confidence will slip a little as you recognise it needs some work. But it’s salvageable, surely. Re-re-read the sentence. Start questioning what the hell you are doing and how you came up with this rubbish. Don’t give up just yet. Take (another) break. Warn the page you’ll be back for it and that this time it should consider itself lucky.

To become a better writer you must read a lot. An outing to the library can only be beneficial. Of course, maybe getting out of the house is exactly what you need to gain some thought-provoking inspiration. You have numerous unread books at home waiting for your attention, but that is beside the point. Some fresh air can do wonders. This might be the perfect opportunity for your idea to unashamedly present itself. Yes, the time-out may be just the cure for not writing. Take the bus and keep your eyes open for something inspiring. You’ll know when you see it. Upon reaching the library, take a while to determine which aisle will hold the best book. After some time of reaching no conclusion, make the executive decision by reciting eeny-meeny-miny-mo. Once you have an aisle, pick a shelf. Select titles that sound remotely interesting and read their blurbs. Revisit your idea, briefly, just to ensure it’s still there. Notice your choice of “take home” books and how it has grown from pile to tower. Think about your writing again. Think and think and think and think. Stop and decide that it’s probably time to head home and do the familiar; sit at your desk.

This time poke at your idea and do a double take. Notice the growth around its midsection and realise that it has become well nourished by procrastination. Now, glance at the page. See that it is staring at you again. It is expecting. Sit there and let your fingers twitch. Grind your teeth when the words don’t come. Just breathe in and stay calm as your idea remains mute. Plead with it to make its way to the page. Coerce and beg and croon. Sing to it. Grovel. Come on now, the day is almost over. The lint is gone. We have read, cleaned, eaten, and procrastinated some more. We have an idea. We have a blank page...

We have tomorrow...
Charlie Betts sat at his kitchen table hunched over his usual breakfast – a cup of strong, black coffee with a Marlboro chaser – trying to figure out just how things had gone so bad so fast. For months now he’d been on an epic losing streak, and in Charlie’s line of work that was as serious as suicide.

The career of a professional gambler is usually measured in dog years, but Charlie had shown staying power. He was a legend from Atlantic City to Las Vegas, from Monte Carlo to Macau. But where once the name of “Fat Chance Charlie” had been uttered with awe, today it was a whispered warning about what happens when Lady Luck deserts you. The terrible irony was that Charlie had never had any love for that fickle dame.

It’s the rare gambler that doesn’t have a little good luck charm or karmic ritual – a rabbit’s foot tucked away in a breast pocket, a buffalo nickel hidden in a shoe – but Charlie? Luck, schmuck! Gambling is about skill. You find your angle, calculate the odds, factor in the percentage, and place your bet. That’s it. That’s all there is to it. That’s what he’d always believed. But now, Charlie’s confidence was shaken to the core. His faith in himself had taken a body blow. This losing streak was unending…unnerving…unnatural. Charlie had to wonder if there was something to this luck business after all.

When the morning paper arrived, Charlie tossed everything but the sports section into the trash and went out to his small patio to study the daily racing sheet. A couple of hours and a pack of Marlboros later, Charlie knew it was hopeless. His head was spinning with stats and odds and picks and sleepless nights. Maybe he’d just forget about the ponies and try his hand at the blackjack table. But where? Charlie ran down a mental list of every casino on the Strip one by one: Bellagio, Flamingo, Riviera, until… Of course! The Paradise is perfect.

Charlie thought about hailing a taxi for the short trip to the casino, but it was a glorious day; he decided to walk. A twenty-minute stroll took Charlie to the bustling corner of Las Vegas Boulevard and Sands Avenue; the Paradise was just across the street. The walk had loosened a shoelace, so Charlie bent down to do it up. Right there, glinting on the paver at the tip of his polished brogue, was a vintage $200 Silver Strike slot machine token. Charlie’s eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. Those coins were rare, collector’s items, and this one looked as shiny and new as if minted that morning: 12 ounces of solid silver, three and a half inches in diameter. There were five casinos in Vegas, hell, in the whole country, that still had Silver Strike slot machines in play and the Paradise was one of them. It was a sign. The gambling gods had smiled on Charlie. He was off the bench and back in the game. He picked up the coin and planted a big, noisy smack of a kiss right on the face. Today is my lucky day!

Charlie stood up and started across the street to the casino. Laughing out loud, he flipped the hefty coin high in the air and watched it spin in the golden sunlight. He held out his hand to catch it and…missed. The coin bounced and rolled into the middle of the busy intersection with Charlie in hot pursuit. He never even saw the speeding taxi.

Brakes squealed. Horns blared. People screamed. The impact flipped Charlie high in the air. Horrified onlookers watched him spin out of control and land with a bone-crunching thud in the middle of Las Vegas Boulevard. There was no sign of movement.

When Charlie finally blinked open his eyes, he was lying flat on his back looking up at a cloudless, Crayola-blue sky. He had no idea where he was and no memory of what had happened. What he did have was a throbbing, pulsing headache. Charlie eased himself to a sitting position and pressed his hand to his forehead. A tender hen’s-egg lump poked up at the hairline. Ouch! How did that get there? He wobbled onto his feet and found himself standing in front of a glass and steel high-rise. There was no signage, nothing to indicate what the building might be. He turned in a slow circle. Nothing.

Puzzled, Charlie again faced the building and studied the façade. The glass walls were mirrored, impossible to see through. Charlie noticed what appeared to be a doorbell, but no door. With alternatives in short supply, Charlie walked over and pressed the bell. He heard neither a ding nor a dong, but a small, square hatch in the glass sprang open and a gruff, fleshy face peered out.

‘Thank, God!’ said Charlie. ‘I—’
‘Name?’ asked the face.
‘Uh…Charlie. Charlie Betts. I—’
‘Wait.’ The hatch sprang shut.

After what seemed like an eternity, a door-sized glass panel swung silently open and the face peered around the edge. ‘Come in.’
Charlie hesitated, but the panel started to swing closed. He just managed to squeeze through into a small foyer before the panel clicked shut behind him. The face was now a whole person with a slick, bald head sitting atop a weightlifter’s body; he reminded Charlie of the muscle often employed by the casinos to keep rowdy punters in check. The bouncer, as Charlie christened him, stepped over to a double door in the back wall and motioned for Charlie to stand next to him. He pushed a button and the doors slid open with a whoosh. A tsunami of noise rolled over Charlie: the familiar, deafening clang of the start-of-race bell sounded from the tote room, claxons blared as streams of silver coins spouted from a dozen slots machines and from every corner Charlie heard delirious shouts of ‘I won! I won!’ To Charlie’s utter delight, he found himself looking at a cavernous, rollicking gaming establishment the likes of which the Vegas casino bosses could only dream of. Glass elevators made gravity-defying ascents, laden with lucky winners straining to lift buckets of silver coins.

The bouncer leaned over and shouted into Charlie’s ear: ‘Follow me.’ They weaved their way through the maze of punters. As they skirted the craps table, Charlie caught a glimpse of a man blowing on a pair of dice, getting ready to shoot. Jangles Johnson jumped immediately to mind. Good old Jangles. What a character! Charlie hadn’t thought about him in, maybe, thirty years; not since Jangles had dropped dead on a Palm Springs golf course fleecing some poor schmuck out of his gold Rolex. When they passed a smoke-hazed billiard room, Charlie saw a guy breaking the rack who was a dead ringer for the late great Mack McCready, the best pool hustler that ever lived. And in the blackjack pit, Charlie caught sight of a familiar face peering over a head-high stack of chips. He could have sworn it was Puggy Parsons. But, of course, that couldn’t be. Only last month Charlie had given the eulogy at Puggy’s funeral. I’m seeing things. Sure, that’s it, the bump on the head. Next to him the bouncer stifled a chuckle. He placed an oversized paw under Charlie’s elbow and escorted him into an elevator. Up and up and up it went. When it finally stopped, the door opened inside an elegantly appointed penthouse office where a dapper little man in a tuxedo waited.

‘Thank you, Pete. That’s all for now,’ he said to the bouncer.

Charlie stepped out of the lift and just before the door closed he heard a quiet: ‘So long, Charlie, and good luck.’ Charlie looked back but the door had already closed.

The tuxedoed gentleman turned to Charlie and offered his hand. ‘Charlie Betts! How nice to see you. We’ve been expecting you.’

‘You have?’
‘Yes, indeed.’
‘Have we met?’
‘No, I’ve not had that pleasure before today. I’m Mike.’

Charlie shook the offered hand but looked puzzled. ‘Then how do you know me?’

‘First things first. Let’s have a seat and get comfortable, shall we?’ Mike led Charlie to a couple of high-back leather chairs in front of a fireplace. Charlie sat in one and Mike sat facing him. Charlie rubbed his aching forehead.

‘That’s quite a bump. Are you alright, Charlie? You’re white as a ghost. Would you like some water?’

‘Got anything stronger?’

Mike motioned to a small side table next to Charlie where two fingers of amber liquid cast a warm glow from inside a brandy snifter. Charlie picked up the glass, sniffed, and took a tentative sip. Nectar of the gods couldn’t have tasted better. Charlie felt the liquid gold work its magic as colour returned to his face.

‘Better?’
‘Yes. Thank you. I must have fallen and hit my head, but I don’t really remember.’
‘No? Well, I’m sure it will come back to you in time. Now back to your question: how I know you. You’re a legend, Charlie. Your many former, shall we say, business associates sing your praises.’

‘Really? Who?’

‘Jangles. And Mack and Puggy, of course, among others. You just saw them downstairs. Don’t you remember?’

‘I saw people who looked like them.’

This is always the most difficult part, thought Mike.

‘No, Charlie,’ he said, in a gentle, calming voice. ‘You saw them.’

Charlie, famous for steel nerves and ice-water veins, felt an unfamiliar frisson of alarm. ‘But...but...that’s impossible. Jangles, Mack and Puggy are dead.’

‘Well, yes, Charlie. You’re quite right.’

‘You mean, I’m seeing ghosts?’

‘Not at all, Charlie. Jangles, Mack and Puggy are quite real. Just...dead.’

‘But, if that’s true... and I can see them, then that means ...’ Charlie patted himself on his chest and face, solid as a concrete block. ‘No! I don’t believe it. Are you trying to tell me I’m...?’

‘Dead? Yes, Charlie.’

‘But, what is this place? Where am I?’

‘I thought that was obvious, Charlie. You’re in Paradise.’

‘The casino?’

‘Heaven.’

‘Heaven? I thought Heaven is where people float around on clouds and play harps.’

‘Oh, it is, it is, for some people.’
'What do you mean?'
'Heaven is different things to different people, Charlie.'
'I don’t get it.'
'Finding out one has “shuffled off the mortal coil”, as one of our more literary residents likes to put it, can be...disquieting. Experience tells us a familiar setting lessens the shock. People who expect clouds and harps get clouds and harps. But you, Charlie, your idea of heaven is a never-ending winning streak in a world-class casino and that’s exactly what you saw downstairs. Nobody loses. Everybody goes home a winner.'
'That’s impossible.'
'This is Heaven, Charlie. Nothing’s impossible.'
Charlie mulled it over. Sure, I might be dead, but things could be worse.
'Okay, sounds good to me. Just point me in the direction of the blackjack table and I’ll be on my way.'
'Well, I’m afraid, Charlie, it’s not that simple.'
'I knew it. I knew there had to be a catch.'
'You don’t have what we’d call an unblemished record.'
'Me? What about Jangles? And Mack? And Puggy? They weren’t saints.'
Mike clicked his tongue against his teeth. 'And there in a nutshell is the crux of our problem, Charlie.'
'Meaning?'
'Nobody’s perfect, Charlie. Nobody deserves to be here. But we’re fair; we give everybody a chance. Here’s how it works. You and I make a little wager. You win, you’re in.'
'And if I don’t?'
'An eternal losing streak at our equivalent of a Dakota Sioux Indian casino. And you know what they say about North Dakota: “Nine months of winter, three months of poor sledding.”'
'A persuasive argument. What’s the wager?'
'Mike walked Charlie to a glass door overlooking the rooftop pool. ‘You see those men sitting around in the lounge chairs?’
The old geezers?
'Mike had a good chuckle at that one. ‘One of those “geezers” is Adam. All you have to do is pick him out of the group.’
'Adam?'
‘You know, first man, Garden of Eden, Eve’s husband.’
‘You’re kidding.’
‘I never kid, Charlie.’

Charlie looked down at the group and counted. Ten-to-one, not bad odds. He was just about to agree to the bet, when the thought of his recent losing streak stopped him cold. It’s hopeless. I haven’t got a chance.

Just then, Charlie felt a gentle hand on his shoulder and heard Mike’s kind voice saying, ‘Have a little faith, Charlie, and remember: my money’s riding on you.’

Charlie took a deep breath, opened the door and walked over to the little group. Some were sunbaking. Some were reading. Some were snoozing. With their grey hair and sun-wrinkled skin, they all looked the same. Except for each wearing a different coloured Speedo, they looked identical, in fact. Charlie circled round and round the group, but hard as he tried, he just couldn’t spot anyone that screamed “Adam”. Lady Luck hadn’t just deserted him, she’d emptied his bank account, and run off with his best friend.

Charlie sat down on the foot of a lounge chair, hung his head in his hands, and closed his eyes to think, hoping against hope for a lightning bolt of revelation. Uninspired minutes ticked by. His infernal losing streak had dug deep and seemed set for eternity. Charlie was prepared to concede loss, but not defeat. I might be a loser, but I’ll be damned if I’m a sore loser. He opened his eyes, ready to go take his punishment like a man and, right there, glinting on the paver at the tip of his polished brogue, was a vintage $200 Silver Strike slot machine token. Charlie’s eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. Those coins were rare, collector’s items. He reached down and as soon as he touched it he felt a tingle of déjà vu. Charlie stood up and gave the hefty coin a couple of tentative bounces in the palm of his hand before flipping it high in the air. In that sliver of an instant Charlie remembered everything: the coin, the car, and, especially, the missed catch. Oh, no! Not again! A disbelieving Charlie watched the coin spin in the golden light, reach its apogee and begin its downward tumble. He held out a trembling hand. This time the Silver Strike hit Charlie’s palm dead centre with a satisfying smack. Charlie nearly fainted with relief.

