SHOWCASE aims to display the best student writing from our creative writing program courses. The University of the Sunshine Coast offers Creative Writing as an undergraduate minor, a major and now a program in its own right, as well as a new Masters of Creative Writing Program. Again, we had a record number of students taking our classes, and innovative work coming out of each course. This ninth edition showcases a cross-section of stories from CMN116: Introduction to Creative Writing; CMN238: Paperback Hero; CMN246: Creative Writing for Children and Young Adults; and CMN266: Creativity and Literature - Chaucer to the Romantics.

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Future Issues: Submissions for the next edition of SHOWCASE will be selected from the best stories of USC Creative Writing courses in Semester 2, 2016
CMN116: Introduction to Creative Writing

As the foundation course for the Creative Writing Program at USC, CMN116 promotes students to comprehend, appreciate and construct the short story as a concise narrative form. The following stories exemplify the course’s core objectives by embodying the short story’s potential for innovation.
**Scar Tissue** | Nikki Stephens

*Court-ordered therapy.*

Alison shuddered, toothbrush mid-air, as the magistrate’s words repeated on her like last night’s beer and takeaway. She squeezed her eyes shut as the hangover hissed good morning to her insides.

The familiar nausea roiled through her stomach. Alison abandoned her toothbrush and bent over the toilet. At 35, she was supposed to be throwing up from morning sickness, not an excess of Carlton Draught, but here she was regardless.

Alison slumped on the floor until the morning sunlight no longer ambushed the east-facing bathroom window. From where she rested she could see the display on the alarm clock in her bedroom. 8:17am. She was going to be late again.

Clutching the towel rail for support, she pulled herself into a twisted genuflect and rose to her feet. Her throat burned as she fumbled in the medicine cabinet for codeine. She swallowed two pills along with her anti-depressant, and thought of last night’s excommunicated dinner. She imagined the northbound Pad Thai waving a cheery greeting to the southbound Harry and Sally, somewhere in the region of her oesophagus.

Harry and Sally were the names Alison gave to her anxiety and shame. She cringed at the notion, but her psychologist suggested she try to visualise her emotions as separate entities. At their last session, Alison imagined Harry and Sally as slugs creeping down her gullet on a mission to siphon the air from her lungs, like cats stealing the breaths of babes in old wives’ tales. She wanted to make a good impression for the sake of her probation report, but the idea only made her wonder from what kind of university Sarah had received her qualifications. Harry and Sally were persistent fuckers.

She left the bathroom and dressed in her old work clothes that had gone largely unworn these last three months. She needed to buy new clothes, but she sure as shit was not about to step foot in her local shopping centre. God knows who she might run into there.
As she entered the kitchen, Alison ignored the empty bottles in the sink, and made a cup of instant coffee. She drained the mug and plugged in her earphones, readying herself to step outside. She walked out the front door, past her car in the driveway, and headed to the nearest bus stop.

Alison winced as the waistband of her skirt dug into her flesh, and shifted in the bus seat. She checked the time on her phone for the third time in ten minutes. 8:43am. She watched the streets of her suburb pass by, part of the orange brick urban sprawl that infested the greater Brisbane area during the 1970s, and shifted her focus to briefly regard her reflection in the smeary bus window. The hangover combined with high summer did her no favours; her skin was booze-flushed, her hair February-limp. Her purse brimmed with cosmetic paraphernalia, but Alison’s hands remained prone in her lap, wrapped around her phone in a Vulcan-like death grip.

A pink wad of gum clung to the back of the seat in front. She studied every nook and cranny, and tried to practice her breathing exercises. A grounding technique, Sarah had called it. Pointless bullshit, was Alison’s considered opinion.

Ten laborious breaths later, Alison swore silently. It wasn’t a Xanax for Christ’s sake, it wasn’t even a beer. It was just a piece of gum.

The beer last night. Alison knew it was a risk, a big one, but figured the odds of Peter stopping by for a surprise urine test at two o’clock in the morning were relatively slim. She narrowed her eyes and lifted her chin as she thought of her Probation Officer in that cramped, grey interview room, hunched over his laptop with the cracked cover. On her first visit (induction, he’d called it, as though she was starting a new job), he made the consequences of breaching the ‘abstain from alcohol’ condition on her Probation Order pretty clear. Still, the risk was worth it for the odd beer.

Thankful for her dark sunglasses and earphones, and cursing her seatmate for his coffee breath, Alison considered her recent discovery in therapy; that she’d never learnt how to breathe properly. Too shallow. Nothing like the long, deep breaths on late night Pilates machine commercials, the holy grail in quality breathing. Now it was part of her spreadsheet of crimes, misdemeanours and
personal flaws. ‘Shitty breather.’ Right above ‘terrible launderer’, assuming the list was alphabetical. She could consult her mother later (Mum being the completist in the family) for A through R and U through Z.

Alison imagined herself flipping off her fellow passengers as she climbed off the bus two blocks from Sarah’s office. She walked past the ‘For Lease’ signs and tried to ignore her reflection in the empty storefronts; her white blouse and grey skirt revealed sweat patterns worthy of a Rorschach inkblot test. Colour prickled her cheeks as the guy in the Nickelback T-shirt leant against the door of the hock shop, grinned at her and lit a cigarette.

Workmen jackhammered the bitumen outside Sarah’s office. Her hangover thundering despite the painkillers, Alison walked into the foyer. She balanced her hands on the timber veneer wall-panelling and ascended the stairs, careful not to trip on the frayed carpet. Sarah was in the waiting room, talking to a colleague.

9:11am.

‘Alison, you’re here. Come on through.’

‘Sorry I’m late’. A needle of sweat ran down the back of Alison’s right thigh as she followed Sarah into her office. She sat on the chair opposite Sarah’s, and felt the seat cushion flatten beneath her weight.

‘Hi Alison. First of all, sorry for the noise, they’re finally fixing those bloody potholes. How have you been?’

‘Uh, fine. I’ve been fine. Trying to keep busy, you know.’

‘Glad to hear it. I looked over my notes from our session last week. We talked about how you think you’ve disappointed your parents. “Let them down”, you said.’

‘Yep.’

‘Have you discussed your feelings with them since we last spoke?’

‘My sister’s pregnant. They’re so excited about being grandparents, and we can’t really have a deep face to face about it, with them living in Victoria and me here. I just don’t see the point in bummimg them out long distance.’

‘Don’t underestimate how much a parent can handle, even from far away. Your sister’s pregnancy is exciting news, is it her first?’

You don’t know my mother. ‘Yes, it’s her first.’
‘Are you looking forward to being an aunty?’

Alison looked out Sarah’s window, at the bright sky, towards the clouds gathering on the horizon. ‘Yes, though I don’t know if I’ll be any good at it.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘My sister and I aren’t that close, and I’m not much of a role model.’

Sarah smiled. ‘Alison, shame has already taken so much from you, don’t let it take the joy of a new baby as well. Maybe this is a chance to connect with your sister?’

Alison swallowed hard. ‘Maybe. I don’t have much experience with babies.’

‘One thing I can tell you for sure, a baby knows nothing of the past, and doesn’t care. All you need to do is love it.’

‘I’ll try, I really will.’

Sarah nodded. ‘Good. Look, before we get any further, I want to remind you that I need to write a progress report for Peter on how you’re going in counselling.’

Alison swallowed again. ‘I remember. What do you think it will say?’

‘I’m not sure yet. What do you think it should say?’

‘Well, my probation requirements say I have to engage in counselling. I’m doing that aren’t I?’ Alison waited for Sarah to respond.

Sarah stood up and poured herself a glass of water before sitting back down.

‘We still haven’t talked about what happened, about why you’re here in the first place. I would like to hear more from you regarding that.’

Alison stared at the door. She turned back to Sarah and considered the older woman’s choice in footwear. She’d seen the same pair of shoes on sale at Chemist Warehouse. Such a polite, unobtrusive choice.

‘Alison?’

‘I thought we could just keep talking about my anxiety. My doctor won’t prescribe benzos.’ Alison rubbed her stomach. She could feel Harry and Sally whooping it up in there, having a grand old time. Eating sandwiches and faking orgasms. ‘Didn’t Peter send you all the court documents?’

‘Yes, I’ve read the official version. I want to hear your side.’
Can’t you just fill in your forms and tell Peter I’m fine? And leave me the fuck alone?

Alison rushed out a long, tense breath. ‘I was drunk the night of the accident so that’s why the alcohol condition is on my probation order. It’s not like I was an alcoholic though, and I haven’t had a drink since...’ She trailed off. ‘...I just want to move on and I feel like this court order is stopping me. Every time I try to talk about that night, I have a panic attack and I can’t breathe.’

‘Okay. Take your time, I’m here with you. Try those breathing exercises we talked about.’

Alison watched the clock and inhaled and exhaled ten times through gritted teeth. ‘I was drunk and got into a car accident.’

Sarah waited for Alison to continue.

‘The other driver broke his arm. He’s fine now though. I lost my job, my parents were devastated, and my friends barely--.’ Warmth spread through Alison’s upper abdomen and her ribcage suddenly felt too small for her lungs. She moved forward in her seat.

‘Alison, you --’

‘I need to go to the bathroom.’

‘You know where it is?’

Her hand over her mouth, Alison stood up and rushed towards the door. She knew she wasn’t going to make it, and there it was. All over those polite shoes.

Everything went black.

Strung out in heaven’s high. Hitting an all-time low.