Charlie felt a spark of hope. A flicker of his old confidence began to flare. He squeezed the coin with all his might. Again he made a pass around the gang of senior sunworshippers, studying each man from head to toe. At last a slow, relieved smile spread across Charlie’s face. He hurried back to the office.

Mike met Charlie at the door and ushered him back to the seats in front of the fireplace.
‘Well, Charlie. It’s time to play your hand. Are you ready?’
‘I am,’ said Charlie, with confidence.
‘Who’s your pick?’
‘I’m putting my money on the man in the red Speedo.’

Mike beamed. ‘Well done, Charlie! I knew you could do it. Welcome to Paradise.’
Mike escorted Charlie to the lift and shook his hand. ‘Godspeed, Charlie. Now, go join your friends. You’ve earned it.’ Mike pushed the button summoning the lift.

‘Before I go, Mike, tell me something. Did you put the coin there to bring me luck?’

‘The coin didn’t bring you luck, Charlie. It brought you faith. That’s all you ever needed: faith in yourself.’

The lift arrived and Charlie stepped in. ‘The casino floor, if you please, Pete.’

As the lift whirred smoothly downwards, Charlie suddenly laughed out loud.

‘What’s so funny?’ asked Pete.

‘It’s so obvious, I don’t know how I didn’t see it the first time I looked at him.’

‘Who?’ asked Pete.

‘The guy in the red Speedo, Adam. He’s the only one without a belly-button.’

The morning was dusky. The faint smell of freshly turned earth wafted in wisps on the morning mist. It was quiet, all sounds muffled by the silence of the rising sun. The boy completed the picture. His green-grassy eyes shone, a bright glow burning within them. A glow that only those with the power to see souls could perceive.

Such a person, if she could be called such a thing, stood before the boy.

They were, as to be expected of such a scene, at a crossroads. The roads were rough dirt, disappearing into the distance in all four directions. The ground was mostly undisturbed, except in the middle. The boy stood on the other side of the mound, feet bare and toes curling in the dirt.

Normally these sorts of negotiations occurred during the night. The soft spray of sunlight, mixed with the smell of fresh morning dew, indicated these were the hours of the angels, so much so that just breathing sent short bursts of numbness through her.

She turned her attention to the boy.

He wilted away from her, his chestnut hair falling around his face, eyes wide and almost startled. Too innocent, and yet far too knowing to have summoned her.

His gaze flickered up to her again.

‘Your eyes are red,’ he said. Whispered. Breathed.

They stood for a moment. Each transfixed by the other.

She blinked at him and he shook himself, as if she had been holding him there.

‘That means you’re her, right?’ He asked.

She regarded him curiously. ‘Yes.’

He shifted his weight, staring at her before dropping his gaze back to the mound in the middle of the road. The one he had buried a part of himself in, as was required, likely a lock of hair or a precious talisman. Or a beloved – if ragged – toy bunny, in this case.
When he looked up at her again, his eyes were a darker shade of green. More like moss than grass, and still shining with the brightness of an innocent.

She suppressed a shiver of her own. She had never dealt with a child before. Even teenagers were touched by the violence of the world. Tainted. This one, however, was not. He was pure. It shone from him. From his eyes and his hair and his very pores. It sent a crawling feeling along her spine and the question of how he had come to summon her played on her mind.

‘What can I do for you?’ she asked, folding her arms.

He swallowed and gave a little cough, as if clearing his throat. ‘Can you fix people?’

‘Fix people?’

He nodded. ‘My sister, she’s… she’s sick. Can you fix her?’ His eyes were hopeful and he added in a rush: ‘I can pay!’

‘Really now?’ She said, raising an eyebrow.

‘Yes.’ He nodded again. ‘You need a kiss, right? I can do that.’

She couldn’t help the smirk that twitched at the corners of her mouth.

‘Something like that,’ she said.

He hesitated, regaining that wide-eyed expression that was like nails on a chalkboard to her soul. She flexed her fingers, attempting to rid them of the numbness that was beginning to seep into their tips.

‘It’s not a kiss?’ He asked, worry touching his voice, making it higher. ‘She said all I hadta give you was a kiss. I don’t have nothing else.’

Uncrossing her arms, she crouched down in front of him, eyebrows drawn. ‘She?’

‘My sister,’ he explained again, feet kicking at the soft dirt at his feet, eyes cast away from her face at her sudden nearness. ‘She’s sick. She said you can help her get better and all I gotta do is give you a kiss.’

She rested her elbows on her knees, feet sinking into the dirt, understanding. ‘She sent you?’

The boy nodded, eyes flicking up to hers and away again.

‘She told you how to find me?’

He nodded again.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Morgan,’ he said. ‘What’s your name?’

She hesitated, another shiver creeping through her. ‘Didn’t your sister tell you?’

He shook his head emphatically.

‘She just said I’d know you ’cause of your red eyes.’ He paused and tilted his head to the side. ‘So what is it?’

She hesitated before answering with a wry smile, ‘Morgana.’

‘That’s like my name!’ he said, voice hitching higher in his surprise.

‘You don’t say?’

At her tone, he paused to look at her, leaning a little closer than she would have liked. She shifted backwards, having trouble focusing on his eyes and the consequent shine of his soul.

She stood up and took another look around. With a little more focus than she had used before, she looked around again, searching for the path from which the boy had come. To the west she saw a flicker of blue, the dim light of a soul. She had not seen it in the glow of the boy, but now it was obvious to her. The sickly outline of the blue soul, the flickering darkness of whatever illness was slowly consuming it.

Yes, that soul was one that would have no qualms coming out to the crossroads to bargain for life.

Morgana frowned at the house in the distance, and asked, ‘How old are you?’

‘Nine,’ he said. ‘How old are you?’

She glanced at him, smirking again. ‘I’m very old.’

The boy tilted his head to the side, frowning, and said, ‘You don’t look very old.’

She laughed and turned to him fully. She tried to spot some sort of darkness in the shine. Some sign that he was already tainted. He stared back at her, swaying slightly, hands moving unconsciously with the motion of the wind.

Morgana took a deep breath in. It had been so long since she had even seen a child as pure as this boy.

He would make a great addition to the King’s ranks. The brightest souls often turned the darkest, and she would be greatly rewarded for stealing such a prize from above.

She sighed. ‘I can fix your sister.’

His face turned brilliant and the shine from him brightened so much that she had to look away.

‘Really?’ he asked.

‘Quite easily.’

‘Like magic?’

The reference almost gave her pause. Her past rearing its distorted face in her mind, reminding her of all the reasons she stood here now. Dabbling in the darkness, her mistakes, her misdeeds, her fall. The reasons that kept her from a higher place. A purer place. Where the presence of a soul like this boy’s would not burn her. Where she would not burn.

‘In another life, perhaps,’ she said softly. ‘What I do is more of an exchange.’

‘Exchange?’
‘I can grant you this… wish,’ she said.
‘Like a genie!’ He said, interrupting her.
‘Something like that,’ she said, raising her eyebrows. ‘But my wishes aren’t free.’
‘Oh,’ he said. ‘You mean the kiss?’
‘No,’ she said. ‘The kiss is how I give you the wish.’
‘So…’ The boy frowned. ‘How do I pay you?’
She crouched down in front of him. ‘You give me your soul.’
He froze, eyes wide, sunlight gleaming off his hair and silence filling the fields around them. It was still. Quiet. All animals having hidden from her darkness.
The boy stood caught in the silence, as her words slowly registered with him.
‘My-My soul?’
His brightness, and her closeness to it, made it hard for her to focus on him. His purity was raw and bold. Dangerous to her own darkness. Her hands tingled from it, alternating between numbness and a slow, creeping burn. It was her punishment, for daring to be so close to a creature such as Morgan.
‘Yes,’ she said. ‘If you accept my deal, then your sister will be healed. You will have ten years of life. And then I will come back for your soul.’
His breath hitched. He swayed closer to her, and though his light itched through her, she stayed where she was.
‘T-Ten years?’ He asked, eyes large and breath short.
Morgana nodded. It was the set price she gave all her customers. Non-negotiable.
He was silent. His feet shifted in the dirt. His fingers fiddled at the hem of his shirt. His head tilted, eyes drifting back the way he had come, back toward the house in the distance, and the soul that lived within.
‘But you’ll fix her?’
‘Yes.’
‘Will I die? Without it?’
‘Yes.’
‘Will it hurt?’ His voice cracked on the last word, hitching in that way that precluded tears.
‘Yes,’ Morgana whispered.
He swallowed again. Hard. His gaze became unfocused though it turned back to her face. Green stared into red. The child and the demon.
‘Ten years,’ he whispered. ‘I’ll be…’
‘Nineteen,’ she said, filling in the end of his sentence.
He looked up at her, eyes glistening, and in that moment, she caught a greater glimpse of him. His sister had known more than she had told him when she sent him on this errand. She had known the cost, and had not told him. Had, in fact, lied to him. He knew that now.
And yet she was all he had in the world. No parents or other living relatives to rely on. No one else to protect him.
Morgana saw this truth and knew the answer he would give.
‘Okay,’ he whispered.
She didn’t ask if he was sure, didn’t check that he understood what he was asking for, what it would cost him. Nor did Morgana tell him what future awaited his sister’s soul for sending him to make her deal.
‘Have you ever been kissed before, Morgan?’
He blinked. ‘No,’ he said. ‘That’s grown-up stuff.’
She laughed.
‘You might want to try it before you’re too grown up, or you won’t get a chance,’ she said.
He frowned at her, but she ignored it, leaning forward to kiss his forehead.
The contact stung and she pulled away quickly, glad she had not touched his lips.
He looked up at her, eyes once again wide, impossibly so. She was close enough to see the flecks of gold in his eyes.
‘Did it hurt?’ He whispered, his breath ghosting over her face.
‘Ten years,’ she swallowed, ignoring his question. ‘Ten years and I’ll be back.’
He nodded, but before she could even register the movement, she was gone.
Leaving the boy standing alone at the crossroads.

She was back for him, ten years to the day, despite the scars his touch had left on her own shackled soul. They still burned, from time to time, and though her King had rewarded her greatly, she did not feel the usual thrill upon collecting a soul.
The boy was waiting for her when she arrived, though he was no longer a boy.
His eyes fell on her, still so bright, and she felt that shiver from so long ago creep back through her. Back through the tips of her fingers and her lips, where she sometimes still felt the burn of his soul. Ten years and the burns from Morgan’s kiss had not yet healed. Rather, they had festered into white scars. Pure stains that streaked through the darkness.
‘You’re here,’ he said.
His voice was soft and calm. He was not like the others. He did not run or plead or beg for another deal, for another ten years, another five, another one. Just one.
Instead he greeted her.
‘Hello Morgana.’
‘Hello Morgan,’ she said.
He smiled at her and stood from the bed where he had been sitting cross-legged.
‘How is your sister?’ she asked, having not seen any sign of the soul she had healed.
‘She’s well,’ he said. ‘No more cancer, thanks to you. I said goodbye to her this morning.’

‘Goodbye?’ Her eyebrows shot up.
‘Of course, I had to explain what was going to happen to me,’ he said, ‘though she already knew.’
It did not appear to bother him, his sister’s abuse of his soul, and once again she wondered if he truly comprehended the deal he had made.
‘You know, you never explained how it works,’ he said. ‘How you could just... take it away. I’ve always wondered.’
She raised an eyebrow and smirked. ‘Like magic.’
He grinned at her, not the grin of those Morgana typically conversed with, but the good natured grin of a delighted child.
‘Perhaps you’ll find out,’ she added.
The reminder of his imminent death did little to diminish his smile and he leaned back against the bed frame.
‘Well,’ he said. ‘Let’s get this done then.’
She nodded and closed the distance between them, leaning close so that she could once again see the flecks of gold in his eyes.
She kissed him.
His lips were hot against her own and she smiled a little. He had taken her advice about kissing.
She breathed in and it began to burn. Heat seared through her veins, boiling hot like lava, dizzying her sight until she had to grab hold of the bedpost for support.
Her pain was her penance.
When collecting on a deal, it was the soul that was meant to suffer, not her. That was the cardinal rule. The consequence for bargaining with demons. She knew this. After centuries of training and working the crossroads, she knew this.
He was meant to feel agony. Not the fleeting pain of mortal life, but rather the eternal damage of a soul being forcibly ripped out, of being touched by darkness. The process was akin to drowning in lava. It was a slow process.
That was the price of dealing with a demon.
But Morgana did not do this.

She breathed in. Sucking out his soul until the brightness left his eyes and filled her instead. Until she was the one drowning. Not in darkness, but in the raw light of him.
She held onto him, tucking him away safely within the small part of her that wasn’t quite as black as the rest. She could not snuff out his light. The soul was too bright.
The price too high.
It’s still frowned upon. Jesus, what if Mum and Dad—’

‘We’ll pay that bill when we have to. I won’t tell if you don’t.’

He stands up and runs his hand through his hair. ‘How can you be so calm? This is a big deal.’

‘Only ’cause you’re making it one. You were just as keen as me, remember?’ She stands up and places a hand on his cheek. ‘Listen. Everything will be okay if we keep this between us. All siblings have their secrets. This is ours.’

He watches from his window as she drives away. Perhaps she was right and it wasn’t that big a deal. It did occur to him that the damage was done. They couldn’t undo it. Like she said, it was about how they handled it. He wonders how long her lecture is, and whether she’ll come straight home afterwards. It’ll all be okay. There must be a certain amount of times someone can do something, before it no longer matters if they do it again and again and again.

They lay beside each other, sharing uncomfortable silence until she announces that she is late for her lecture. She pulls the sheets away, revealing her naked body. His embarrassment at seeing this only increases with the casual nature with which she searches for her clothes. He tries to ignore the urge to pull her back to bed.

She knows he is staring at her. Boys are so obvious when they perv, especially when they think they’re being sly. She turns and sees him biting his lip, unable to keep his hands still. He was having one of his anxiety attacks. He has always worried too much, even when they were little. She turns around to zip up her jeans. When she turns back, he is no longer in her bed.

He enters his room and busies himself getting dressed. His mind is a highlight reel of what they just did, of intimate details he shouldn’t know but will never forget. For the first time, he truly fears Hell is real. He jumps when she wraps her arms around his bare torso and snuggles her face into his back.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asks.

‘I think you know what’s wrong.’

‘You’re gay?’

He unwraps himself and faces her. ‘Stop fucking around.’

‘You certainly weren’t saying that before...’

‘I feel awful. I think I’m having a heart attack.’

She sighs and sits him on the bed. Everyone hoped the panic attacks would be something he would grow out of, but he shows no signs of doing so. When he gives her that vulnerable look, she can’t help but find it endearing. She pets his hair and says, ‘Listen, it’s not like it’s illegal.’

‘I’m pretty sure it is, actually.’

‘Well, so is everything. Look, we aren’t hurting anyone.’

‘How do you know?’

‘It’s hardly genocide.’

‘Between Us’
by Josh Wildie
It was late when the phone rang. Probably Will with his drunk army mates.

‘Hello?’

‘Evie, it’s me Jimmy. Dad’s had a stroke and is at the Mater. Mum is there with him, I’ll pick you up in ten minutes.’

‘Why?’

‘Why what?’

‘Why would I want to go there?’

‘For Mum, Evie. She needs you.’

‘She doesn’t have to be there. None of us have to be there.’

‘He is still our Dad, Evie.’

‘Alright.’

‘Thanks Evie. Love you.’

Why does he say that all the time? What do any of us know about love?

***

Mum was beside the bed, shrivelled inside and out, with the look of a kicked dog. Dad was tubed to several machines that moved multiple fluids in and out of him. That was all that was moving. Will and Joey arrived.

‘Why have you cut all your hair off, Evie? It looks terrible; you look like a shorn sheep.’

‘Shut up, Joey. It looks good sis,’ said Will.

The doctor arrived and told us that Dad’s stroke was severe, and the outcome wasn’t looking good.

Mum spoke in a little voice.

‘I can’t hear you, Mrs Parry. Can you say that again?’

‘I said, feed him scotch intravenously and finish him off.’

The doctor’s look of disdain had no effect on Mum. She knew worse.

Jimmy jumped in. ‘Mum’s upset, Doctor, and doesn’t know what she is saying. It’s okay, Mum, everything will be alright.’

One look at her beautiful Jimmy and the tears welled.

‘Will it ever be alright, Jimmy? Evie’s hair, her beautiful hair. I’m so sorry, so very sorry.’

‘It’s okay, Mum, I cut it for swimming. I like it this way, really, I do.’

‘You don’t even like swimming, Evie!’

‘Shut up, Joey.’

‘Don’t tell me to shut up, Will. I’m not the baby anymore.’

‘Really? You could have fooled me.’

Disgusted, the doctor left.

At times, looking back, there seems to be great holes in my life. Incidents, places, people that I can’t remember. Memories that have disappeared or maybe never happened. Jimmy says I’ve blocked out the worst, and he wishes he could do the same. Will says the old man hit him so much around the head, his memory is permanently damaged, and it’s no wonder he joined the army as he couldn’t think for himself anymore. Joey says it wasn’t that bad; but what would he know or remember, he was just the baby and still is.

If I could recall one good time as a family, I think that would be enough. The photos looked like we were happy, although Will always had a sulky expression when Dad was in them. The rest of us smiled on command as the box brownie clicked. Dad looked handsome; six-foot, crow-coloured hair, with black eyes that gave him a lost, vulnerable look. Never saw that myself, but the camera did. Mum was pretty, five-foot three, strawberry-blond hair and smiling. Dad was big on appearance, and Mum was charged with the mission of always making sure Dad had the best suits; white, starched shirts and his assortment of silk ties, with his polished black leather shoes. Fortunately, for the rest of us, Mum could sew and would pull apart our cousins hand-me-downs and make us all new outfits.

Father Maloney – or Father Baloney as Will called him – often said, ‘What a fine looking family you are.’ Usually when he came over to share Dad’s scotch on a Sunday night and feed off Mum’s mutton roast. Those nights, apparently, Mum didn’t feel like dinner, as she had eaten earlier.

Dad was the ever jovial, lavish host, with the Black and White whisky bottle filling Father Maloney’s glass nearly as much as his own. Initially, that was how it was: a social interlude, until the mind-click engaged and the demon took back control. We knew the signs and sounds of the demon’s return, and tensed further as he made his presence
She was four-foot seven, a scrap of a woman, dressed as was her habit in black and white, like a little willie wagtail flitting from one letterbox to the next, proclaiming the good news of the day. Dad groaned when he realised who it was, frantically looking around for someone to save him. The house was silent.

‘Morning, Sister Maria, I’m in a bit of a hurry for work, so can’t stay and chat,’ his arm guarding the entrance.

‘I won’t keep you long, James, I’m looking for Bernadette. She hasn’t come to clean the school this morning. Is she unwell?’

‘Just a touch of the flu, Sister, nothing too serious. She will be over it in a couple of days.’

‘And the children, James?’

‘Yes, yes, the children have it also, Sister. We’ll let you know when they are all well again.’

‘I better come in and check on them, James.’

‘No need for that, Sister, the doctor will call in later.’

‘No problem, James, I’m here now so I might as well see what I can do to help.’ With that, she walked under his arm as if it were a garden arch built for that specific purpose. The bloodied carpet slowed her progress.

‘Call the doctor now, James.’

‘I really must be off to work, Sister!’

She raised herself to her full height and stood in front of him and spoke with deep compassion and kindness. ‘James, be a good boy and call the doctor now.’ He was equipped for screaming, abuse, disgust, hate; all of which he could take on and win, but compassion and kindness were unfair weapons of war. He crumbled before her, a defeated man-child and did as he was told.

It wasn’t the fractured skull or the swollen, battered face atop the bruised body that hurt the most. It was the shame, the all-consuming shame that made your shoulders sag, your head droop, and the light in your eyes dim as it seeped into your heart, poisoning and encrusting it, leaving your spirits of love and joy shrivelled, forgotten prisoners.

Dad lingered on, stealing more of our lives, as we, the loving family, stayed by his bedside. A merciful, quick ending eluded us. Dad always demanded centre court, even in death. Father Maloney, a man of impeccable timing, arrived to give the last rites. He said Dad would be pleased that he had his blessing. Will’s grunt was the only response.

That evening the willie wagtail of Wilston arrived, with the good news tucked under her wing. How did one so little, shine so brightly?
When Sister Maria talked about God, it was like he was sitting there with you, nodding in agreement with her. She was a funny little bird.

We couldn’t quite envisage life going well, and a long life hadn’t been that enticing previously, but we all still had a flicker flame of hope left in us. So we decided that we would hang that hope on the promise of a better life.

That night, we told Dad that we loved him, and forgave him and ourselves. Sister Maria suggested it might be a good idea if we included God in the forgiving bit, this time asking for forgiveness rather than giving. Obedient children that we were, we spoke to our heavenly Father, softly, for the first time.

Dad died the next morning, seemingly at peace.

It was a large funeral. Father Maloney was resplendent in his white robes of righteousness, adorned with gold. He spoke on what a good man of the church Dad had been, and how he was known as a faithful husband and loving father. He recalled many fond memories of roast dinners with the Parry family.

Dad’s boss spoke about what a great bloke he was at work, and his expansive knowledge of aerodynamics and how he was an expert in that field. He said how funny he was, and how he always boasted about his happy home and family. Jimmy said later, that he thought he should lift the lid of the coffin to see if we were at the right funeral.

His air force mates spoke about his bravery under fire, and how he could always be relied on. The RSL sent along a bugler to play the last post. Will cried. Mum told us later that Dad stopped going to the ANZAC marches because he didn’t like his few surviving mates seeing him cry when the last post was played.

Sister Maria said that Dad had a soft, hurt heart; she saw it in his eyes just like the camera did.

Life changed after that, and so did we.

Psalm 23.

‘I can see our poor James isn’t doing that well. I think it is time that you honoured your Dad before it’s too late.’

‘Are you serious, Sister Maria? What is there to honour?’ asked Will.

‘Will, I know your Dad’s faults; not as intimately or fearfully as you all do, but I do know them. God wants the best for all of you; he wants you to know his love as your heavenly Father. You can’t experience his love until you forgive and honour him for being your Dad.’

I tried to answer reasonably as I loved Sister Maria. Who didn’t? Even Dad’s demon hid from her purity; but years of hate, hurt and anger pushed aside my attempt at civil behaviour. I told her we couldn’t forgive Dad, nor God for that matter, and that God was on top of the unforgiveable dung heap. We knew our earthly Father’s love, we all carried the wounds, but where was our Heavenly Father’s love when the boys and I were being smashed into the walls and Mum lay unconscious on the floor? What did we do to deserve that? Where was he when I cried out to him to save us? Weaving down the path with Father Maloney, hiding in his hollow church? My hate, hurt and anger projectile-vomited out of me. Jimmy grabbed me tightly to halt the flow. Will bear-hugged Mum, and we sobbed together in dysfunctional disharmony.

Joey rolled his eyes.

Sister Maria cried out silently for our souls, and no doubt Dad’s also.

Eventually, bodies and spirits drained empty, leaving stony dry sorrow.

As was her habit, the willie wagtail of Wilston sang another joyful tune of love, forgiveness and good news for the future. Surprisingly, our tough army-brother was the first to fall on his sword.

‘Alright, Sister Maria, tell us what we have to do. Anything has to be better than this.’

‘Well, Will, let’s start with something positive about your Dad to build on. What was he good at?’

‘He had a powerful backhand.’

‘Oh, I didn’t know that. He was a good tennis player?’

We looked at each other in disbelief.

Mum started to giggle. Jimmy followed with a snort and then a river of laughter engulfed us and flowed throughout the dying ward, washing away the poisoned crust of the past, healing and sealing our heart wounds and freeing the forgotten prisoners.

Sister Maria’s dawning of understanding saw her shed a tear for us. She soldiered on.

‘Do you remember the commandment: “If you honour your father and mother, things will go well for you and you will have a long life on the earth”? It is the only commandment with a promise and God and I so very much want that promise fulfilled for all of you. You need to honour your Dad and Mum for being your parents and trying their best.’
The Browns
by Tracey White

Looking back, I’d wondered why we were there.

There on the platform in all the noise and rush, rush, rush I stood, with my brown satchel and my polished shoes. All the dusty, brown dust of home brushed away. Why had we spent two whole days and two whole nights sitting on the tickety-tacking train? Two whole days chuffing us out of the country and clattering us into the city. With our small brown suitcase we set off through the rushing, rush, rush.

Mama had sensible shoes. Sensible, marching shoes to march me along with her tugging, tugging hand. She wore her brown hat pinned close, and her beaky-bird face led the way. I tried to look around as we marched; tried to take in all that newness. So many motor cars! I tried to keep my socks up. Stone churches with their steeples pointing to the sky; praying like us. I stumbled. Shops and shops and shops! Mama frowned at town ladies. Frowny, pretty dresses. Frowny, coloured shoes. Soon, my new marching shoes had me dream, dream, dreaming of my feet in the brown dust. And I wondered where we were marching to.

All the noise and rushing, rush faded away until nothing was new anymore. Mama slowed our march. I watched my feet. I watched as one by one my socks crumple, crumple, crumpled down around my new shoes. The shine was gone. All the streets were brown brick buildings and brown brick fences. Mama stopped at corners, checked her piece of paper, and tugged me along again. All the browns were in that place. Dreamy, dreaming lonely browns. Secret, made-up brown friend browns. Stumbling, stuttering little boy browns. At a small park with iron gates we rested. Mama had fruit cake and cheese and an orange left in her basket, and we sat close on a brown bench sharing food from home, my new shoes dangle, dangle, dangling down.

When we stopped again, outside a tall, brown house, the sun was low. So many windows! What was this place? I straightened my satchel and pulled my socks to show their new brown creases. Mama frowned. She opened the gate and marched us down a neat path to a big white door with a big brass knocker. Knockety, knock, knock. ‘Who’s there?’ I wondered.

It was a lady in a black dress with a white apron and a pointy white cap. She nodded to Mama and looked down at me. She didn’t frown at my socks. Mama gave her an envelope and our small brown suitcase. Then, Mama bent down to me and whispered, ‘When you speak properly, you can come home.’

I ran down the path as the gate clanked shut. I heard Mama’s sensible shoes marching away. Marchety, march, march. Back to the tickety-tacking train and the dusty, brown dust of home.
During one of the many discussions we had throughout the making of this anthology, our tutor Ross asked me what would happen if I couldn’t come up with an idea. What if I came up with a bunch of ideas, but none of them went anywhere, or they just didn’t gel with the anthology’s aesthetic? What then, Josh? I waved away these concerns and assured him he had nothing to worry about. Me without ideas? Unlikely. My brain was crawling with the things. If anything I had too many, and the collective would be begging me to slow down. And once I had a good idea, the rest would be easy. A collective sigh of relief should be performed, because they had selected the right guy for the writing job. As Ross nodded and jotted something down in his notepad, the thought running through my mind was: ‘Shit, I really need to come up with an idea.’