The music was the first thing Alison noticed. She was happy. She’d always found David Bowie soothing. Not to mention relatable. The song ended and a voice shouted about discount carpets like it was Armageddon. The radio. Okay. The light was the second thing she noticed. It was bright. Even brighter than the sunlight outside, and shining right into her eyes.

‘No, don’t try and sit up. You’re okay. You’re in an ambulance.’

What in the fucking fuck.

‘Can you hear me? You’re in an ambulance.’
'What happened?'
'You vomited, then fell and hit your head.'
'I...must have a stomach flu. Is my head okay?'
The paramedic was a young man, Pakistani. Late 20s maybe. He looked down at her, quiet for a moment.
Alison winced. ‘The lady in the office, did you speak to her?’
‘Yes, she was very worried about you, we’ll let her know you’re okay. Do you want to call anyone?’
‘No. Is my head hurt?’
‘You have a bump on your forehead but it doesn’t look too bad. They’ll run some tests, just in case. You were in and out of consciousness for a few minutes. Do you remember?’
Alison closed her eyes. *Well, I’m screwed then.* ‘No, I don’t remember, it was just black.’ *It was nice.* ‘What kind of tests?’
‘Just the usual. Blood tests, maybe an X-ray. Nothing to worry about.’
She didn’t respond. She lay still and thought of blood alcohol levels, of Sarah’s vomited-on shoes. She thought of her parents. She thought of her sister and of the future niece or nephew in her belly. She thought of the bottle shop two blocks from her house. The pills in her medicine cabinet.

The paramedic turned away and busied himself with his equipment.

The doctor told her it was a minor injury; she would be discharged in a few hours once the test results were back. She should go home and stay in bed. *That won’t be a problem, Doc.*

The flimsy curtain that separated Alison from other patients did nothing to block the noise and chaos of the emergency room. Alison climbed out of the bed and asked the nurse for directions to the bathroom.

Once there, she stood in front of the mirror and examined the lump on her forehead, tender and swollen. The door opened. It was another patient, a woman maybe a little older than Alison. Alison glanced at her, just long enough to notice burn scars, and turned towards one of the private stalls.

‘Rough day?’
Alison blinked. ‘Yeah.’ She nodded and reached towards the toilet door.

The other woman chuckled. ‘Me too. Aren’t they all though.’

It sounded rhetorical so Alison didn’t answer. She took a second glance, still standing outside the stall. The woman had blue eyes, downturned at the corners.

‘Looks like you had a fall.’

‘Yeah.’ But instead of nodding again, Alison shook her head.

‘You alright, honey?’

Alison opened her mouth, tried to speak, but her head spun and her feet felt like butter. Something was giving way inside.

‘Okay, it’s okay, I got you.’ The stranger wrapped her arm around Alison’s waist and lowered her to the floor. She sat beside her and lifted Alison’s head gently to her lap. ‘I’ll call a nurse.’

‘No, no, please don’t. I just need a moment.’ Alison realised it had been weeks since she’d had human contact beyond bumping into weirdos on the bus.

‘You have a head injury.’

‘It’s nothing. Really. See, I can get up.’ Alison lifted her head slowly and sat upright, resting her back on the wall and her side against the stranger’s shoulder.

For the second time that day, Alison slumped on a bathroom floor. This time though, someone slumped beside her.

‘Jo.’ The woman beside her reached out her hand.

‘Hi Jo. I’m Alison. I’m sorry, I’m so embarrassed.’

‘Ha, don’t worry. I’ve made a few lasting impressions in my time too.’ She pointed to the scars on her face.

‘If you don’t mind me asking, what happened?’ It was a personal question, but sitting like this felt so intimate and warm, despite the cold floor tiles.

Jo looked directly at Alison. ‘I fell asleep with candles burning one night after too much bourbon. The house caught on fire.’

‘Oh shit, I’m so sorry.’

‘It’s okay. It was ten years ago. I got off better than my daughter.’

Silence stretched between them.

‘What happened to –’

‘She lasted a few months in intensive care.’
The silence stretched further.

That must have been...I can’t imagine. I don’t know what to say.’ Alison was surprised by her own hand, reaching out to take Jo’s. ‘How do you...why do you keep going?’

Jo shrugged. ‘I’m still working on it. I’ll never be a cheerleader, but I have moments. I see Sophie everywhere. I talk about her as often as I can.’ She drew her knees to her chin. ‘It hurts like hell of course, but it makes me feel closer to her. Like my scars. You should have seen them after the fire. Red-raw. Then pink for a long time while they were healing. They’re still there, but they’ve faded. Now they’re just a part of me. Like Sophie.’ Jo touched her cheek and tilted her head back toward the ceiling. ‘Anyway. I sound like a bullshit self-help book, but that’s how I keep going.’

They sat together in silence on the floor. Harry and Sally were still and quiet. ‘Come on, let’s get you up. We’re lucky no-one else walked in, we must look ridiculous.’

Alison nodded. She stood with Jo’s help, and turned to regard their reflection. In a different time, they might have stood in front of a nightclub bathroom mirror, drunk, bonding over lipstick and shitty boyfriends. In a different time. Before the scar tissue.

Back in the emergency room, Alison thanked Jo and hugged her goodbye. The light was blinding, but she was glad for it. She returned to her bed to find the doctor doing rounds, ready to sign her discharge papers. Her tests showed no injury. She didn’t ask if Sarah or Peter would see the results.

Outside, Alison headed to the bus interchange. On the way, she called Sarah’s office and made another appointment with the receptionist for tomorrow.

The bus pulled over, two stops before Alison’s. Two young men, probably uni students, climbed on board. Alison looked down the street towards the brightly lit Dan Murphy’s. She closed her eyes and thought of pink, healing skin.

For tonight at least, she would stay on board the bus.

***
I wrote 'Scar Tissue' in an attempt to explore the theme of being unable to escape the past, and the pain of learning to live with it. I used to work in mental health, and have been on both the giving and the receiving end of therapy. I know how frustrating it feels when nothing seems to be working, and the surprise and gratitude when help comes from the most unlikely of sources.

* 

I have always loved reading, probably way too much – there’s a fine line between bookish introvert and complete hermit. (I try to strike a balance, though I often fail.) I moved to the Sunshine Coast from Brisbane nearly four years ago, for a fresh start and to be closer to family. I left my former career behind without really knowing what to do next, but I’m hoping it has at least something to do with the written word. Fingers crossed.
A bleached blonde with savage black roots walks in. It’s early. Just after daybreak. She’s been out, trying to pick up some business from the last of the revellers, hoping to cash in on their disappointment, the night that failed to deliver, the loneliness, the coming down.

A red lurex dress hangs from her coat-hanger shoulders, not quite covering goose-fleshed bum cheeks stained blue with cold. A gold chain belt drips from the bones of her hips. Skeletal legs balance on impossibly high heels – clear plastic with silver trim, lots of straps. She wears the caved-in features of the drug-addicted: excavated cheeks hold up bulging eyes, bruised purple underneath, pupils pin-pricked; teeth protrude, no flesh to house them.


The café is narrow. Pine tables and chairs. Red checked tablecloths. Mirror tiles. A fake fireplace, and hanging above it, an aged print of Mary, sacred heart and halo fading. An Asian girl smiles while she grinds coffee beans. I linger over my second cup.

At the rear, booths hide in the darkness. No lights back there. The junkies prefer it that way. A place to nod off in peace. And the others - the pimps, the dealers, the queers, the freaks, the cons, the mad, the cross-dressers - Cross-dwellers.

A waif girl enters. No shoes. A bed sheet around her shoulders. Short, straggly brown hair. Wispy. She seems to drift, to glide, across the floor. Ethereal. She tries to push open the rear door with a skinny shoulder.

A Chinese cook appears. Old, weathered, but still straight-backed. He stops her.

"No, no come in here." He places his body between the girl and the door.


He stands solid. Dented silver tongs in his hands.

"Pleeeaaaasse."
“You no come in.” He raises the tongs. Threatening.

"Fuck you," she spits. And then she’s gone. Flapping sheet in her wake.

Tolerance is low around here. There's not enough padding to be nice. No margin. No room left at the Inn. It’s razor’s edge. All the way.

I finish my coffee, realise I need to pee. I would normally go home. I’m particular about toilets at the Cross. But all of a sudden. The need. It’s urgent.

I get up. I have to go. Out back.

I walk through the door into a cluttered, ancient kitchen. Over cracked linoleum. Past peeling paint and once-silver shelves. Pots shoot steam, frying pans spit fat, flames lick at blackened gas hot plates.

"Toilet?" I ask the back, bent over frying bacon.

His head moves. A brief blink-and-you’ll-miss-it tilt. Towards the back of the kitchen. I scrape between him and the shelves stacked high with pots, pans, chipped white crockery, rotting cardboard boxes.

I open a grubby white door, step into a dim corridor. I am confused for a moment. My eyes focus. Get used to the dark. There. To the left. At the end of the corridor. A door with a male/female sign. I start towards it. Soft padding feet on bare carpet. The door’s ajar. I push it, see the bum of a man peeing into the toilet.

"Sorry." I back away. Quickly. Retreat down the corridor. Take a left turn. And another one. Desperate to get away, from him.

I reach a thick metal and mesh door at the end of the hall. I press my face against it, icy on my cheek, and stare at the dirty laneway outside. I stay there till I hear him flush, open the door, leave.

I run back down the corridor. I’m busting.