The following week slipped through my fingers, and I had little to show for it. My inspiration, innovation, and motivation were absent and hadn’t even bothered to let me know they were taking time off. While staring at my laptop screen, it occurred to me I had a bunch of old ideas lying around my parents’ house. Maybe one of them could be the idea, or tie me over until something better came along.

On the drive up, I felt nervous about seeing them again. It had been a while since we’d been in touch. When I pulled up in the street and the music died along with the engine, I heard a mixture of uncommitted barks and questioning growls come from the yard. I saw their faces peering through the scattershot hedge and ran up to them. The dogs then followed me up to the gate and greeted me in a storm of dirty paws, saliva, wet noses, and hair. It took ten minutes to make it to the house. After greeting my mother and answering her questions regarding my education, diet, and financial situation, I went to my old bedroom.

The first of my old ideas I encountered were comedic in nature. Oh, they knew what was what, with their quirky yet insightful take on this thing we call life. Some were kind of funny, others weren’t. All of them reeked of the desperation to be accepted by somebody. Anybody.

My morose, melancholy ideas were gathered in collective isolation. They sat and stared out the window, fogging the glass with each weary sigh. I joined them for a while, but found the experience exhausting. I stood up, flicked my fringe out of my eyes, and moved on.

An idea grabbed me, held me tight and said how wonderful it was to see me. It said I was a beautiful person in a beautiful world. Positivity was the key to happiness. Smile and everything will be okay. My goal should be to bring happiness and help people forget their troubles. Put a little magic back into the world. Its bumper sticker slogan philosophy was sweet like cotton candy, but also had about as much substance.

This speech was barged in on by another idea who told me not to be a sap. People were saps, and the world is fucked. Fuck the media and the politicians. Fuck anyone richer than you. Or kinder. Or smarter. Or better looking. Oh, and you know the phonies?
F**k them. Who are the phonies? Only a phony would need to ask that. It painted itself as a prophet, when it was actually a child having a tantrum. As I left, I narrowly avoided one of my more sentimental ideas, tearing up while flipping through a photo album.

While some of my ideas had potential, they were all out of shape from neglect. I made my way past the post-modern idea, which kept telling me it was an idea, and left my room. I locked the door behind me so I would be alone without my own thoughts. It was bizarre. The only connection I had with those ideas was that I once had a connection with them. Time has a way of making the intimately familiar become alien.

I drove back to where I lived, still with nothing to contribute to the publication. After repeating the routine of staring at a blank document while working through my music collection, I decided to take a walk. The plan was to clear my head while paradoxically filling it with... something. As the sun set, the street lights lit up. I took a different route home than usual and became lost. Panic was put on hold by the theory that if I kept heading in one direction, I would eventually find something I recognised. After crouching down to tie my shoe, I looked up and stared into the distance. It was difficult to make out, but there was something there. Hesitation gave way to curiosity. I tried to give a casual air to my walk, so as not to scare away whatever it was. Occasional glances toward my destination revealed it was not stationary. It became clearer, as the gap between us shrunk, that this wasn’t just any old thing on the street. This was something. This was an Idea.

When I first approached, it snarled in response. I held my hand out to it as a friendly gesture, but it didn’t sniff or lick it. I wasn’t actually a hundred percent sure it had sniffing or licking capabilities. It remained still in the restless way of something that wasn’t used to being inactive. The rough edges of its unkempt exterior couldn’t hide the potential pulsating within. It needed to be polished and refined. It was something that wasn’t used to being inactive. The rough edges of its unkempt exterior couldn’t hide the potential pulsating within. It needed to be polished and refined. It was something that wasn’t used to being inactive. The rough edges of its unkempt exterior couldn’t hide the potential pulsating within. It needed to be polished and refined. It was something. This was an Idea.

The size of this Idea didn’t sink in until we were only metres apart. I held my hand out to it as a friendly gesture, but it didn’t sniff or lick it. I wasn’t actually a hundred percent sure it had sniffing or licking capabilities. It remained still in the restless way of something that wasn’t used to being inactive. The rough edges of its unkempt exterior couldn’t hide the potential pulsating within. It needed to be polished and refined. It was something that wasn’t used to being inactive. The rough edges of its unkempt exterior couldn’t hide the potential pulsating within. It needed to be polished and refined. It was something. This was an Idea.

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I designed a diet of written words for my Idea to survive and thrive on. It was a balance of the necessary things. I’d produce different flavours of plot, setting, and character development. These were sprinkled with helpings of metaphors, a few pinches of simile. Adverbs and topical references were treats; too much of either would make the idea bloated and lazy.

I’d spend hours each day writing and re-writing prose before printing it out, or tearing it out of my notepad, and presenting it to the Idea. It was unpredictable what the Idea would go for and what simply didn’t work for it. In the middle of the night, I’d sometimes stand in the Idea’s regurgitation; something that seemed good at the time but later didn’t agree with my Idea. Living with this Idea was a messy, time consuming process, but I didn’t mind. It would be worth it.

In the brasserie, mid-way through attempting to open a jar of home-made iced tea, Hannah looked up at me and told me I looked tired. I shrugged my shoulders in response before asking if she would mind reading something for me.

‘Sure,’ she replied. ‘Only thing is, I am pretty busy this week so I probably won’t get a chance to look at it ‘til Friday.’

‘It won’t be done by then. I’m just giving you a head’s up.’

‘Okay... So give me a taste. Is it going to be weird and quirky? Perhaps a little dark, but kind of funny, with an underlying sense of melancholy?’

‘I’m tired of doing that sort of thing.’

‘It’s not some gross sex thing, is it?’

‘No, I think I’ve already got that covered.’

When I met up with the writers’ group in the workshop, I told them my Idea was still being worked on, and I would show it to them as soon as it was ready. I told them this again the following week. I then repeated it the following week. I then repeated it the following week.

Instead of taking the bus, I decided to walk home. It would take at least 40 minutes to get home. Forty, peaceful, beautiful minutes. Time flies when you want it to yourself. I arrived home and was greeted by the meowing of my landlord’s cat. Though he wanted a second dinner, he accepted a cuddle as a consolation prize. I found my fellow tenant, Martin, watching TV and sketching. We talked about this and that before he asked, ‘How’s the journal thing going? Got any ideas?’

‘Only one,’ I replied. I glanced down the hallway and saw Honey the cat scratching at my bedroom door. She continued to do so as I approached, simply staring at me as she did it. She bounced off the walls and scampered when she got a response in the form of a thump from the other side.

‘What the hell was that?’ Martin called around the corner before appearing in person.

‘I have no idea. There’s nothing in there.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘You know what? I had a box of books on my bed. I bet they fell off and made a thump.’

‘Sounded like a lot of books—’

‘That’s why it gave Honey such a fright. Cats are notoriously illiterate and are terri-
that made me stop, re-read and feel anything at all only had a single sentence on it. I’m sorry. I closed the book, rubbed my face, and began to walk home.

For the next week, I hoped my Idea would return to me. It didn’t. I was left with nothing and the final submission date was only a week away. When Ross asked me what I was going to do if I couldn’t come up with an idea, I just made the smartarse remark that I’d just write down what I did for the last ten weeks and call it meta-fiction. Writing about writing is what writers do when they have nothing to write about. I am my own punchline. I have taken the easy way out, but that’s okay. Next time, I won’t cut corners. I will apply myself and prove I’m not a hack. This time I will have to settle with submitting the boring details of my life and hope it will do. It’s a shame that the truth isn’t nearly as interesting as fiction.

fied their secret will get out.’ Martin smiled, and almost accepted my explanation, before walking back to the living room.

I entered my room and saw my Idea lounging on my bed. I gave it a dressing-down about causing a commotion. While it didn’t technically count as a pet, I feared Andy and Hazel would feel I had breached my contract if they found out about this. The Idea didn’t seem concerned. Its life was consumed by wonder over whether I had anything to feed it. Each step I took made a rustling noise due to the discarded notes hiding the carpet, each of which the Idea refused to feast on. My laptop files were a collage of false starts, random musings and even entire drafts that I had abandoned as worthless.

Like most diets, the one I designed for my Idea was diligently followed at first. I put so much care and attention into what I fed my Idea. Everything was planned to the smallest detail, all of it balanced and interacting. The Idea was reluctant to accept the subtle, the difficult, and the challenging work I gave it, but I reassured it that this was for the best. This would help it reach peak condition. This would make it magnificent.

The effort and patience this required took its toll. Every day was a struggle to not only get the Idea to accept quality, but also to create this stuff in the first place. I began sweetening the deal with a few adverbs here and there. Some nights I was tired and just jotted down some purple prose. Once in a while wouldn’t matter, but once in a while became the norm. It was so much easier, and everyone seemed happy. Themes weren’t explored so much as glossed over. Resolutions were contrived, absolute, and comfortable. It came to the point I was providing the illusion of fulfilment, but with none of the nourishment.

The out-of-shape state of my Idea caused a knot in my stomach. The reach of its ambition could only encompass momentary pleasures. With its motivation drained, it was a bloated mess willing to settle rather than improve. I could barely stand the sight of it. My disgust caused me to begin screaming at it. It wasn’t worth half the time I wasted on it. It had let me down. It was a bad Idea. It was beneath me. This tirade was long-winded, one dimensional and put my mind momentarily at ease. When my voice gave out, I left my Idea cowering in the corner and made my way to the bar fridge on the veranda to see if I had anything to further remove myself from accepting culpability.

I threw the bottle cap over my shoulder and consumed half of the beer before the fridge door slammed shut. As I gasped for air, I felt something shove past me and scamper down the stairs. I ran into my room, shoved on my shoes and grabbed a torch and a notepad. Skipping two or three steps at a time I flew down the driveway and into the streets after my Idea.

The light of the rising sun awoke me. My back ached from the awkward position I had fallen asleep in on the bus stop bench. I had been asleep just long enough to feel groggy and disorientated. I flicked through the notebook beside me. I skimmed over rushed descriptions, scattershot scenes and prose, all trying too hard to impress. The one page
Warheart
by Tracey White

Never before, though I’ve seen many wars,
Have I ever beheld such brutality.
The Northland bleeds.
Our Sons are enslaved to the insidious machine,
Our Daughters fed to the hungry regime.
I flee South.
With scant on my back and less for my mouth,
I press close to my chest a bundle, most precious.
The roads are a snare of nets and despair,
Of refugees chasing freedom.
I skirt away.
The mountains will succour us, shelter and water,
Fungi and berries to feed my Granddaughter.
I bear on,
With hope for the life of my Avalon.
Up a forgotten, ancient path, into the wilderness of my past.

I navigate our destiny, past the lichen and the tree,
And contemplate a journey Southward.
Avalon stirs.
South, to lands unseen before,
Ancient lands, and the city of Treloar.
Fear at my shoulder,
By ridge and river, ravine and boulder.
Ever South, and ever true, that we may start a life anew.

In time we survive, and Avalon thrives,
The mountains proving our saviour.
Hope gathers.

Each long day, one day nearer Treloar,
That strong-held city, our refuge from war.
Yet, at the final rise, we falter,
Heart heavy and hope altered.
Treloar is black, smouldering under the scars of her attack.
The fall of Treloar found a merciless law,
From the Sheriff, hard-hearted and cruel.
The city cried.
His Deputies, menaced in brutal rampage,
But, resistance held in that crumbling wreckage.
Underneath the sinister streets,
Down sewers and rat holes and stormwater beats,
The Warhearts subsisted, where no hope existed.

In the echoing drains and the relics of trains,
Holding court in the subway ruins,
They served.
Hardened of nerve in their rags and their spoil,
Daring crusades, vigilante and foil.
Raiding the Deputy’s taverns,
Retreating like ghosts to their miserable caverns
With water and loot, with weapons and boots.

Seizing a toll for the brutal control,
Were those who chose against enslavement,
The Warhearts.
Recruiting and drilling and growing their number,
Stolen boots, filled with spirit and thunder,
And valour.
They earned their tag, they won their armour,
With wit and with tricks, with trust and with kicks.

Avalon was unaware, the wilderness her only care,
The Old Man, always there to guide her.
A child.
He sheltered her in a lofty cave, camouflaged at entry,
While he went out to scout for food, or keep a cautious sentry.
And he taught her,
To stalk, to hunt, to trap and find water.
Then one curious winter’s day, the Old Man ventured far away.

Leaving the child to the mountainous wilds,
The Old Man took his journey.
Avalon slept.
With his sack and his staff, he crept into Treloar,
And alongside the ragged and hungry and poor,
Scavenged the chaotic rubble.
But the Old Man found trouble,
And he found it anon, never again to hold Avalon.

A Deputy band came across the Old Man,
Whipping and whooping as he fled,
Riding him down.
For a breach created on a whim, a stone cell.
And for many years to come, the Old Man’s hell.
Wearily,
This rat and bone-heap destiny
He bore, his hope of seeing Avalon once more.
Wasting away with no light of day,
One escape only was sure.
The Old Man held his breath.
Then for death, the screws mistook him in his sleep,
And they hurled him onto the cold, rattling bone heap.
Alone,
He dreamed of Avalon grown,
Clever and strong, lithe and long of limb.

As frail as a bird, he shivered and stirred,
To a touch both tender and foreign.
He woke,
The Old Man dying in the mist,
To find a young Warheart holding his wrist.

Albion,
In the fear and danger of scouting alone,
Waited, to feel his skin, to find life within.

His cloak in a flurry, Albion hurried,
Lifting the Old Man out of the bones,
A waif in his arms.
At the sound of the Deputies galloping down,
The Warheart disappeared underground.
A breath hardly drawn,
Albion knew, the Old Man would fly with the dawn.
He fed him, warmth and care, compassion in the Warheart lair.

When he feared the end was near,
Albion struck a taper.
The Old Man whispered,
‘Listen, Albion. Go to the wilds. West of here. Find my Avalon.’
Albion wrapped the Old Man tight, for the Warheart catacomb,
And pondered.
For although he’d known him just one night, he wondered.
The Old Man’s plea he could not forget, and on his Oath it would be met.

Clever and strong, lithe and long of limb,
An enigma of the wilderness,
Avalon.
Covering the land in her Amazon stride,
Haunting cities and canyons, crossbow at her side,
And a memory,
In her heart, in her mind and in her cry.
Alone in a perilous land, she wrought her careful plan.

Avalon explored the city of Treloar,
With years of reconnaissance and stealth,
She readied.
Searching and laying her plan of revenge,
For the Old Man, his life to avenge,
For his Hell,
No Deputy, no Sheriff, no mercy to avail.  
Her campaign drew near, and she would furnish their fear.

She knew their haunts, their habits, their whores,  
The Deputies, in their filth and their boots.  
Stalking them.  
Steeled, watching in disguise,  
A cold resolve in her hooded green eyes.  
Her freedom  
Was a risk she prepared to redeem,  
Her sacred mountain home, wind and tree and stone.

Cunning as a mountain cat, with strategy and skill for tack,  
Avalon put her agencies in motion,  
Readying.  
Her wilderness, with snares she laced,  
Warrior weapons cleverly placed,  
Along paths,  
Readying her territory, for the inevitable aftermath.  
Wilderness in her art and grace, warfare in her heart and face.

At the secret grounds the Old Man found,  
In her cavern, ever safe,  
Avalon began.  
She bound her wrists and wound her chest with proofing strong.  
She ate, and she chanted her wisdom song,  
Then donned  
A fighting tunic of deepest green and honed.  
In the pre-dawn air she waited, silent, sharp and elated.

Avalon arose, in the creeping daylight glow,  
And stepping from her cave surveyed the land.  
She strode  
Into the gathering morning light,  
Her plan, to make Treloar that night.  
Walking by her side,  
The Old Man, watching her, his pride,  
Checking her snares, with her bow and her dare.

Along a spur in the valley floor,  
Wrapped in the wings of a cape,  
She found  
Suspended in her trap a dreadful yield,  
With Tyrant’s boots, but no Deputy shield.  
Cinched  
At the boots, at the touch of her arrow, he flinched.  
‘I made a vow,’ he said gently, ‘to find you, Avalon. The Old Man sent me.’
LOCAL MAN REPORTED MISSING
By Trudy Blackmore

Mr Michael Weaver of Richmond Estate was reported missing early this morning by a colleague after he failed to attend work two days in a row. Circumstances surrounding his disappearance are unknown; however, police have reported traces of blood were found in Mr Weaver's Richmond Estate home. At this stage the Police do not have any leads and are treating the disappearance as suspicious.

I 'spose I shoulda come forward sooner. I mean, I know I shoulda. I just I...I dunno. I was just embarrassed...Yeah, I was embarrassed. For 'im. Didn't seem right, it didn't, what 'appened.'

The woman sat across the table from the detective. She was wrapped in layers of woollen clothes and had collapsed in the chair like a pile of washing. The many stratums bubbled around her waist, giving her figure a lumpy shape. Her hair was parted to the side in a sweeping coif of blonde hair that made her head look lopsided. The detective could see pink blotches of blood pooled under the skin on her hands, evidence of not long leaving a sink of hot water. The blush in her cheeks, however, seemed to be from exertion...or nerves. She continued:

'E really was the vision of what a man oughta be. I couldn't 'elp it. I 'ad to.'

The detective shifted in her seat.

'Ma'am, you do realise that you are now a suspect in this case? So why don't you start at the beginning. What do you know about the disappearance of Mr Michael Weaver?'

'Weaver. Always thought that name fit Michael. 'E seemed the type a man that weaved spells, 'e did. 'Specially with the ladies, yeah.

Thought it first time I saw 'im. The day 'e moved in next door. I 'member I was lookin' out the window. We live on a lovely street, you know, and from me window in the dinin' I can see right up the street to the corner. I was watchin' the corner that day. Watchin' what cars was enterin'. A 'andsome, red sporty lookin' thing turned the corner and stopped outside next door. Earlier, I'd seen some removalists, so I knew we was gettin' a new neighbour. That's the first time I saw 'im.'

Her voice held the confidential tone of a storyteller, transformed into the modern-day version that is often found at hairdressing salons. Vindictive banter passed back and forth about who did this and whose husband was sleeping with whom. The words souring as they exit the mouth, mixed in with the acrid stench of chemical dyes and acetone. The woman's cockney accent gave the words a lilting quality that was reminiscent of olden days, back to the origins of gossip, when the peasantry would swap tales of their betters in a darkened inn over warm ale and putrefying meat. For a moment, the detective thought she could smell the tavern's musty wood smoke, but instead it was the dirty stench of cigarette on the woman's breath, wafting in invisible billows across the table.

The detective let her speak; she seemed to like the sound of her own voice.

'First thing I noticed was 'e was very tall. And 'andsome. 'Ad a li'l bit of an air about 'im, that 'e knew it as well, but I wouldn't call 'im arrogant. 'E was just like a big tree you see stretched to the sun. Not the ones that push down the other trees and make 'em stunted. Not outta meanness. The trees that 'old their own ground like they're sure of 'emselves, like they know where the sun is and they stand proud for it. Well that's what Michael was like, like 'e knew where 'is sun was.'

Her face started to soften as she spoke. Her grey eyes faded into the memory and a lazy smile spread across her face, making the loose skin around her eyes perk at the corners. She looks like an enamoured mother, the detective thought.

'...Well anyway, that was the first time I saw 'im. And I didn't mean for the rest of it to 'appen but...Well, soon I got to watchin'. Nothin' funny or anythin', I just liked the way 'e did things.'

'Watching him? Is that referring to the videos you brought in, ma'am? You do realise that some of these could be construed as incriminating?'

'Incriminatin'? It wasn't anythin' funny, I said. I just liked the way 'e did things and I taped 'em so I could 'member. Meant nothin' by it, I didn't.'

The detective leaned forward across the table. 'Ma'am, a man has gone missing. You have just handed us evidence that you have been stalking him for months and you want us to believe you had nothing to do with his disappearance?'

Her question was met with silence. She walked to the door and spoke to an officer outside the interview room. After a moment, a TV was wheeled in.
‘Let’s have a look at this recording, shall we? I found it particularly interesting.’

The camera focuses out a car window. A red sports car idles, waiting in a car park. The right blinker flashes yellow. Three spaces down the car park a white car inches from a space, its reverse lights glaring. Michael sits in the driver’s seat of the red car. One arm is propped up on the lip of the open window. His other hand rests on the steering wheel, his fingers tapping the leather. The camera focuses onto his face. His lips move and he sways his head from side to side. A voice croons from behind the frame. Michael turns his head to look out the window, his face pointed towards the camera. His blue eyes focus on something and his eyebrows bunch. He turns his head to face his windshield, both hands gripping the steering wheel. A blue car turns into the space the white car left. Michael turns off his blinker and drives away.

‘Bloody bullies,’ a voice says.

A car door opens. Blue sky fills the frame. The jingle of keys and muttering is heard. Grey pavement rushes past. The two-pronged tip of a long, metal object flips in and out of the frame. The camera focuses on a dirt-dusted tyre with a metallic, blue rim framing its head. An impact is heard, followed by falling glass. The sound of crumbling metal. Someone breathes heavily. The frame goes black.

The detective turned off the TV.

‘Well, they ’ad that comin’. They was bein’ mean they was, takin’ ’is spot like that. ’E’s a sweet boy. Shouldn’t be treatin’ ’im that way. They hurt ’im. Didn’t ya see the look on ’is face. Don’t mean nothin’, yeah. You don’t understand.’

The detective pulled a photograph from a folder and placed it on the table in front of the woman. A blond, blue-eyed child stared up from the worn table top.

‘Do you recognise that child, ma’am?’

The woman stared, transfixed by the boy’s face.

‘Where’d ya get that?’

‘Ma’am, who is the boy in the photo?’

‘That’s me son.’

Monday, April 9, 1987

MYLES, Samuel Michael

Aged 3 years
Late of Richmond. Passed away on 1 April 1987.
Beloved Son of Mr and Mrs C. M Myles.

Family and friends of the Myles family are invited to attend his Funeral Service to be held at the Gregson and Weight Chapel, 26 Wises Road, Richmond on Friday, April 13 at 10.30am.

The woman seemed shaken. Her thumb and index finger mashed together in her palm. The detective could see her index finger was jutted at an odd angle. Clearly, a break healed wrong. As she looked at her, she could see the vestiges of other old injuries. A crooked nose, a slightly shorter leg, the puckered, pink beads of a scar on her neck; some sort of burn perhaps.

The woman began to mutter under her breath. ‘…Bringin’ it up. Long dead now...’

‘I was looking at the record of your son’s case, and—’

‘Got no right,’ she said in a shockingly child-like voice.

‘According to the file he drowned in the bath, is that correct?’

The woman clutched her arms across her chest, slowly shaking her head.

‘Ma’am?’

‘Only left ’im for a second, I did. Ain’t never made sense.’

Sunday, February 16, 2014 4:26 PM AEST

HERO SAVES DROWNING BOY, HYDE LAKE

By Amanda Trew

A three-year-old boy was saved from drowning today when a local man rushed to his aid. Michael Weaver, pictured, was attending a birthday function at Hyde Lake when he heard a cry and saw a young boy flailing in the middle of the lake.

‘He obviously couldn’t swim and was in distress. I didn’t really think much else. I just jumped straight in and swam my heart out,’ Mr Weaver commented. Michael, a keen swimmer, regularly competes in triathlons. He was able to get the boy to shore and performed CPR, reviving him before paramedics arrived.

The child’s parents, Mr Vincent Moore and Mrs Mary Moore, have thanked Michael for saving their son and say he is their knight in shining armour.

The boy is currently in Richmond Public Hospital and is expected to make a full recovery.

The woman sat looking at the floor. She seemed to shrink underneath the layers of clothing.

‘Me husband blamed me. Didn’t treat me much nice after that. Don’t matter ’e wasn’t there, didn’t save ’im either. That’s one why I liked Michael. I knew ’e would ‘ave.’
Excerpt from coroner’s report:
Analysis of blood found at the scene has revealed signs of decomposition and separation, evidence that the body was in early stages of rigor and livor mortis.

‘Ma’am, did you kill Michael?’
The woman pulled her chair forward and placed her arms on the table. The furrows in her forehead made a mole above her right eyebrow jut forward. Resolved, she began to speak:

‘...day or next after that video you showed before, yeah. I went to me camera. I got it set up so it shows straight into Michael's window. I looked in and it’s then I seen them boxes...seems ’e was packin’. This rush went over me, it did. Started feelin’ all hot and stuff. I got used to watchin’ ’im, thinkin’ ’e was leavin’ made me...well, I couldn’t ’ave it.’

The woman was agitated, her breathing becoming shorter.

‘So I went over. I was on ’is back deck, lookin’ in the glass door. ’E was standin’ in the kitchen, stuff all round ’im, knives and whatnot. Then ’e sorta sensed somethin’ I guess. ’E looked up and saw me and ’is face just seemed to melt, it did. All the colour went white. ’E grabbed one of them big knives...And this is the silly thin’, yeah, ’e come towards me, ’e did.’

The detective saw the woman was shaking and she started to rush her words.

‘ ’E had all those boxes lyin’ around, all over the floor...Well, ’e tripped didn’t ’e and came right down on that knife. Straight into ’is chest.

‘Orrible sound, it was. Like a wet sponge bein’ squeezed. Found meself next to ’im after that. The door I don’t ’member much openin’, but I must of.’

The woman’s voice became soft and unhurried. She seemed stilled by the memory. A frown creased her forehead and her cheeks pushed up, drawing the attention to her eyes. They held her shock and confusion.

‘The ground was just covered in blood. It started to spread all round ’im, like a flower bloomin’, it looked like. ’E lay there a minute, lookin’ at me. The white of ’is eyes shone, but it wasn’t no milk white. More like the blue, grey white of an oyster, it was. Yeah, ’is eyes were these watery, fleshy things. Almost think you could ’ave scooped them up. ’E lay there, lips openin’ and closin’ and then they just sorta didn’t. ’E was...nothin’. ’E was just a bit of meat. Don’t never make sense. One minute, a person; next minute, meat.’

A shiver ran up the woman’s back but it seemed to shake off her story. Her countenance flipped and she strode back into a gossipy tone.

‘Started feelin’ embarrassed after that. For ’im. Silly way to go, it was. People not respect that, yeah. Thought I could ’elp, I did. Make it so people ’member ’im. So it not so stupid. Person like ’im deserve that.’

Friday, September 26, 2014 11:21 AM AEST
WOMAN SENTENCED IN BIZARRE CORPSE CASE
By Trudy Blackmore

Mrs Daisy Myles, 52, was sentenced today in Richmond District Court to 14 months in jail. She was found guilty of one count of interfering with a corpse and one count of obstruction of justice.

Mrs Myles came forward to the police after removing the body of Mr Michael Weaver from his home, after he died due to trauma from an accident. In what many people are now labelling as hero adulation gone wrong, Mrs Myles proceeded to dismember the corpse and bury him in the grave of her three-year-old son.

During the court case, Mrs Myles was shown to have been actively stalking Mr Weaver for some months before his death and had become obsessed with him. Mrs Myles, while showing some remorse for her actions, remarked that she was ‘happy Mr Weaver’s death had come to mean more and that people would not soon forget him’.

Judge White stated that Mrs Myles’s behaviour was ‘unorthodox’ and following advice from medical experts and Mrs Myles’s lawyer, has ordered Mrs Myles to serve her sentence in Richmond Mental Hospital where she will undergo psychiatric treatment.
Out of my numerous addictions, the one that costs me the most space, time, and money is reading. I have many books. I tried to count them once, but got bored around the two hundred mark. When I examine my bookcase, it is like seeing various stages of my life. Certain books mean something to me because they shaped, or re-shaped, the way I think. Others take me to the time I was reading them and bring back a flood of memories of what was going on in my world. There are some that do both, and an unlucky bunch that did neither.