The toilet is painted blue. At least it was. Half a century ago. The colour hangs from the walls in strips like peeling blue sky, revealing painted layers underneath, clouds of blood red, baby-shit yellow, death grey. The walls are filthy with stains that scream of misery. The toilet seat and cistern, once-white, now covered in burn marks. A single sink, knobbly pipes protruding from underneath. Plumbing from another era.
I paper up the seat and sit. Read the wall. In red ink: "Kids use this toilet so don’t leave your Needs and Swabs lying around." I wonder how much heaven, how much hell, has happened right here. In this putrid little booth.

I pee as fast as I can. Forcing it out in a rush. Paper the button. Flush. I don’t wash my hands.

I race back to the cafe door. Reach for the handle. The knob on this side has been ripped off, leaving only the innards, a metal bar, sticking out.

I grab the bar. Try to make it turn. It won’t budge.

I tighten my grip on the bar, shoving away thoughts of germs, filth, disease. It won’t turn. I lift up the hem of my dress. Wrap some material around the metal. Frantic for a better grip.

It doesn’t work. I can't move it.

I feel depressed. I need the light.

I try knocking. Timidly, at first. Then loudly. Wildly.

No response.

I realise I don’t have my phone with me. I’ve left it at the table. Panic starts to gnaw.

I re-pace the corridor searching for another way out. Turn right, run to the end. Another thick metal door. I try the latch. Locked.

I go back, turn left instead, into another hallway. At the end a locked-tight, metal and mesh security door – again.

I push against it, the bars feel like nightmares, prison doors. I rattle the lock, feel blood pumping through my skull.

I run back to the kitchen door. Try again. Feverish now.

I can't make it turn. I work up a sweat trying.

There must be another way. There has to be. Another way. Out.

I start to run. Corridors everywhere, dark and grey, rat holes infested with my fear.

I find a different passageway, take it. And there, at the end of the hall, I see a white wooden door. I run towards it, see a hand-written sign on cardboard, thumbtacked: "Warning. Residents only. Keep out." Written in red ink. Like blood, I think.
I pause. Kings Cross is not the place to trespass. People get killed here, chopped up and put in garbage bins, bashed in back alleys, taken out by hot-shots from the drug dealers they’ve ripped off. Or they overdose in gutters, and no-one stops to look, misses a beat, says, ‘what a shame.’ Most die unspectacularly, alone in some skanky boarding house, no witnesses, no hand to hold. None of it makes the papers, but it’s news on the street, for a day, at least.

“Residents.” A boarding house? Flats? A scummy bed-sit? I try at reason - if there are residents inside, there must also be a way out. Hope flutters, a garish curtain.

The dread of my entrapment makes me bold, strangles caution.

The door is stiff, doesn’t want to open. I shove against it with the strength of my terror. It gives way and I fall inside.

Dim red light spills down an archaic curved staircase, once grand, touches on carpet vivid with stains, softening them.

Realisation hits in a rush. A cold, hard, stinging slap. I am in a brothel.

I’m in a foyer-like area at the base of the stairs. There’s a door. I run for it. I’m terrified of being found by some sleaze zipping his spent penis back inside his pants before heading back to his work or wife, or by a strung-out working girl who thinks I’m trespassing on her turf. Or worse, by a violent pimp ready and willing and itching to pulverise my brains out. Horror curls in my stomach. I taste acid.

The door is deadlocked with a lock that is high up, over my head, out of my reach.


My mind is a wild ocean, rushing, whooshing in my ears. Hopelessness crashes over me. I fight for air. I am drowning.

I lose reason, run to the stairs.

Fear slams my stomach, makes me stop. What’s up there?

I remember the high-up windows I’ve seen from Darlo Road, between the café and the strip club. I’ve always tried to see into them, seeking out something, anything; tried to see past the curtains, drab from time, and from the hundreds of hands that have pulled them to block out the sun, and from the exhaust spewed out
by the cars that have crawled past filled with ten thousand voyeurs looking for cheap
thrills.

I’ve always wanted to know, needed to know, been obsessed with, who is inside. Daily, walking past on my way to work, scanning, desperate for a shadow, a movement, a face. Careful not to look too hard, too long, not to be seen, spying. No-one likes that around here.

And always, nothing. No sign of life.

Now I’m here. Inside. I know it.

All I need to do is walk up these stairs, and I’ll see them, the ones I have yearned to know of.

I slip off my rubber thongs, hoping my bare feet won’t make a sound. I step onto the first stair, hallowed ground. The crusted carpet rasps at the soft skin under my toes. I move quietly. Slowly. One step at a time. Up. I hold my breath, as if in reverence.

I am on the last step, and I imagine I can smell pain, like an old man’s foul breath, and taste the sour froth of despair. The long years of abuse begin to sing to me; songs of need, violent need, scratching out my eardrums.

And then the walls of my reality roll back, and I see seething black, like boiling mud. I am looking into an abyss.

I hear voices, low, female. I can’t make out words. Sweat runs down my chin, neck, breasts, the backs of my legs; the dam of my fear broken.

There is a corridor. Narrow. Closed doors. I tread quietly. Down.

An open door. I peer in, and she’s there. A brunette. Tousled shoulder-length hair, brown eyes, a face that reminds me of girls I went to school with, the tough ones that the boys liked. I have seen her on the street before. She recognises me, softens.

‘I’m lost.’
‘Aren’t we all?’
‘I mean, I can’t get out.’
‘Tell me about it.’
‘The door. To the café. It’s broken.’

She turns, walks back into the dimness of the room.
More a booth than a room. A bed, unmade. A mirror, those curtains. She sits on the floor, stares into the mirror, slaps a vein on the side of her neck, teasing it to rise. The needle is already loaded. I must have interrupted her. For a moment the vein swells with the fit, a carbuncle, purple and grotesque. And then it’s out. A trace of blood left on white skin. Holy Communion. Her mouth hangs open. Her breathing slows. She nods. And is still. The peace that passes all understanding.

She lifts a hand to her hair in painful slow motion. Begins to run fingers through. Then stops. Mid strand. Like that game we used to play as kids, Statues, where we’d freeze when the music stopped. Her hand sits like a bird, snagged in its nest of hair.

Time passes. Eons.

I feel like I’m witnessing a sacred ceremony, her body a living sacrifice worshipping at the high altar of self-destruction, paying homage to the Mighty Hammer.

She lifts her head. ‘I’m sorry. I’m sick. I couldn’t wait.’ Voice soft, hardly there. She lights a cigarette, smoke curls like incense across her face.

‘Do you work here?’ I don’t know what else to say.

‘Yep. I started out dancing, downstairs. Soon worked out I could earn a lot more, doing this. What about you?’

‘No.’ I try not to sound superior.

‘I started six months ago. I was sick of being dope-sick. Now I’m sick of the bastards around here fucking me over.’

‘Can you help me find my way out of here?’

‘You’re a funny bitch.’ A lazy smile. Black teeth. ‘If I knew how to get out of this shithole, I’d go to the country. My sister lives in the country. I’d rent a nice house. And at night, I’d lie in the yard and watch the stars. I love stars. And I’d fill the fridge with truck-loads of pink lemonade. I love pink lemonade.’

My throat feels thick, painful. I reach out. Tentatively. Like a whisper.

I stroke straying hairs back from her face, touching her with love and reverence, as if she is the most precious woman in the world. And of course, she is. Someone’s beautiful baby girl. I untangle her hand from her hair and hold it.
Tenderly. Willing her to take all the love and strength I have. Osmosis. The laying on of hands.

She nods. Is silent. Scratches at a sore on her forehead. Stops. Mid-scratch. Stillness, again.

Her mouth drops open and stays like that. I try not to stare inside.

I hear a noise and remember, I need to get out. I turn to go. And then turn back. To her.

She opens her eyes. Looks at me without seeing; the glaze of the opiated. Her face is a vision, beatific. She has entered her promised land.

I turn again. Walk out the door.

‘Hey Sis, give me a minute. I’ll help ya... out.’

She does the impossible, gets up, shambles forward. I link my arm with hers. I need to keep her upright, moving, forward. We do the walk of the aged; slow, stopping, starting. We keep moving. The corridor, the stairs, the door, another corridor. In slow motion, like a B-grade horror movie where the suspense scenes are too long-winded. Two dead women walking.

I feel her commitment to getting me out with every step we take. I want to hold her and cry my gratitude all over her, tell her I see her goodness. I say nothing.

The final corridor.

She lifts the bar, aligns it in the lock, and then turns. The door opens. I take her into me, hug her. She nods off on my shoulder. Then stirs.

‘See ya.’ She shuffles away. Out of my reach. My touch.

I walk into the kitchen.

‘You, no pay me. I keep your phone.’ The Chinese cook clutches my mobile in his greasy fist. ‘You, you pay up.’

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‘Out Back’ is set in Kings Cross. It explores the human condition, our terrifying frailty and our innate goodness, and questions whether there really is an ‘us’ and ‘them’ or whether underneath our personas, there is a shared humanity.