After years of watching my book collection multiply like bacteria, I asked my mother if she would buy me a bookcase. She was reluctant at first and pointed out that there were already shelves in my room from back when it was my father’s study. Reason and logic were not enough to deter me; I explained that those shelves still had Dad’s stuff on them. I needed a bookcase exclusively for my books. It would be the perfect gift.

We went to a furniture store, and I picked the one that screamed ‘Josh’s bookcase’ the most. It was delivered that day, and I helped the salesman wedge it through my door and crushed my fingers in the process. Once he left, I pushed and pulled it around the room until I found the perfect spot for it. I immediately began placing my books on the shelves, arranging them by author, but not alphabetically. My OCD is not as dedicated as it could be. When three of the four shelves were filled, it became apparent I wouldn’t have enough space to accommodate my habit. As is the case with addictions, mine didn’t take the hint and has only grown since then. My books are now divided between my parents’ house and wherever I currently live.

Despite being a prolific reader, I have not read all of the books I own. The time period between purchase and consumption can be years.

There are some books that, when I see them, I feel a slight guilt I haven’t made time for them, for whatever reason. Some would question the logic of purchasing books at a faster rate than I can read. It has nothing to do with impressing people or trying to prove something to myself; I just can’t help it. There are so many narratives out there I want to explore. I genuinely want to read every one of these books as well as ones yet to be purchased.

My bookcase is like an overflowing capsule. It holds many dear memories, yet also stands as a reminder of how much I have left to experience. As I glance over titles, deciding what to read next, there is a concern that echoes in my head more and more, the older I get. Sitting amongst all this may be a masterpiece waiting for me, and I may never get the chance to let it shine.
Dust Motes in Sunbeams
by Lachlan Haycock

Excerpt from Chapter 1 (p. 3):

When I was young, my mother could not let a day go by without sitting me down and telling me a tale from her childhood. It might have been about her adventures through the vast green rice fields of her home village, for instance, which used to be one of her favourite activities. Or it might have been about a visit from a local government official, which was always exciting and unexpected. Whatever the tale, she held me while I listened, then kissed me and sent me off to bed to study the Qur'an.

But she would always end the story with something profound: words of wisdom from the most respected healer in the district. On one such occasion, when I was eleven, she said that whatever I did later in life – be it working at the market or as a faithful housewife, needless to say at all times serving my husband – whatever it was, that I could find solace in the words of Allah. They would keep me safe, she said. They would keep me sane.

When I remember what happened to me later in life, however, I regret ever being told that.

~

May 1946
Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Look at me, he says.
My eyes flicker, then meet his.
Smile, he says.
My lips part, then widen.
Lie down, he says.
I lie flat on the bug-ridden mattress and turn my head towards the wall. He leans over me.
Don’t move, he says.
I don’t.

The next morning, he opens the door to his office and walks inside. ‘Get on with it,’ he orders. ‘Have it all done by the time I return.’ Then he picks up a pile of papers from his desk, adjusts the lapels on his uniform, and walks back out like he does every morning. I scramble out of his way, missing his sleeve by an inch; I know the punishment for coming into contact with him without permission. The movement makes me wince though, as my back and shoulders are still sore from the previous night.

I begin completing my duties as I have always done. The office – with its dull yellow walls, high ceiling and musty odour – gathers dust overnight, so my first task is wiping down the bookshelves, filing cabinets, and liquor table.

I move to the window and look out. Although it is only mid-morning the sun is already high in the sky, heat radiating downwards. The city stretches to the horizon in all directions. Black smoke rises upwards from amongst the sprawling slum houses. Its smell is metallic and coarse: dead leaves and rubbish from overflowing bins are used for fuel. In the distance lies the minaret of a building higher than any other in the city: the Masjid Gede Kauman, or Grand Kauman Mosque. Thousands of people complete their daily prayers there, my mother once told me. Thousands of people, each one eager to prove their worth to Allah.

The sun burns everything. There isn’t a tree in sight.

I move back to his desk. This is the place with the most risk of being caught, even though I cannot read his documents; they are in Dutch. There is a newspaper lying open in the centre of the desk that I do understand: The Yoyga Post. My eyes flick up to check that no one is looking, then fall to read the main headline: TROOPS IN BALIKPAPAN FACING DEFEAT AT MORSHEAD’S HANDS. Below is a story entitled: DUTCH FORCES HOLD ELOPURA.

Only important people read the newspaper, however, and I have been punished for doing so before; at least, that was what he thought I was doing. So, I continue my cleaning of the office. He will return soon, and I’ve not known him to express gratitude.
when he does so.

The day draws towards noon, and the temperature continues to rise.

Bismillāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm: In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

My forehead pushes into the woven thread of my prayer mat. Then the pressure releases, and I sit upright, hands on my knees, legs tucked away beneath me. The mat takes up most of the space in my room.

I am wearing my white prayer gown, the only other item of clothing I own. My eyes are closed and my body is still. I am facing in the direction of Mecca. These are habitual actions, but something is missing.

Al ḥamdu lillāhi rabbi l-ālamīn: All praise is due to God, the Lord of the worlds.

My forehead presses into the mat again. Allah's words enter and swirl around inside my head, the ones I learned by rote when still a child. I remember the copy of the Qur'an I owned, the patterning on the pages done by hand over many weeks by the village craftsman. It sat on the shelf in the main room of our house; I fetched it from there every evening before heading to bed.

Memories of a better time.

Ar raḥmāni r-raḥīm: The Merciful, the Compassionate.

But the words don’t spread throughout my body, healing and strengthening like they always have. I don’t feel the connection. His words are swirling around in a sea of growing confusion, not calm.

Something is missing.

Look at me, he says.

My eyes flicker, then meet his. The skin below his eyes is wrinkling, something I have seen on many of his colleagues.

rough scratching cheek

I move my gaze to the sky above; mouldy grey clouds are forming. It will not be long until the rain begins to fall in large fat drops like it does every other evening. A flight of Javan hawk-eagles passes by overhead, silhouetted against the mouldy clouds.

grunting flat wall

We are standing in the small courtyard behind his house, where the rats dig their holes and the wall rises above my head, so I can only see the sky and tops of coconut trees. The air is dense and a blanket of heat covers the city.

painful pricking hands

My skin itches in the heat. This usually doesn’t happen, but it has grown worse over the past few weeks. The birds above us pass by again, then fall out of sight below the top of the wall.

Thunder rumbles, and the birds call out.

The next morning, I go about my duties in the office once more. When he enters the room at noon, my nostrils are assaulted by a waft of cigarette smoke – he must have been in a meeting – the smell is always stronger after a meeting. He is wearing his military uniform and says he has been called somewhere. I need to go with him. I know this to be true, having read the sign at the top of the stairs many times: PERSONAL ASSISTANTS PROHIBITED FROM LEAVING THE BUILDING UNATTENDED.

He picks up his military beret from its stand in the corner and eyes me. At least, that is what I imagine him doing, because my own eyes are pointed at the ground. ‘Keep your mouth shut,’ he tells me, ‘or you’ll be in the cabinet tonight.’

He leads me down the stairs to the foyer, which is usually full of people filling out forms or making complaints, like any other government building. Today though, the room is full of soldiers. Each of them is dressed in grey-green fatigues and holding their weapons before them. I am led towards a man with bushy eyebrows and a comb-over, who is standing at the head of the group. His skin is much darker than the rest of the soldiers; he has the wide face and flat nose of a Javanese.

I am not told to move away so they can talk by themselves; sometimes they do not bother about that.

The man with the moustache holds out his hand. ‘Colonel van Koenraad, begroeting. Just this way, sir.’

‘Begroeting, Captain.’ The Colonel turns his back to me, but I can still hear him.

‘I will be there shortly. However, I need somewhere to put my, ah, assistant before we leave.’

‘It cannot remain here, sir?’

‘Normally that would be the case, Captain,’ replies the Colonel. He flashes a glance in my direction. ‘On Wednesday evening, however, Emernsbrecht’s assistant … Well, it hasn’t been found. I know I cannot leave mine outside. It would run off, I am sure.’

I keep my eyes at the ground.

‘I understand, sir,’ says the captain. ‘But, I cannot help you. As you know, we have no one to spare. I am sorry, sir.’

The front door swings open and a man strides inside, this one also with a moustache.

‘Colonel!’ he calls, ‘we’re about to leave.’

The Colonel looks back at me and narrows his eyes.

I am seated in the back of a military truck. There is a sign with ‘KNIL’ in embedded letters
attached to the back of the driver’s cabin, while a canvas is spread over the back, leaving the sides open. The road is full of potholes: my arm, which is tied to the seat, collides with the side of the truck every time we pass over one. I am cramped between two men with rifles; they push up against me when we turn a corner, but do not make an effort to move back. The Colonel is seated at the front, nodding and speaking in Dutch to one of the soldiers. I hear him mention the Masjid Gede Kauman, then he points down the road and the conversation ends.

We pass through a maelstrom of colour and sounds. Food stalls cluster together on either side of the street, some with piles of fruit spilling out onto the dirt, others displaying a complete array of batik clothing. Women squat before trays of open coals; the smoke blows across the street and stings my eyes. People dart in and out of traffic, which is mostly made up of bicycles, rickshaws, and cidomo, the traditional horse-drawn carts. They all jump out of the way when the truck approaches. Even the sellers running alongside the rickshaws jump out of the truck’s path. I see many people pausing at their tasks to stare up at the truck as it rumbles down the road.

Now I hear the call to prayer. The muezzin’s voice emanates outwards, penetrating into the darkest and most secluded depths of the roadside stalls. Children run in and out of these, and their mothers run after them. This is the first time I have been out into the city for a long time. Usually, I am not allowed onto the streets for very long and never very far from the Colonel’s house.

Then the bumping and jarring stop as the truck pulls out onto the main road, and we pick up speed. Next, the soldiers begin adjusting their rifles, brushing off their boots, and wiping sweat off their brows. The Colonel also adjusts his beret. I look over the side of the truck and see the end of the road approaching. At its head is the Masjid Gede Kauman.

Hundreds of people are moving through the arched gateway at the front of the mosque. As a group, they pass through into an open yard with taps along the wall where they perform ablutions. All of them are barefoot and dressed simply: the women clad in white prayer gowns and the men in long pants and prayer caps. They move up the marble steps, but without pushing one another aside. The open doorway is as wide as the street itself, but cannot allow everyone to enter before the prayers have begun. The muezzin’s call from the top of the minaret has grown louder, and I feel the urge to join the others in prayer.

The truck engine growls as it approaches the arch. Heads turn and then scramble to avoid being hit as the truck crashes straight through the gate, only slowing down on the other side. As it stops, I can see the frowns on people’s faces. They continue to push forward, but avoid drawing too close to the truck.

The Colonel barks something at the soldiers. In response, one of them unlocks the back of the truck and jumps down to the ground. The rest of them follow, while I remain tied to the seat. The soldiers move into the crowd, holding their rifles ready; I stare after them. They push forwards and head up the steps, black boots stamping down on the stone. The Colonel is at their head, and I see him wipe away sweat from his brow and mouth.

Then he steps inside.

I try and focus on the fact that I am not inside the mosque. It means I don’t have to witness what happens next.

I try and clutch at the words in my thoughts, but they swim out of reach.

A woman calls out from within the mosque. A moment later there are gunshots, followed by a series of screams from throughout the building. The people near the truck freeze. Further gunshots cause the crowd to erupt into chaos. The muezzin’s voice is cut off.

My chest is tight and my face is cold, despite the heat pressing into my face and making me itch. I close my eyes.

Afterwards, I bow, and stand, and turn at my prayer mat, but nothing comes to me.

Bismillā... Bismi... Bis...

My eye twitches, and the muscles in my legs pulse. I do not know why; I cannot stop it. I cannot concentrate on the words in my head any more than my four-year-old brother could maintain his attention when---

rough scratching cheek

I choke: no.

No.

The words of Allah are gone. All I have are memories – snippets of visions – of moments I want to forget. Flashes of dark words and darker sensations.

I lay my head on the mat and finally something appears.

Bismillā ... bismillāhi ... bismillāhi r-raḥmāni...

But the next part eludes me. I clench my eyes and white spots flare into life before them.

Then I hear the sound of footsteps outside the door to my room. The door creaks open.

I open my eyes and the Colonel stands before me.

Look at me, he says.
My eyes flicker, then meet his.
*Biṣmihī r-raḥmānī r-raḥīm.*
They are red, just like his face; the colour of the rambutan fruit at the start of season. This makes the wrinkles around his eyes stand out even more. They are always there now, whenever he makes me look at him.
*Al ḥamdu lillāhi rabbi l-ālāmin.*

We are outside again, in the courtyard behind the house. The orange evening sun peeks through the leaves on the trees, which flicker as a breeze passes through. As ever, a flock of hawk-eagles soars past overhead. I sometimes wonder what that would be like.

Soaring past overhead. Alive.

Free.

I know what happens to me now.

*Ar rahmānī r—*

This time, the pain burns more than ever before.