*
I am an experience junkie so living in Kings Cross for a year (where this story was set) was an amazing time for me. I have also lived and worked in Thailand where I volunteered with the International Media team at Destiny Rescue. I have lots of characters, stories and settings in my head from these experiences. Late last year I decided to put some time and effort into building my storytelling skills, and here I am a first year Creative Writing student at USC. I love university and being surrounded by other writers. I am motivated by social justice issues and desire to tell stories that move the hearts of readers.
Someplace Else | Sally Ryhanen

Back to a wall. Roll the spine, suck in concrete.
It will pass. It will.
I watch Dee break down from a distance, watch her pull the colours and
shapes of her soul apart. Her song scorches the street, scattering the normal people.
They gasp into safe clucking corners of the mall. Cardboard coffees wave in our
direction, sacred icons against her screams.
Anchor. Cut roots deep into the ground. Inhale the earth. I am a giant,
immovable. If I am not, my daughter will sweep the flagstone streets with me.
‘You’re okay, Dee. You are...alright.’ My voice is out of tune, weak.
‘Trick her brain, Hannah,’ the doctors had said, ‘tell your daughter she is
alright, alright...’ ‘Autistics don’t really feel emotion.’ Slap. On went the label. Pluck.
Out flew the packaged crap.
But what went wrong today? Can I rewind the record, darling Dee, change
the music?
I am here for the music, for Dee, like her father had been. Downtown in
Georgetown, we are tucked away under Galvin’s dark green canopy with its zippy
waiters nodding distant love to our girl. This is Abe and Dee’s special place on the
fringe of the Bluegrass Festival, where she can catch meandering threads from
banjos and guitars. Dee needs the distance, far from rainbow flags cracking in the air
and the stamping, hooting crowd at the far end of the mall.
‘Sorry ma’am...but...?’ A man edges in.
Smile Hannah, stand tall, spread calm. It is ordinary.
‘Can I...er...help?’ Peppermint breath tickles my face; the man is too close.
The distraction wilts me. I keep my eyes on Dee but flick a smile for the stranger.
‘Thank you, sir, no. You’re kind, but please Do Not Look At My Daughter.
Keep your eyes on me and walk away.’
‘But...’
‘Now.’
Take off Superman, you’ll only mess up. My back is bleeding into the wall. I
plead. ‘Her father will be here soon. She’ll stop then.’
'Music don’t lie girl, but people do.’ Abe’s mantra bites me.

‘Please go, sir and don’t look at her.’ Dig deeper Hannah or fly away.

Dismissing him, I call to Dee.

‘Need a little sugar in your bowl honey? Dee?’ I can’t find the right tone, my voice rises but it's too thin.

’Sing our little girl home woman, give her those Bessie Smith Blues.’

Sweet Breath Super Hero, with love, light and I-must-interfere in his eyes, defies me and gapes at Dee. The words ‘don’t look’ lit up his brain. It’s like when you crave chocolate. If you say ‘Don’t think about chocolate,’ the sound of ‘choc-o-late’ will fill your mouth with decadence and swell in your throat, ’til you will rob, murder and maim to get chocolate. Compelled to look now, the stranger’s eyes consume Dee, with no more choice than a starving man gorging on pigswill. I swear people get off watching my girl’s pain.

Dee sees the enchanted onlooker. Not through her eyes; they are filled with her own fists. One at a time, alternate. One then two. One then two. Bash. Slam. Thump. Hammer. Smashing down to free her music. But her other sense sees the stranger, absorbs him.

A gift or a curse? People of her kind, they say, get 40 channels at once. They see, hear, smell, sense you, me, him, them, it and it and it. They can’t work the remote.

I take a step and put myself between Dee and Superman.

I lose the wall. I lose the earth. So be it.

She comes at me, sightless.

The man runs away with his sweet mouth shaping silent obscenities.

Someone else hit 911.

The Georgetown Community hospital know us well. We don’t need to come here much when her father is around. When Abe is here, he tricks the air that batters Dee in these moments, weaving music, poems and love. Medicos talk about triggers; Abe works in ‘lost soul notes’.

‘Dee...honey, listen, I’ve got that sad ole soul, it can’t hurt anymore sugar. It’s in my guitar. I’m playing it away...it’s beautiful now, listen.’ Her misery becomes a
feathered dandelion, sung away on a breeze. I have stood between them to feel the pulse that he takes and turns and lets go. I’ll hang there and see, sense, understand…nothing.

Our ER is haunted by angels, not nurses, and by Christ they can laugh. My god is female, a black stand-up comedian. ‘Dee,’ our angel croons, ‘I’m gonna put you up against that baaaaad arse man who reckons he’s gonna run our almighty U.S. of A. Trumpet him off darlin’, wham bam, thank you, ma’am. We’ll pay you a million.’ The nurse is coming at me with a steel bowl of surgical goodies. ‘Now girl, let’s hug your Mom here and we’ll do the embroidery on her face first. She loves you, Dee.’

The nurse threads a needle through my skin and Dee stares at it from her chair. I try so bloody hard not to flinch, not to trigger her, not to be normal. Pick the Autistic here guys, me or her? Laughter gets garrotted, before it can bellow out my mouth, declaring insanity.

Sometimes an ugly soul of a nurse will watch and whisper, ‘Again? Jesus! Section the damn girl, put her away.’

‘Don’t even think about it, our girl stays with us.’ Pardon Abe? I can’t hear you anymore.

Whenever Abe is AWOL, ‘the question’ waits at the hospital exit, like a loyal doorman. ‘Where’s Dad?’

‘He sang himself away sweetheart. Remember?’

‘Need a little sugar in my bowl, Mom.’

‘Yes I know Dee, I know. Let’s go home.’

Home can be tough, with and without Abe. Dee was 12 the first time he walked out.

‘It’s enough. No more. I am a muso.’

It was that simple and that wrong.

Can people be just one thing in their life? Can’t I be a trapeze artist and a mother if I want? I’ve forgotten how to do that though: want. Don’t get me wrong, there are beautiful times. Times when I shine because of my girl’s all kinds of awesomeness. Like at her school…she’s a champion. Telephone calls from school make my day, mostly from Mrs Rowe the principal. ‘She’s the Trumpet, Mum.’ Dee
can’t explain why Mrs Rowe is a Trumpet. Loud, in your face perhaps, likes to take the solo? Whatever, Dee sure knows how to play that Trumpet.

The calls kick in with, ‘Mrs Asher...Mrs Rowe here, ...no, no it's nothing bad...' and last Monday the story was ‘...only Dee’s stuck in a solo again. How can we nudge her along?’ God, I love my girl, she makes that school work for their trophies. She’s always a step ahead.

‘What’s she singing?’ I ask.

‘She’s in fine voice Mrs Asher, but we need to go for a banking training session...it’s,’ she flounders.

‘On the Road Again?’ Mrs Rowe, grunts, hating to lose tempo. ‘Willie Nelson style, leave-me-here-I’m-happy, or a Canned Heat version, I’m-too-cool-for-school-I’m-running-away-again, Mrs Rowe?’

‘Without the benefit of your musical background, Mrs Asher, I’d suggest the former, Willie Nelson, as she’s smiling.’

I laugh down the phone. This one’s easy for me.

‘She just wants to stay in the classroom. Ask her what she’s saving for. There’s a picture of a guitar in her diary. That’ll get her out to the bank.’

‘Okay.’ A dying fly fizzes in the telephone line.

I yell at the ceiling. ‘Thanks for the help Mrs Asher...you are amazing. You deserve a medal, Mrs Asher, champagne...a lifelong trip above the world in an airship, Mrs Asher, forever free?’ But it’s not about me I suppose, the school is good for Dee. It does its best, has a go at rearranging the fragmented mosaic of her mind. Mrs Rowe, god bless her, is its super glue. But she claims the prizes when any kid tip toes towards the normal end of ‘special’. Mothers - yep it is mostly mothers still hanging around - seem to count for zilch. Sometimes even, you are the enemy. There’s always a dig or two at pick-up time, like last week.

‘A wonderful morning with Dee, Mrs Asher, but the afternoon...’ I scan the room for my girl, my toes curling into the floor, ready. ‘We accept that life is ultra-busy for all our parents, but could we mention again the healthy eating programme, certain foods...?’

‘Chocolate, you mean chocolate.’

‘Well yes, such a behaviour changer, Mrs Asher.’
Sure is a behaviour changer sweetheart. It can stop a left hook at 20 paces. ‘Hey, Dee,’ I’d dodged the slap that morning, ‘here’s Mr Goodbar for school, catch, darling, catch.’

‘That cheeky Dee, did she sneak chocolate into her bag again, Mrs Rowe?’

As I tuned out the Trumpet that afternoon, I watched my girl cross the classroom. Dee is larger than other kids but looks great on the days she lets me brush her hair and get her buttons right. Abe loves her crushed up mane...loves it to be ‘...free and wild woman, she must be free.’ With his copper skin and my daisy yellow hair, our girl is a sun-bound flower, a downright-too-delicious-to-be-real-flower, that blossoms when its sky is bright. Damn near stops my heart when I catch her smile. But when her sun goes down, she shrivels. Sometimes I can, but mostly I can’t reckon what her sun looks like, to bring it back. Abe can taste its shape, its melody, its warmth and he knows where it hides.

He gave our baby girl language through song. ‘She’s a Cute Thing’... tapping, smiling, singing, her fine fingers quick and gentle on her dress...

...scatting, ‘T’ain’t nobody’s biz-ness if I do’, unblinking eyes under a curtain of curls...

...open hands drumming our creped oak table...

.... on bad days she might wail ‘Dreaming’... slamming a chair into the wall’s deepening scars...

... now a ‘Sweet Black Angel’, beating time with her body against our glass door... to a shattering finale.

Maybe the psychs are right. Perhaps Abe duck-shoves his own emotions over to our girl,

knowing she is empty. Anyhow, Abe says I don’t know either of them. ‘You’re out of tune with my life,’ are the only lyrics he leaves me, each time he runs. I miss the cues they both give me, like the loser kid stuck way outside the band, holding a triangle and silver wand high...praying, sweating, counting then...missing. Always fucking missing. Without Abe, Dee is too often my sweet black angel.
I didn’t remember much after Abe walked out the first time. Dee searched the rooms for his funny upside-down-mop body. Stick-thin jangling limbs, topped with grizzled dreadlocks falling into his face.

Distracted, he left his dope stash in my knicker drawer. I seemed to sit awhile in Starbucks. ‘Another cup, Ma’am?’ Baristas think out loud when you’re stoned. ‘You can’t fool me woman, I see you, pretending. These strangers are your friends, I’m your family. Sitting is your job. It’s okay girl, it’s okay.’

I went home sometime. A neighbour smashed in the front door, sometime. Dee’s hunger and Dee beat me. Meals missed... nine, ten? She let the whole damn neighbourhood know when our fridge was empty. They took my kid away. Child abuse they said. Funny that, as it was me with the broken bones. It took a while to feel. Dope is a magic blanket.

A social worker held my hand, the unbroken one, as she led me through the queues of people-like-me in her office. A musk of earth and burnt popcorn still clung to my skin, the tell-tale smell people smile at or turn away from, as you try to make like normal in your day.

‘If you don’t give her up to the State, Hannah, they will take her anyway.’ I never called this woman by her first name. I never called her anything. I didn’t like her using my first name, but didn’t say so. ‘This way you’ll get some control. Isn’t that important for you, Hannah?’ There she goes again.

The State found Abe in Washington, far away from our Kentucky bluegrass land. He yelled and screamed to get his beautiful daughter ‘...outta that stinkin’ cesspit.’

‘No, Mr Asher, your child is not in prison as you say.’

‘What’s that fucking electric fence for then mister, to keep cows out?’

They signed Dee out to him, but not to me. I’m the ‘abuser’.

The three of us danced around each other when they sent us home. A slow, blues beat. Abe claimed the solos, the hero of our dead little trio. His eyes would move over my body some days. Most times though Dee claimed him, sitting, standing, swaying; near enough to take the breath of his music right into her soul.
Cymbals crashed in the morning gig of Bourbon bottles jettisoned to the trash. He was distant and tired on dope, but the Wild Turkey got him jagged and fast. I was too tired and slow to dance away from his fury. The paramedics know our house, know me, know Dee. It was easy for Abe to shrug, palms outstretched and mutter our daughter’s name when they asked what happened. Silent, they trussed me up into their meat van like a piece of brisket.

‘Now honey, I love your girl like my own but it’s ‘bout time you popped her a little happy pill or two or she gonna kill you.’ My throat tightened as the nurse assumed my girl smashed into me again. ‘Hey Hannah, what I done said wrong? Don’t give me that evil eye.’ Off balance, she flipped a tepid laugh, glancing behind me. ‘Where is that girl of yours anyhow...who’s she with?’

You can choke on words. The nurse spun me round and belted me with a tough medical punch straight between the shoulder blades. It knocked me onto the bed but I could breathe again. The fist dislodged the words ‘Abe did it’, alongside an avalanche of self-loathing. The nurse took me and held me like I had just been born.

‘I’ll get the goddam law girl.’ Rock and a hard place here.

‘Tell ‘em and you’re down the Swanee, woman,’ he’d whispered, before the paras took me. ‘They’ll get Dee. You’ve got six months of that probation stuff, no chance letting you alone with our girl.’

I neglected my child they said. Didn’t matter Abe had up and flown away first. Forgetting to ever come home seems neglectful to me.

Forgetting not to beat the crap out of me again seemed a bit neglectful too.

The musos had changed key when I got home from hospital. Dee had been at school when Abe’s rage moved from his eyes to his fists, so she couldn’t know what happened. But you sense a shift, when the singers play around with your best song; a few extra chords, a change of pace. All that was going down in our house. Same but different.

Dee touched my face that night. ‘It’s okay, Dee, sorry sweetheart, you made me jump. Come here...I am so sorry.’ I hadn’t meant to push her, it was a reflex, a defence. She’d never wanted to touch me before. My body softened as her fingertips reached out and grazed across my cheek, close to the stitches by my left eye. She traced indigo and orange down my face, then walked away. Abe strummed,
the guitar across his knee like a baby, head bowed, playing into himself. There weren’t any sounds between him and I. But Dee turned her back on him as she sang. I was moving and cooking and cleaning, but I swear she was singing to me.

She touched me again the next day, on the way to school. I held the wheel of the car one handed, slow, easy riding in the traffic build up. My right arm rested down on the seat. She started a rhythm, with one finger, on my wrist.

An unspoiled breath came from someplace deep in my body. That breath, the moment your baby shows you...tells you, she knows who you are.

Abe would have picked up her song, a cheap game show winner, pressing the bell and crying out the answer, arms raised, calling for the love. But the skin at the end of Dee’s whip-smart finger knew I was listening.

At the school gates, she up and ambled away, but I sat. Right then, there was no place else to be.

***

There is a tribe of lost people. Some members join mainstream culture, to an extent. Others are defensive in their contact with the rest of the world. Communication with and within the tribe can be markedly difficult. They live in our backyard, but blink and you’ll happily miss them. Their nomenclature is short and easy to slide over... carers, or forgive me, Carers with a capital C. Disability, senility, mental illness, spare kids, whatever, the Carer fronts up, a kamikaze pilot calling ‘Pick me, pick me, I only have my life to lose.’ They find their weapon of choice... humour, godliness, opiates, martyrdom, or all four where the wild ones go, and battle on.

Why do they stay? Pure and stunning love may be the answer. I’m often wrong, but I’ve never been around a Carer, saint or sinner, without feeling a shaft or two of pure and glorious love.

The characters in Someplace Else live only in my imagination. The situation does not.

*

Sally can get on a bus and step off richer, by at least one stranger’s life story. Uninvited, the tales tumble over each other to get to her. A chronic skin-shedder, she has held 57 jobs, from Playboy croupier to managing 70 remarkable disAbled people, with a heap of literary fodder in between the first and last job.
‘As a pretty late starter to the creative game, Sally, what’s your greatest fear?’

‘The nails banging in the coffin mid paragraph...’
Michaela O’Flynn

Freddie doesn’t talk much, but he’s a good listener. Most days, Freddie and I lie in bed and watch as the shadows chase the sun across the room. Occasionally I venture into the kitchen to stare at the fridge, wait for the door to beep and return to bed empty handed.

I know I should eat more, I tried to at first, but I struggled to keep anything down. Most of the time I would just stare at my plate, watching my fork chase my vegetables. I can’t remember when I stopped being hungry.

‘I washed my hair last night.’

Freddie just stares at me, but I know that he’s impressed.

‘I know right,’ I say, giving him a little high five. ‘Go me.’

My toes brush against a fighter jet that lies tangled amongst the sheets. The house is littered with toys, shoes peeking out from beneath the lounge, socks dumped by the front door. I can’t bear to look at them, I don’t want to move them. So they stay there collecting dust.

I run my toes along the edge of the wing, ignoring the tears that soak into my pillow.

My husband tried to remove it once. I awoke to him digging through the sheets, muttering to himself.

‘Mike, what are you doing?’ I asked.

‘I am sick of waking up with this bloody thing stuck in my back,’ he said, holding up the jet.

‘What do you think you’re going to do with it?’

‘I am going to put it where it belongs, in a box, along with the rest of them,’ he said, gesturing around the room.

‘They’re not yours to touch,’ I yelled. ‘So put it back or get out.’

He stood there staring at me, his fingers tightening. My lips began to quiver, tears spilling down my cheeks as I looked between him and the fighter jet. He closed his eyes and let out a soft sigh.

‘You’re not the only one hurting, Helen. I miss him too,’ he said.
Then he dropped the jet back onto the bed and walked out of the room.

I grabbed it. I wanted to hurl it across the room. I wanted to hold it to my chest. I did both.

The moment it left my hand, I was crawling off the bed after it. It hit the wall with a thud, leaving a dent in its wake.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, as I scooped it up. ‘I’m so sorry.’

I climbed back onto the bed with the jet pressed firmly against my chest, whispering ‘I’m sorry,’ as I rocked back and forth.

Mike didn’t come to bed that night, or any night after. But when I awoke the next morning, Freddie was lying in the bed beside me, his button eyes staring into mine. He smelt like chocolate and dirt and memories.

‘Thank you, Mike,’ I said, as I cradled Freddie in my arms.

‘I love you,’ said Freddie.

And I cried.

The sun is nothing more than a faint yellow glow in the window now. Like every day, the shadows have won. I sit Freddie on my knees and press our foreheads together.

His nose is covered with teeth marks that scratch as they brush against my skin.

‘I miss him,’ I whisper.

Sometimes, I can still hear echoes of laughter. The cries of battle, his little feet running through empty halls in hot pursuit. At night I wake to him calling my name, I rush to his room to find empty sheets and I shrink to my knees, hands shaking, gasping for air.

Come morning, Mike would find me balled up on the floor, with my face buried in a pillow, breathing in what was left of his bubble gum shampoo. ‘Oh Helen,’ he’d say, as he lifted me into his arms. He would place me gently on our bed and mould his body around mine, then he’d hold me until my sobs turned into dreams.

‘You miss him too don’t you,’ I say, stroking Freddie’s arm.
His fur is matted and stiff from years spent being dragged along the floor. His left ear is torn and his tail leaks stuffing. I tried to sew him up once, only to be met with screams of protest.