---

Memories of Wattle
by Jade Mitchell

Christmas is nearly here
Summer’s on its way
Decorations on a green pine tree
I see them every day

Family get-togethers
Driving in the heat
Excitement of early presents
And the lollies I’ll get to eat

Pack my bags for Queensland
Flying on the plane
Can’t wait to see my daddy
Or my little brother again

Another Christmas party
Full of faces I don’t know
Run around the yard
And pretend it’s full of snow

At my grandparents, Christmas day
Just the seven of us
No more lollies to make us hyper
No more frantic fuss
Rip off the wrapping paper
A gasp of pure surprise
Presents are the best
When they come from those you prize

I hate that rotten Christmas
The tears of pain it brings
Why did you leave me Daddy?
The pain inside still stings

Back at Daddy’s again
Peaceful nights of sleep
Then a new addition to my memories
Pictures I don’t want to keep

Christmas comes and goes
For many a happy time
I still smile and laugh with family
Sing songs and Christmas rhymes

He took me back to Grandma’s
In the middle of the night
I never understood
Why he and Robin had a fight

For you Christmas is the best
The best time of the year
And though I still enjoy it
I’d rather it disappear

The morning came anew
Like any morning I’d had before
Though this time it was different
Oh the shock fate had in store

They say that time heals wounds
But I’d like to let them know
Though it doesn’t hurt as much
It's there, hiding below

He left the world that night
After he tucked me into bed
The whisper of ‘I love you’
Echoes in my head

18/12/2007

I watched the coffin lowered
It was hard to understand
I’ll never see my daddy
Until I join the other land
It was in my humble abode.
Spring. Winter. Summer.
For the seasons, it did not matter.
It was never warm, it was never light.
That was when I gave up the fight.
To live on would be my death.
To die would be my lasting breath.

This Same Room
by Amy Bailey

It is the same room.

The sheets rise and fall with his laboured breaths. He is asleep; however, his face still shows pain. A furrowed forehead, a spasm near the mouth, the flit of eyes under thin lids. I check his vitals and morphine, then pause beside his bed. They always look like fledgling birds at the end. So vulnerable. I guess that is what they are, really. At least their souls.

His head looks small against the pillow. Sparse grey hair leaks out of the scalp, slumped on the pillow from the weight of it all. His wrinkles seem to muddle his features, drawing him deeper inside.

Did you look like this? Did you become small and fragile? So unlike the man I knew you to be? Were you shrunken by the enormity of it all?

I watch the man and measure my breath with his. His eyes flick open. Blue. So blue. The first real blue I have ever seen. They find my face. He is near. And alone.

Alone

I grab the chair beside his bed and sit down. I take his hand. His eyes stay locked on mine. His Adam’s apple slides up his throat. I grab the water from the bedside table, dip a cloth into the liquid, and pat it to his mouth. Gasping, wet fish lips.

Is this what it was like for you? Did a stranger hold your hand at the end?

His bony hand jerks, trying to reach behind him. A bible pokes out from under his pillow. I notice the gold crucifix, resting in the shallow dip of
his collarbone. I ease the book out. A silk page marker lies within the pages. I open it up and read:

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going.”

I place the bible on his chest and his arm cradles it like a child with a teddy bear.

He breathes.

*It was this room. This bed.*

He breathes.

*I was on my way.*

Was it like this for you?

You didn’t wait.

I disconnect the monitor and draw the sheet up. Push the chair against the wall. It is this same room. Always a room like this. It should be dark but instead everything is new and bright.

*Death-coloured glasses.*

I walk out into the ward hall, close the door, and sit behind the nurse’s desk. A man hurries up the hallway, glancing at room numbers. He has thin, brown hair that falls around his face and blue eyes.

He reaches the room, the door, and opens it.
Dearest James,

Nothing unusual to report on the home front, except we now have a cat. I’m not entirely certain how this happened, only that it has.

Two things: the first being that it wasn’t my idea; the second is, by necessity, explaining why “Me” is now “We”.

Her name is Sonia; the person, not the cat. Now that she has moved in with me I feel I should mention her. I met her about two months ago through a friend; he recommended her actually, to replace my troublesome cleaner. Yes, Brandy is no more. At least you won’t hear any more complaints about her dubious habits.

Sonia is intriguing. Her ability to bring order to the physical chaos that is my abode runs counterpoint to the shambles of her own existence. After years of physical and mental abuse, she finally left her husband; though he continued to stalk her every move. She told me this between the dishes and the vacuuming. I made her lunch and we talked. Not sure why I made her lunch. But she ate it and I listened.

Sonia’s stories of her mistreatment at the hands of her husband – and indeed of her entire past – had a profound effect on me. The more I got to know her, the worse the stories became. Although she appeared defiant against the litany of misfortunes her life had dealt her, I sensed something beneath that hardened surface that seemed forlorn. I wanted to be nice to her. I wanted to show her that not everyone was bad, especially me. Also, just perhaps, the professional loneliness I had cultivated over these many years had begun to grow stale. Whatever the reason, the outcome was that I invited her to move into the studio. Yes, I know, The Studio, my sanctuary, my sanity. Not meant for housing homeless housekeepers.

I suggested it to her out of the blue, surprising even myself. Instantly I regretted it, but her reaction was so heart-wrenchingly grateful that I couldn’t take it back. She moved in the very next day with her hatful of possessions. On the first night, I invited her up for dinner. She is quite the cook! I was breaking every personal rule by this stage, so it was no surprise that we became involved. “The unpublished author and the unloved housekeeper” I’ve seen worse titles in airport bookstores.

Eventually, I used the excuse of needing the studio for work to offer her the spare room next to mine. She has never slept there; she has, however, begun to personalise the space, bringing in curious knick-knacks to decorate it. She is making herself at home, nesting and now creating omnipresence through the agency of the cat.

I came home one afternoon to find it preening itself on my favourite chair, and felt myself go rigid. Sonia was upon me immediately cooing that it was such a poor thing, and it would keep her company during the long hours I spent working. She sat me down with a cup of tea, and told me how she found it at the animal shelter. Finding a stray cat at a shelter for stray cats is not one of the great discoveries of the new millennium, especially when it looked like a used toilet brush. Additionally, it was affected with the most bizarre gait: its back legs appearing slightly off-track as if channelling Groucho Marx.

She named it Champ! Champion of what, I’ll never know; existing against all odds, I suppose.

Champ certainly seemed pleased to have landed in such luxury. Sonia lavishes it with affection, presumably to ease the transition from its favourite bin to my favourite chair, and a louder purring I have never heard. Sonia told me that it was a repeat offender at the shelter and scheduled for destruction the day she found it. Not only is she neat, her timing is impeccable. Sonia and Champ share things in common: a waiflike appearance, a hard and unfair life, and my hospitality. All things aside, I am glad to be on that list.

On my morning walk to the letterbox, now accompanied by Champ, I felt content. I felt loved. I felt two rough and powerful hands around my neck. I was spun around to find myself nose to nose with an irate fellow, eyes dead coals in the furnace of his face. He was spitting accusations at me, all the while shaking me violently. His grip on my throat was like iron, and my eyes were threatening to burst free of the swelling pressure in my head. It was the ex-husband. My arms hung limply by my sides as he forced me towards the letterbox. I stepped back and straight down onto Champ – cowering bravely behind me – mashing his tail into the pavement. Champ let rip a horrifying shriek, and I did what anybody would do in such a situation: I lifted my leg with lightning reflex and, in doing so, caught my assailant directly in the groin with my knee. Instantly, his grip on me loosened and, with a surprised gush of sour breath, he doubled over and fell to the ground. I have a closely-held belief that the secret to a long life is knowing when it’s time to leave. That time had definitely arrived. I bolted for the nearest refuge: my car. When his fist smashed through the driver’s side window, it occurred to me, and not for the first time, that I should have bought the second-hand Volvo instead of the Datsun 180B.
Why is it that the key never fits straight into the ignition and the car never starts first time, in moments like these? With the Datsun approaching warp speed, I checked my rear-vision mirror to see the ex, standing unmoved and unconcerned about the blood streaming from his forearm. It only occurred to me, as I was making my statement at the local police station, that Sonia was home alone and possibly in danger. I cursed myself for my carelessness, but I confess that, in truth, I was more angry at her for bringing such a lunatic to my doorstep.

When I arrived home, he was gone. Sonia seemed as shocked as I was about the whole affair, saying that he must have followed her after she had gone home to get some things. I was furious. I certainly had a lot to say on this matter, but right then was the wrong time. Everything was wrong.

Do you know, James, that each person's interior workings are unique? That while we all appear relatively similar on the outside, the inner goings on, our cellular configuration and clusters of neural receptors in our brains, and the way they operate are individually exclusive, even more so than our fingerprint or DNA? I quietly told Sonia this, and that true to this idiom, her foolishness was likewise unmatched. I further informed her that while she may keep the surfaces of my kitchen spotless, the stains of her past were beginning to soil my, up until now, uncomplicated existence. Suffice it to say, I ate alone that evening.

While the constable on duty at the police station offered me his empty promise that we would not be bothered again by this man, I decided to leave nothing to chance and made a phone call; I am not without connections. The angry, stalking ex-husband has been informed that the best way to look after his knees, is to not pop in quite so much.

So exit chump, enter Champ. He has been mauled. After the prescribed two weeks of keeping him locked indoors, so as to acclimatise and settle apparently, we gave him his freedom. We felt like two jailers releasing a reformed inmate, revelling in our benevolence. All was rose-scented hope for the unpublished author and the unloved housekeeper.

Champ had become so gracious in his moods that even I was included in his smooching. One afternoon, Champ did not return from his daily outing. Did not come for his dinner and that night, nothing. Sonia fretted, 'Poor thing' and I frowned, 'How DARE he!' When he finally returned to the house, he had lost all of his new found confidence; a used toilet brush once again, albeit now a well-fed one. It seems the feral cats from the adjoining wilds took a disliking to Champ's adventuring and tore a few strips from him. I'm afraid that I became so riled at Sonia's overreaction that we had a huge argument; our first real shouting match, after which she dealt me the killing blow of a teary retreat behind a slammed door. She refused to talk to me, and the stupid cat is back preening itself on my chair.

Amid scuddy days of snuffing cloud and icy rain, a sombre, non-weather related mood had fallen over the house. It started after a late and drunken evening during which Sonia revealed her most shocking story to date, one she had only ever whispered in prayer, bent below God in shame and despair. Beyond the physical abuse and mental anguish visited upon her so frequently by her estranged husband; the cruellest blow of all was the forced termination of her unborn baby. She was inconsolable as she dragged her tale out, doused in her sobbing and rending. She kept repeating that it wasn't his decision to make, that he had no right. I agreed. Yet the thing was done regardless. I should have held her, should have said that it was okay, it wasn't her fault. But all I wanted to ask her was, 'Why did you do it, then?' Which would have sounded the same as 'It's not okay, it is your fault.' So I said nothing, I just watched her cry. Since then, a shadow has fallen over our moments. Our togetherness has descended into awkward silences that need to be wriggled free from. I should have responded in some other way, or else she is embarrassed at having told me such a personal secret. Perhaps she has changed her mind about many things. Maybe we both have.

Champ has developed a nasty habit, or rather revealed one he had all along. Twice now, we have woken to an animal sacrifice, colourfully displayed on the front porch, right where we take breakfast; small bush marsupials, with barely any parts missing to suggest the motive of a midnight snack. Some kind of instinct inherent in all felines I suppose, although I don't know what its sudden prevalence might mean. I am interested enough, I think, in the well-being of Sonia's moggie, but not to the extent of shelling out for a pet psychologist. Things are still not cosy on the home front. Sonia stays in her room at night and speaks little during the day. It took years for my marriage to reach this level of intimacy. On top of all this, it's your birthday.

Happy Birthday, son. And this year more than ever, as eighteen is the mark of manhood. I guess because now you are given the legal keys to the excesses and responsibilities of adulthood. A heady mix! And though, as always, I know not if you will ever receive this letter, I do know the cheque I send your mother will be drawn down, as always (the only proof I have that either of you exist at all) and hopefully she will pass on what little she knows of you. But you deserve to know why I have been absent throughout your life. I can only assume that you know about me, although anything at all could be the case.

When I met your mother, I was separated from my wife. We had a fabulous romance, your mother and I, for a short time, during which she became pregnant with you. Unfortunately, I found out about this too late as I had already broken things off with
her and returned to my wife, determined to give my marriage another try. In the end I lost everything, as it goes with these things. But never having known you is the deepest hurt of all. I never did have any other children; just you, and as we have never met, I suppose this is a dismal failure on my behalf. I could have tracked you down; entertained the idea many times, just to lay eyes upon you. But I have respected your mother’s wishes and stayed away. I have been religiously keeping a journal since the day you were born and one day I hope that you may read it and come to know your father, and how sorry I am about everything.

Love, Dad

P.S.
Sonia is gone. She left Champ. Yesterday he had kittens; five of the mewling little beasts under my back steps. I stood there looking at them this morning, telephone in one hand, shovel in the other, poised for action. What to do? Use the phone and have them taken away? Or bring down the shovel, hard; once, twice, and be done with it all for good? Perhaps the second option is the tidier of the two. Unfinished business tends to come back to haunt you.

P.P.S.
I’ve gone with a third option. He’s no longer called Champ, she’s called Sonia. I don’t suppose you’d like a kitten for your birthday?

Love, Dad

Wavering
by Mark Gerrett

Amazing how my body is perfectly horizontal to the surface. My feet, first sinking, then stabilising; now rising up, level with my head. I have stopped here, levitating on the invisible current. This must be my perfect depth.

My last breath must have decided to travel evenly throughout my entire body...it was a memorable breath. Allowing the slow immersion of my chest into the water felt right. Drawing that slow, sweet breath. Feeling only the slightest melancholy, like leaving a loved one behind. After a time, it became quiet, and there was a burning moment of panic. That was expected. Odd, it didn’t last long. Now there is only calm and the watery echo of some creature tick-click-ticking, somewhere. Why, I wonder? Because it wants to. That seems to be the one unquantifiable variable; an unavoidable fraction (fact? fiction? fracture?)...