‘No, Mummy don’t, Freddie is afraid of needles.’

‘It won’t hurt, I promise,’ I said.

‘Please don’t, Mummy.’

So with little eyes peeking over my shoulder, I kissed each tear and covered it with a bandage.

‘Better?’ I asked.

‘Perfect,’ he said, wrapping his arms around my neck and kissing my cheek.

‘Freddie says thank you.’

‘You’re welcome, Freddie,’ I said.

The bandages have long since fallen off. But I like him better this way, covered in scars from excessive love.

The front door clicks open, followed by the familiar sound of keys crashing onto the bench.

‘And I miss Mike,’ I say, slumping back against the bedhead. Freddie topples from my knees and lands between my legs. I sigh. I should pick him up. But I don’t.

Once upon a time, I would have been waiting for Mike to arrive home. Wearing nothing more than a silk robe, I would launch into his arms, his keys and bag spilling to the floor as his hands found their place around my thighs. Our lips would crash together as my fingers twisted through his hair.

Other days, he’d walk through the door, only to be wailed by rubber darts. Giggles and squeals filled the house as the three of us chased each other from room to room, firing back and forth. Eventually Mike would haul us over his shoulders and throw us down on the bed where we’d laugh and talk about our day.

Now, the silence that greets Mike is darker than the shadows that swirl on the bedroom walls. Most afternoons, he locks himself in his shed and drowns out the world with an orchestra of tools. I used to spend a lot of time out there, watching the boys build ramps and paint wooden toys.

I haven’t been out there for a while now, not since Mike asked me to leave.
I was asleep with Freddie tucked under my arm when I woke to a loud crash, followed by Mike yelling. It was dark outside, as I dashed through the yard. A thick blanket of clouds rolled across the sky, the glow of the moon fading in and out as though it were being adjusted with a dimmer.

‘Are you alright?’ I said, throwing the shed door open.

The room was filled wooden toys; boats, cars and planes covered the shelves, some finished, some waiting to be painted. Storage boxes lined the walls, each one housing an array of paint and glue and tools. The work benches and floor were covered in wood shavings, a thick layer of dust had settled across the windows, acting as curtain to the world outside.

Mike was kneeling on the floor with his head in his hands and his hammer resting between his knees. In front of him sat a wooden go-kart. On one side the word ‘Flash’ was scribbled in blue paint with two hand prints beneath it, one big and one small. The front wheels hung loose and the frame was covered in little round dents.

‘Mike, wha-what are you doing? Are you okay?’ I asked.

I went to move toward him, but he raised a hand to stop me, blood dripped from his knuckles and soaked into his sleeve.

‘Michael,’ I gasped, taking a step forward.

‘Helen, don’t,’ he said, looking up at me. His eyes were puffy and red, his hands shaking as they dropped to his knees.

‘What hap-’

‘I said don’t,’ he snapped, rising to his feet.

I stepped back through the door as he walked toward me, the muscles in his jaw flexing. He placed his hand on the door above mine, I wanted to brush my fingers against his, but I didn’t.

‘Please, Helen,’ he said lowering his head. ‘I just need to be alone.’

He closed the door on me and walked away.
I prop Freddie back up beside me and drape my arm around him. The sun has vanished, allowing the lights from the television to dance across the walls. The fridge door opens and I cringe as I wait to hear the cracking of a can.

Mike never used to drink, except the occasional beer to unwind, or several when we were among friends. Four drinks and he would be on the dance floor, thrusting his hips and wiggling a finger in my direction.

I remember the night we first met. I hated dancing. I had little rhythm and even less confidence. I sat at the bar watching Mike spin around the floor as other women made their advances. He was in the middle of twirling some half naked blonde, when he caught me staring at him. He grinned, I blushed.

While still holding her hand, he waved me over.

I shook my head.

He smiled and nodded.

I shook my head again.

‘Come on,’ he mouthed, wiggling a finger at me.

I laughed and turned away. But Mike was persistent, he dropped the other girls hand and jogged over to me.

‘Come dance,’ he said.

‘No thanks, I’m good,’ I said.

‘Wrong,’ he said, dragging me, unwilling, but laughing, onto the floor. I know what people were thinking, she’s so plain, what is he doing with her? But I didn’t care.

He slid his hands around my waist, pulling me tightly against his chest. My heart raced as I looped my arms around his neck. He smelt like sawdust and mint, his fingers callused and rough against my skin. I rested my head against his shoulder, grinning as he sang out of tune in my ear.

Those days feel like a lifetime ago, as beautiful and distant as the stars.

‘I want to go out there,’ I say.

Freddie continues to stare at the wall, but I know he’s smiling.
I ruffle the fur on his head before reaching down to free the fighter jet from the sheets. I run my fingers along its edges and hold it up for Freddie to see.

‘I’m just going to do it,’ I say, gripping the jet tightly. ‘I’m going out there, Freddie. Wish me luck.’

I slip out of bed and peek into the lounge room. Mike is still in his uniform, sprawled out with his feet resting on the table. I look back at Freddie; he is smiling at me. I close my eyes, take a deep breath and step through the door.

The television hums quietly, but my feet are silent against the tiled floor. Mike shifts in his seat and I freeze. Did he hear me? Should it matter if he did? I want to turn around and go back, but my legs aren’t listening. I stop just behind where Mike is sitting and I rest my hands on the edge of the lounge.

Mike jumps when he sees me. ‘Fuck, Helen,’ he says, holding his hand to his chest. ‘You scared the shit out of me.’

He tilts his head to the side and stares at me, a hint of a smile resting upon his lips. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. The hollows beneath his eyes are black against his pale skin. He looks older, I want to reach out and touch the stubble on his chin, but my hands won’t allow me. I close my mouth and Mike sighs, his smile fading before he turns away.

My lip starts to tremble; I can feel the tears trying to break free. I wrap my arms around myself and rush back to my room; stopping when I get to the door. Freddie is still sitting there smiling at me.

‘I can do this,’ I say, pushing back the tears. ‘I can do this.’

I squeeze the jet tightly and march back toward Mike. He doesn’t bother looking up at me this time, so I place the jet down beside him and walk away.

I don’t look back.

I pace back and forth across the room several times before collapsing onto my pillow. Freddie topples onto his face, so I pick him up and fold him into my chest.

‘I miss him, Freddie. Why can’t I tell him how much I miss him?’

The lights from the television fade and I hold Freddie tightly as I listen to Mike move about the house. The shower turns on and off, doors open and close, the house dissolves into silence. And I cry.
I place Freddie beside me and curl myself into a ball, head buried beneath the sheets. I close my eyes and wait for sleep to come.

‘Helen?’

I sit up and flick on the bedside lamp.

Mike stands in the doorway, flipping the jet between two fingers. I wipe my eyes, wrap my arms around my legs and rest my chin on my knees. He walks into the room and sets the jet down on his bedside table. He looks down at me, running a hand through his wet hair.

‘Do you think that maybe I could join you?’ he asks, pointing beside me.

I nod, stretching myself out and rolling onto my side.

With a soft smile, he flops down beside me, I move to grab Freddie, but Mike lands on top of him, pinning Freddie beneath his chest, a fury brown arm reaches out toward me.

‘I love you,’ says Freddie.

And I laugh.
Christmas Was Yesterday | Amelia Bradley

That red Gucci dress wore her so well. Strapless. Curves in all the right places. Every red-blooded man in the room was watching her, but she didn’t notice. She still hadn’t noticed until I was right beside her, I extended my hand and she took the champagne.

‘Jerry,’ I told her.

‘Lucy,’ she replied. ‘I have a boyfriend.’

Eric? Derek? Give a fuck. He did give a fuck when he walked in on the two of us, though, her bare legs straddling my naked hips. I gave her plenty of fucks after she moved in, too. Six months passed quickly when the days were spent stealing ‘I love you’s’ over the phone during work hours, and hung-over on Sunday mornings, tangled in the warmth of each other until midday. The hangovers stopped around the same time two pink lines appeared on a piss stick.

‘I’m keeping it,’ She told me.

‘Okay,’ I replied. ‘Maybe we should get married.’

I parked my Ford ute behind the Merc in her parent’s driveway, gravel crunched under the Versace knock-offs I forked out fifty bucks for the day before. The door opened.

‘Mr. Sinclair,’ I put my hand out, ‘Jerry Jones. I’d like to take your daughter’s hand in marriage.’

The wedding invitation for Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair arrived back in our mailbox several weeks later, soggy from weeks of rain, marked: ‘Return to sender.’

I guess they didn’t give a fuck.

‘Their loss,’ I told her, my arms tight around her quivering frame. She cried herself to sleep for some time after that. I tried to make it better, but eventually I ran out of words. Eventually, she ran out of tears.

‘Lilies or peonies?’ She asked me at the florist.

‘I dunno, the pink ones, I guess.’ I didn’t really give a fuck.

‘I’ll order a bouquet of peonies, please.’
She cried the day she walked down the aisle. That white lace dress hugged all the right places, stretched a little tighter across the belly. A fragrant fistful of peonies. She noticed me this time; she didn’t take her eyes off me. I wanted to fuck her later that night, but she hadn’t been up for it; the life protruding from her midsection had withered the flourishing sex life we once had, so I held her close, just the way she liked.

We both cried at the sound of our newborn son’s screams. His pink face contorted in sensory overload, arms outstretched, wrinkled fingers clawing at the air. Pathetically perfect.

‘Shhh, Jack, Mama’s here, baby.’ She held him close; just the way he liked. I was lost for words. Eventually we ran out of tears.

The sexless nights soon became sleepless nights, too. Jack wailed in his cot. Six weeks. Six months. Two years. Lucy hadn’t gone back to work after he was born, she spent all day at home with him. What a fuckin’ holiday. She kept the place clean and tidy enough. Except for one night, she lost it and threw the dinner plates against the wall. It wasn’t my fault she forgot about the water in the bathtub and it overflowed, but apparently I was the arsehole when she consequently burnt the chicken. She cried about it, but I was too pissed off to give a fuck. I had a beer.

Clean and tidy. Food in the fridge. Fresh laundry. Fresh bed sheets? I couldn’t remember. In fact, I couldn’t remember the last time we slept in the same bed. I had the good porn sites saved to ‘Favourites’ and the tissues by the bed. The calendar said it was our anniversary. Or was it her birthday? Shit, maybe it had been both. I dunno, I was out of beer.

‘Hey Jacky boy, how was soccer training?’ It was daylight robbery what that B-grade has-been was charging to coach under six’s.

‘Good, Dad. Will dinner be ready soon, Mum? I’m really hungry.’

Back to the game. I turned the volume up. My team were losing, but at least the beers were cold.

‘Jerry! For Christ’s sake, wake up, Jerry!’ Lucy thumped me awake on the couch. My head thumped, too. Must’ve been the beers.
‘What? What is it?’
‘We’ve got to go to the hospital. Jack’s coach just called, he’s been hurt. It’s bad.’

The hospital smelt like sanitised depression. Cold, heavy air pumped through the wall vents.

Intensive Care Unit: room 5B. My son’s face and body was buried beneath a tube tentacle alien which displayed more signs of life than he did.

‘Prepare for the worst.’ Dr. Chan sounded like a cunt.

Three days we spent holding a bedside vigil. All the time in the world doesn’t prepare you for the worst, though.

‘We’re so sorry for your loss, Mr. and Mrs. Jones.’ Said Dr. Cunt.

The official police report said a middle aged woman had a seizure and sent the car ploughing through a soccer field of six year olds. I didn’t give a fuck. A police report didn’t bring my kid back. Lucy swept blood stained hairs from Jack’s forehead with her fingers, and kept sweeping long after they were gone. She scooped her arms under his limp bones and held him close; just the way he liked. It was time to go. She stood up and we hugged each other, it had been a long time since we did that. She clung to me, her wet face pressed hard into my chest. I had no words. Nothing. She eventually let me go. Her face never dried, though.

I paid the pizza guy twenty-five bucks and closed the front door. It was getting cold outside, I guess it must’ve been winter, or something. Not too cold for a beer, though.

‘Lucy!’ I called, ‘There’s pizza here!’ I picked up a second slice. The Cougars scored again, they were set to win the game. About bloody time.

Where the hell was Lucy? I got up. My legs ached, a few extra kilos will do that. The kitchen was quiet, untouched. I hadn’t seen her there for a while, actually. The lights were off down the hall, except for his room, of course. It was always on. The door was open just enough for the light to creep into the hallway, just enough to hear the sobs. I paused there.

What’s the point? I wouldn’t know what to say anyway.

I had another beer.

The Cougars won the championship.
It was cold that winter.

The beers were, too.

My legs ached.

The late night shows sounded like lullabies after a while. Who were these celebrities?

_Who gives a fuck?_

I went to bed. Lucy was there, she looked peaceful when she slept. The shadows would return to haunt her face in the morning.

‘Merry Christmas.’ I said.

‘Christmas was yesterday.’ She replied.

I’m an arsehole, again. I bought her flowers. Peonies. She smiled, a light flickered in her eyes, it didn’t stay. Brown peony petals dropped like crumbs around the vase. I eventually threw them away. My boss called again, he left a message: ‘Jerry, just checking on you, mate. Your job’s still here, if you want it, otherwise I’ll put the young fella on full time. Let me know by Friday. Hope you’re doing okay, cheers.’

Yeah, cheers. Beers.

I turned up late for work Monday morning. My head throbbed. The pay cheque fixed the leak in the roof and cleared the account Lucy racked up at the pharmacy. The account at the pharmacy? How many vitamins was she buying? What were those labelled orange bottles in the bathroom? Give a fuck. Just pay the damn bills. I went back to work the following week. Weeks. I got used to the throbbing, it was hard to function without it. No one asked questions, no one gave a fuck. We talked about the game. Trent bought a new car, a Mustang, it had a nice arse. Tom’s new girlfriend was a leggy blonde, she had a nice arse, too. I went home thinking about Tom’s girlfriend, and her arse. The tissue box was gone from the bedside table; I was too lazy to get a new one. I forgot about Blondie’s arse.

Weekends were spent sleeping off a hangover until midday, only to pass out again at midnight. Lucy was gone during the day, come to think of it, she was gone some nights, too.
'I love you, too.’ I heard her whisper on the phone. She thought I’d passed out. Maybe I was dreaming. I definitely wasn’t dreaming when the diamond chandeliers hung from her ears, catching the light and spitting it back like laser beams. I pretended not to notice. She pretended not to care. Perhaps she really didn’t. I opened the fridge and cracked a beer.

‘I’m going out. You’ll be asleep before I get home,’ She said.

‘Where are you going?’ I asked. Who are you going with?

‘Just to see a movie. Get coffee. Girl’s night,’ She lied.

I tried, but I couldn’t give a fuck. The Cougar’s lost the game. They’d played shit all season, Barrett was out with an injury. Where was that bloody pizza I ordered an hour ago?

Lucy came home around midnight. Or was that the night before? My head was fuzzy. I knew when she’d been crying, I’d seen her cry a lot. She whisked past me, straight into the bathroom. The laser beam chandeliers were gone when she emerged, I never saw them again. She disappeared into the bedroom, I thought I heard her sniffle. The brew foamed in my mouth. Eventually she ran out of tears.

Eventually, I ran out of beers. I found clean clothes in the pile of dishevelled laundry – or at least they didn’t smell too bad, and walked to the bottle shop. Two young girls turned the corner and knocked straight into me, cans of vodka-somethings rolled onto the footpath.

‘Sorry, girls.’ They were the shortest shorts I’d ever seen. ‘Let me help.’ I fumbled with the cans, stacked a tower of three and handed them to the brunette with droopy curls. She took them from me and clutched them to her chest.

‘They look pretty tasty.’ I pointed to her chest. I could tell she wasn’t sure if I meant the cans or her tits. I wasn’t sure, either. I smiled anyway, she adjusted her sunglasses and pranced off. I shrugged. I could see the bottle shop from the corner and waited for the green signal at the intersection. There was a park on the adjacent corner, a big open field. A couple of young kids played on the grass, their mother sat on the bench watching while they kicked a soccer ball. The light flashed green and bleeped impatiently. It turned red again. Still on the corner, I watched the boys play and laugh, Mum clapped. The sun had sunk low in the sky and a chill touched my

How long had it been since I said his name? Lucy. How long had it been since I said hers? How long had she been so unloved? My eyes burned.

You’re a fucking idiot, Jerry.

I turned around and headed back the way I came. My feet moved faster, lifted higher. My breath quickened and blood flooded my veins. The florist across the road grabbed my attention. Yes, that’s what I’d do. My Lucy.

‘The pink peonies, please.’ They were much nicer than lilies.

A bitter taste of yeast and hops stagnated in my dry mouth.

Home. I went to the bathroom to brush my teeth, blood streaked through the minty froth. I put my toothbrush back on the vanity next to hers. The labelled orange bottles were gone.

I walked up the hallway, Jack’s door was shut. I opened it, but the light was off. Empty. I went to the bedroom. She was asleep, she looked so peaceful when she slept. I sat beside her, laid the peonies on the covers and placed a hand on her shoulder. The warmth of those Sunday morning sleep-ins was no longer there.

‘Lucy.’ I said. She didn’t respond. ‘Lucy, let’s talk.’ Silence.

An empty orange bottle sat on the bedside table, a handwritten note underneath it:

I’ve run out of tears.

I swept stray hairs from her forehead, and kept sweeping long after they were gone. I scooped my hands under her heavy head and pressed her dry face hard into my chest; just the way she liked.

It was a modest funeral. Peonies piled on top of the black wooden casket, suits and sunglasses filled the tiny chapel. A Merc was parked out front. I guess they give a fuck now.

Back home it was quiet. Dead quiet. There was no beer in the fridge, so I laid on the bed for a nap. It felt empty. Empty fridge, empty bed, empty pill bottle still sat on the bedside table. Valium. How long had she been taking that?

‘Jesus Christ, Lucy.’
I sat up, my head felt heavy on my shoulders. Her wardrobe was ajar so I opened it. Beige cardigan, grey sweatpants, faded blue dress with a loose hem. An imposter had stolen my wife’s identity; who was this woman? What the fuck happened to my Lucy? A flash of colour hanging in the back caught my eye.
CMN238: Paperback Hero

Paperback Hero is now a first year course that is offered in both semesters and, together with CMN116, is a foundation course in the program. CMN238 focuses on the hero/anti-hero as a narrative device within a range of commercial fiction and promotes innovation within established genre and literary forms. The course also examines a number of popular genres (horror, chick lit, detective fiction, etc.). The following narratives embody the key techniques and themes explored in the course.
All the Wild Animals | Emily Johnson

Now, you’re expecting a story and I’ve many to tell. Though, I don’t have much time, and I assume you’re quite busy so I’ll try to make it short. Forgive me if it’s slightly disjointed, and I’m sure you’ll have questions, as the story is quite strange in nature. It really is one that’s better expressed in person, so you’ll have to imagine I’m there, speaking as you read.