Of all my memories, it’s a science lesson that stands forth in my mind. The teacher explaining why Albert died. Albert, the fictitious victim of carbon monoxide poisoning, representing, in their absence supposedly, all other victims. Albert died because his respiratory system became flooded with carbon monoxide (CO). CO wanted to become carbon dioxide (CO2), so it stole all the oxygen atoms it needed from Albert’s body. Albert died of oxygen starvation then. Game over. When asked why CO wants to become CO2, the teacher just stared blankly. ‘Because it wants to.’ Simple as that.

It was possibly the least scientific explanation ever given. There was no getting away from it, though. It just wanted to. Atoms have a will? Yes, of course. People, too, have a will, just like atoms. We exist; a small part of a much larger system. We succumb to external influences. Heat. Cold. Pressure. Responding at a sub-atomic level because we have no
choice. Because we are at the command of unknown forces. Intricate grand schemes. Or chaos. It changes us, but not our inherent natures, which are no more planned or asked for than that of atoms. CO wants to become CO2. Some people want to become rock-stars or teachers. Or water. Water is my choice. H2O. Because I want to. Straight ahead, the blue sky is yawning; my face reflecting it, beatific; adorned in tranquility, more beautiful than in all the years draped with trouble. Only the sky will see it. The wavering heaven with its two white clouds belly-dancing before me, undulating through the ripples on the bright surface of the lake. It is like a segue from a ’70s film, shifting forward from a flashback of a dream. Such a perfect, cheerful, sunny day. No need to breathe. This must be right. My neck is constricting. A last ditch effort to scare me, awaken my primal instincts, encourage me to survive. It is out-voted. Things are growing dark all of a sudden.

Now brilliantly, unbelievably, bright.

The Browns brothers’ sports centre still smelled like sweat and the lingering odour of chlorine. Weaver brown, one of the aforementioned brothers, stood across from me. perspiration clung to his brow, his nose and even his earlobes. he was waiting, an Untitled message flashing in his eyes. what was it? what was he trying to say?

a sigh drifted across the room. This Same Room that we had stood in so many years – 14? 15? – ago. our pact to remember, broken Between Us. our Disconnection had never been so palpable. our friendship twisted and tainted and i knew that this time, this time i would have to pay The Price.

he shifted again and i saw the flex of easy muscle, of an action done so many times it was second nature. he had gone on to become a star. a tennis player. The Tennis Player. while i had been left behind to become… become what? an echo of this room? a faded memory of what used to be? an Omission of something essential leaving me incomplete. yet, i was not the one Wavering. this was no longer a match of skill, but rather a Game of Chance. his foot shifted, the ball arched up into the air, and his racket came swinging down.

in the resounding crash that followed – shattered glass and broken ply boards – came a resentful yowl. angry and snarling, the sound sparked out of the corners of the room where the yellow ball had spun off to. a slim, scraggy figure ghosted across the court. a grey shadow with flashing yellow eyes. a Moggie.

the cat turned, one ear half eaten away, glaring at those who had disturbed his home, his refuge. his eyes shimmered like Dust Motes in Sunbeams, little specks of electricity in the twilight of his life. this creature

The Purpose of Words
by Jade Mitchell

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was not a cat, but a survivor, a Warheart, left behind in a world that had abandoned it. abandoned me.

here i was, faced with the mirror image of myself and somehow this filthy cat struck a spark of something like hope.

looking across at mr tennis prince, rummaging through the rubbish to retrieve the ball, ignoring the cat, much as he had ignored me the past fifteen years. i thought that maybe desolation wasn’t so bad. after all, this mangy creature seemed to be doing okay.

this is not a Story in Completion, but rather a swirl of emotions brought to you by a despondent hand. take from it what you will. take curiosity, anger, sadness, anything. everything. take the world. take the moon. just take something.

for that is the purpose of words.

A Story in Completion
by David Blake

I dance amongst the incandescence of neither here or there and visit the sweet melodies of neuron symphonies and static synaptic fare. I ride wave upon wave of phantasm; glory be to God and his Kingdom of chemicals that I bathe within. Forgotten is my mind and my pain. I know she is here; she left an imprint of her love for me to find. The texture of a blooming cherry blossom, the scent of comfort and desire. Never will I leave here, not now, not again, not ever. Now that I am at peace, her amber hands lull me to sleep, her quartz figure, another prize my mantle keeps.

***

He said his name was Vengeance.
My tears fell onto the gritted boards below as the crackling lines above sang and danced.
A tune punctured with rim-shot and brass stabs as the train passed underneath; in its wake it stole my screams and ransomed them to the wind.

I thought I heard him chuckle. Perhaps I saw a gold tooth creeping behind his thin lips? There was a sparkle behind his eyes as I fell. I felt warm, at peace as I lay on my side, hugged by a comforting light. Warm refractions upon the growing ocean spread across my vision, a red curtain drawn between scenes, the last act in this dismal career and I thanked him.

***

I took my keys and wallet and left the house. I closed the door behind and ran down the steps.
The footpath was reminiscent of the bloated jacket from the man sleeping across the doorway I had once passed; it was a grit and
dust-ridden flannelette shirt, checkered and red, rutted by gnarly roots, insulated with newspapers, and perfumed by a thick, moist, warm, well-worn stench. I heard a crack of thunder, and checked my watch. It would take five minutes to reach the station. In ten I could have returned home to grab an umbrella, but I had little time left and continued along my way; another hasty decision that was as terrifying as it was unavoidable.

I ran to the station. It wasn’t a long run, almost flat, but I was wearing a suit; a hired suit tailored for the occasion. With long strides I danced between explosions of heavy raindrops. I did my best to avoid the downpour; another spear in my side. No longer did I have the fortitude of leniency. I could not be late.

The rain steamed off the road with a bouncing sizzle. That sweet apple smell of autumn afternoons, smeared with grease and mud and turmoil. I turned the last corner and with renewed purpose I headed for the footbridge and another chance at life.

‘Oh my God! Help! Help!’
‘Is he still with us? For God’s sake, call an ambulance!’

***

The shower was warm and left the bathroom scented of sea salt and apricots, diffused within lithe clouds of steam. My hair carefully washed through and conditioned. My teeth brushed. My face shaved. I fixed my tie in the mirror, and arranged my borrowed cufflinks. That errant strand of hair, I pushed back behind my moulded plastic ear. As I ensured I was presentable, I recited the words that had been with me for so long: ‘I am a survivor, I am here, I am alive.’

‘Apply pressure on the wounds!’
‘Oh my God...so much...so much blood.’

I walk from the bedroom to the bathroom in a towel. Light slices through the gap in the window curtain onto the linoleum floor. The studio is small, a converted three star hotel in fact. Enough room for a fridge, a microwave, and single bed. I start the shower. Tears fall over my neck and shoulders, a salty rain that poisons my dreams with fear; memories like prison tattoos, painful and permanent.

‘I don’t feel a pulse! Is anyone a doctor? Help for God’s sake!’
‘Did anyone see what happened?’
‘Someone call the police!’

The water from the kitchen sink runs cold and I top up my coffee. Black, no sugar. I sit at the kitchen table, a notepad by my side. The phone call was brief but polite. Tomorrow, six pm.

A crowded commute to be sure, but I was invested in the call back. I sip warmth onto my palate, like copper and cream.

‘Oh, thank God...he, he fell...he’s bleeding?’
‘It’s okay, miss, you’ve done fine. Please wait over there, the police will need a statement.’
‘Everyone please, get back, get back!’
‘Clear a path! ...Sir! Can you hear me?’

I cower in the corner, my back to the tiled wall. I’m hunched into a ball; one eye bruised closed, the other cast down as I track a wispy, red spiral spilling from within, chasing the seams of grout. My shame and weakness falling through the event horizon of the hole in the floor; not for the first time do I question fate. Why do I survive, why am I alive, why am I here?’

***

I rubbed my wrists, the cuffs cut hard, yet not as hard as I would have liked. First night under watch, max security. No laces in my shoes, no personal effects, no hair bands, no gum, no sheets or toilet or window. Bare concrete and cameras on the wall. I am terrified. I am numb.

‘Get these people out of here!’
‘No sign of spinal trauma, puncture wounds to his neck and throat...he’s right to move.’
‘Get him on the paddle, we need to get him to ER.’

My father, my mother. Their ashen faces not able to meet my pleading, guilty stare. They weep as I’m led from the stall, hands behind my back. Glass in my throat.

His family. They leer and shout, weighted with grief, flanked by barristers. My once friend, my colleague. His fiancé tells me to burn in Hell. I see his snarled features, his broken body. I smell the shit in his pants and the caramelised liqueur bubbling on his skin. His mauve eyes bleed at me.

‘One, two, three. Lift.’
‘Gently, gently now. Quick, quick, he doesn’t have long.’
'Prep the de-fib, stat.'

Birds sing in a hiss. I feel a jolt. I am cold. A brisk wind dances across my face as the universe expands about me in dazzling blues and reds. Another jolt, and then another. A loving hug about my neck and sweet words in my ear. Happiness washes through me as I fall through the darkness and the crescendo of bird song fades away to black.

'Stay with us!'
'C'mon, fight dammit!'
'Clear!'

***

Together we run out onto the field, all the neighbourhood kids kick the ball and we weave and run and fall and dodge. I go in for a tackle and miss. My bare shin contacts that of little Johnny Roberts, and we both go down with a crunch. His older brother approaches and stands over me, his shadow cast over my tear filled face. As I roll on to my back to get up, I see a blur of a fist and feel the full force of anger from a brother protecting his own. Once again, I see fireworks.

'Clear!'

The subtle song of birds has now become the warbling shriek of a child with a broken nose. There are new shapes buzzing around me – prodding at my flesh – ripping at my clothes; all the while laughing, a hideous carousel of hacking laughter, careless taunting, showers of warm spit and ridicule. Tall and lanky, yet my cries were still high and pitched. They hold me down, and take my pants.

'Lucas pooed his pants and screams like a girl!'
'Lucas the loser!'

I ask them to stop but they don't. I plead with them. I grovel. It's no use, helpless and gagged I feel shame sliding and cutting my throat. I find the strength to breathe, yet it's not my own. Deep measured breaths despite the fear of paralysis of my mind and body.

'Compress! One, two, three, four...'

***

Falling forward, my face impacts the windshield.

...she slaps my face hard yet the welt hurts less than the indignation in her eyes.

A dull nylon blade flays my shoulder and chest, the belt curls flesh and skin.

...a warm knife in frozen butter, poached eggs atop crusty bread, salmon and dill. A champagne breakfast for a lovers' day.

The heat sears my left arm and flank; I cough and try to scream, but my lungs fail me.

...two boys hold me down as Johnny and his brother push dirt into my mouth.

With a grinding shrill, the roof is peeled from the car. A dozen men or more look on in horror.

***

I heard a hiss as I drew breath, and a loud popping and gurgling as I exhaled. The air was thick with familiar smells: burning rubber and bacon. The reality of the situation forced its way into my nostrils and induced a near blinding panic attack. Scratching and tearing at my restraints, I claw and grasp and whimper and scream. And scream. And scream.

The fire was a mottled, sooty smudge in my eyes. The invisible gnashing teeth of frozen gargoyles chomped at my flesh and bone. Acutely aware that my hell was shared by another presence, a sputtering, wheezing, wet groan to my left when I turned my head slowly. The taunts were all that came into focus...

'Lucas pukas, covered in piss and mucus ... Lucas pukas eat shit you fat dufus.'

'No way! Never would I date you – freak!'

'You? You want to come home with me? ...Fuck no, fuck off loser!'

'Lucas, I hate you. I can't ever forgive you. You've destroyed your life and mine. Stay the fuck away from me!'
My career is as stunted and nutrient-deficient as my desk is cramped and forgotten. I choke on mountainous piles; manila folders within binders within boxes within trays. My hours climb weekly, only to have my team diminish by the day. My boss is yelling at the back of my head. I curse my inability to stand up and show my work is worthy of more than blind, arrogant abuse.

I shake at the violence of it all, internalised anger and hate; castrated.

I pack my frustrations and with Daniel, my one surviving team member, we find our usual place at the local. The amber liquid soothes my aching head. Fermented bubbles of happiness buoy my soul. Finally at peace with friends: Jack and Jim and Amber and the dark Irishman. And now Daniel. We stay for dinner and connect. We linger in the camaraderie.

"fuck work, fuck the boss, fuck the clients and their self-righteous assumptions!" We share our distaste of office politics over gin and lime; we bandy ideas of a new world order, with us at the helm as we tour Barbados, Leningrad, Mexico, and Tennessee. We find humour in each other's jokes; we agree our significant others should meet.

Last drinks are called but we're full from our meals. We bid our farewells and promise to return. Daniel can't drive home to his fiancé in this state, I offer my couch. My wife is away and I live only a few minutes up the road.

I'm jovial and feel fine.

All will be fine.

***

All is now fine.

---

End
by Jade Dor

Oh, hello again.

Important.

That is what you are to me, you know that right? Well, now you do. I hope that it makes you happy. You've sure made me feel great just by reading me. So, what do you think? By now, you should have explored every inch of my body, from cover to back; and I'm really glad that you have. I told you that you would enjoy it.

Now you understand where I was coming from when we first met, don't you? Why I love my family so much, and why I dislike airports and the colour brown. With your help, I have discovered my purpose in life. And without you, I wouldn't have one. You have no idea how much that means to me.

So, what comes next? Hopefully, next year, Intense, Kaleidoscope, you, and I can all make friends with the new anthology that the next group of students will create. I wonder what it will be called... Well, I guess I'll just have to stick around to find out. What about you? Now that you've read me, will you read my friends too? I sure do hope so. But, before you read anything else, go entertain your family and friends with me so they can discover my purpose. After all, I am good at it.
Fifteen stories. Ten authors. Flick through the pages and see the world. See it not in black and white, but in the fractured shards of colour and grey, swirling in impossible patterns. The world is not always how we perceive, and we are not always as whole as we believe. No matter where you are or how you are, there is something inside that will resonate – if you let it. So take a look, and let us speak to you from our fractured place among these pages.