It’s an old tale, and I was only a boy then, and though my current age is a fading figure in my mind, my memories of the Hermit are clear. Where to begin is no easy task, but as the Hermit was a teller of tales I thought it only appropriate to bookend this story with the first and last he shared with me.

One day a donkey found the skin of a great lion, and decided to try it on. Feeling quite proud with this newfound sense of power, he trotted about frightening all the animals he came across. Spotting a fox, the donkey prowled over trying a roar. At the sound, the fox said: “You foolish ass, if you really want to frighten me you will have to thieve the lion’s voice too.”

As a boy I was a solemn thing, the only son of a widowed fisherman. I had too much time to indulge in my own thoughts so it was only natural that I was drawn to the eccentric man. I spent many of the early mornings or later evenings wandering the vast shoreline as my father cast and drew the nets. This was how I came to know the Hermit. You see the strange man had a very particular routine. He was seen to wander into the ocean just past the decrepit jetty, promptly at sunrise and fall each day. He would bathe himself in the scaly light and foamy waves, all the while mumbling to himself or the waves, or perhaps the stars? I wasn’t sure. My wonder grew and I began to watch the recluse, from the safety of the dunes.

One evening as our bare soles padded from rock to sand I stopped my father and asked about the Hermit. Tall and thin, he stooped down leaning in so close that his dark and whiskered face consumed the ocean, the sand and the orange sky altogether.

“Son, he’s a strange fish,” he said with a furrowed brow. I looked up; my eyes on fire, waiting for more. He described to me in his short way, how the town had
watched in collective horror the day the Hermit arrived. You see the Hermit was the first and only outsider, aside from the Book Keeper. Sea faced and pale bodied he was a spectacle. You can only imagine how those sheltered creatures had perceived him that day.

“Soon after, the First Father passed... an omen, they'd said. The Gods frowned upon the Hermit- a dark soul swelled in the man. Strange as he was, I never felt any evil in him.” I thought of the day my father had taken me to the mausoleum, to see the bones of the First Father. How I had stared up in the vast museum at the Holy remains, brown and splintered.

“When the Book Keeper came to clear the First Father’s name from the records he asked the Hermit for his title. He had none- he was exiled.” I had always thought the Book Keeper a strange beast. At that stage I had seen him only once, the occasion he came to bear witness to the Gibbous ceremony, the morphing from boy to man. The elders turned shadows in their hunting clothes, crouching in the dead grass. Animal blood had dripped down the boy’s face as he ran east into the rising sun, not to return until he would take on the second mask that night. I remember his bloodied skin and wild eyes emerge, eclipsing the rising moon. The boy’s expression made me wonder how many of the birds that soared or the wolves that prowled were once men who had forgotten themselves. That night his father had pulled the cat skin over his scalp and fiddled at the boy’s nape with a needle and fishing line. The Second Father had chanted the blessings over the wailing boy and the roar of the fire. All the while the Book Keeper had stood with an open book in the outskirts obscured in shadow, watching, writing.

“I have no more knowledge of him, he keeps to himself and the others steer clear of the man. He rarely comes into the town, and I’ve only heard his voice once... since the death. He was posting a letter, the general refused the blessing,” he held me with a cutting look then trudged on to the sea.

That was the night I first spoke to the Hermit, my father out in his boat, a dim light bobbing past the breakwater. I trailed the man as he wandered about the sandstone cliffs, and he mumbled fables all the while. The first few nights he did not acknowledge me, rumbling tales in his deep tone as though to himself. With no one
else in sight we would walk, the vast shoreline and powdery dunes unfolding before us, open and wide, empty space.

We grew close. In those days before the flood, we spent much time in his home on the outskirts of the village. It was a small shack, with wooden walls and floors that were worn with salt and weather. His desk was pushed up against the filmy window and I would sit cross-legged on the damp floor as he wrote. In the evenings he would lock away his work in a wooden chest, chaotic with papers. Then I would walk home along the shoreline.

That winter my father died. It had been a high tide and he’d been scaling fish on the edge of the old jetty. Taken by the ocean, surrendered to the slipstream. I had been with the Hermit when the Second Father came; telling me his stiff body had been found, bloated and green, bobbing up and down with the seaweed in the bay. And so, the Hermit had joined me as I shuffled up and stared down at the pickled face and gaping whiskered mouth, saying yes, that’s him. My vacuum lungs had swum with absurd laughter. My stoic friend had led me away from the staring white coats that fumbled awkwardly at their masks.

As I sat in our empty home, never before had I been so aware of the fish stench that permeated each room. If I looked out the window I could see his beaten silver boat, still dancing in the wind. Anchored to the seawall. That night I had dreamt I was walking across the dunes carrying a small grey fish back to the water. It wheezed in my hands, gills flapping open and closed. The fish started to grow and became heavier and heavier, until I couldn’t carry it anymore. Stumbling toward the water’s edge I tried to steady myself in the sand. Then scales turned to smoke, and ash trickled right through my fingers.

If you have ever lost anyone intimate, then you already understand. If not, it is not something that can be written, or read. Grief can only be felt. I woke to the shadow of a crow, cawing under the window. The world was shrouded. Then slowly, like a stain of spreading blood, light found the house, and my feverish body hunched up in the chair beside my father’s empty bed. The sun, beat upon the earth. I pulled the curtain and with a harsh croak the crow took flight; a black mark swimming in a red
The time that followed floats as collective fog in my memory. So I cannot tell you when, precisely, but eventually the Hermit came. His presence and fragmented tales remain the only surviving relics of that ghostly time. Those rumbled chronicles slipped through, like a dripping tap at the back of my mind, “...so he decided to bow to Thetis...”

“Doing just that, was swept... this stage.”
“A secret house... all the while”
“Dreaming of an Atlantic fortress...”

I had been unsurprised to find so few villagers at the lamenting. The Hermit had, of course, been denied attendance. In truth, those present had been unfamiliar to me and must have shared a tenuous tie with my father. I feel I should explain that this was in no disregard to his character. He had spent the greater length of his solitary life amongst the waves; therefore it was natural that he failed to develop substantial bonds with the town folk. So, it came as a great comfort that I did not have to stand in a brimming room of feigned remorse. Of swelling eyes and dripping noses, that grieved illusive memories.

I stood alone. I recall sensing the presence of the Book Keeper, as he hunched silently in the far corner. He formed a rigid ball around the Records, only just balancing the Book in one hand and a stick of charcoal in the other. It was at this point, maybe more perceptive in my age; I saw the way the Book consumed the figure. How he clutched at its weight like a beggar might clutch at coins. In that moment, seeing the sheer disproportion, I realized the absurdity of his situation.

The Mausoleum had been cold, and shadows had echoed from the ancient walls. There was a small skylight, but the walls were windowless. Instead deep glass shelves lined the edges with rows and rows of glass jars, below which stood sinuous animal heads. Displaced oxen, wolfish dogs, and deer, a menagerie of hollow specimens. Bones swam inside the jars, embalmed in discoloured fluids, contained and labelled illegibly then rearranged in Godly order. Nothing living, nothing breathing. Death captured in time.

On a wooden slab in the centre of the room lay my father’s shell, limbs
arranged in a semilunar fashion. Loose skin hung from the concave framework, deflated and so paper-thin it appeared as though it would give way at the slightest movement. The Second Father had recited, “In life did swallow a young boy, and then drown the man.”

I had felt the Book Keeper’s eyes bore into my back as he washed my father’s name from the records. I looked at my father’s body. He was still masked but his eyes had been open, staring past me. Dim light fell on the right half of his face and I can remember seeing the faint line below his jaw where fur met drooping skin. The Second Father closed the ceremony, footsteps echoed as the small audience filed out the back door. Upon my exit, for the first time, I caught the eyes of The Book Keeper. I remember peering into those owlish eyes, thinking he seemed, to me the loneliest creature I had ever come across.

I tried to resume living in the house of my childhood, but it was no good. A ghost filled the rooms from ceiling to floor. Like smoke, it saturated the air I breathed. With stale salt it seeped through the walls and mimicked the sound of the ocean in maddening echo. I gathered my belongings and left the house, shutting the door softly, not to disturb it. And so, I moved in with the Hermit.

What shall I tell you, of the events leading up to the flood? There is little I can recount in detail, and no one knows the direct cause of the event. It started with a sullen drizzle, persisting through the season. Briny droplets begun to trickle through the roof, and the Hermit and I spent much time trying to fix water leaks. One evening I left the Hermit to his work and wandered to the ocean. By then, I had found a particular space where I could perceive my father’s abandoned boat. Nestled between the dunes, and wrapped in indigo sky I had closed my eyes to listen to the rain lull the ocean.

I suddenly became aware of a dull beating coming from the earth. The beat grew to a regular thud, the wind begun to howl and the heavens wept in frenzy. Rain poured, and I knew not where the sky and ocean met. My search for the Hermit was a wild blur. In my confusion, I lost all sense of navigation and somehow ended up in the flooding town square. Water found secret paths, changing shape and washing over dwellings that had been there moments before. I had been trudging blindly,
waist deep when the wind calmed, and the earth stilled. The deluge persisted.

Confused villagers looked through the rain the phenomenal ruins around them. One peered down into the water that ebbed below him, gazing at his fractured impression. He began to bend into the reflection, in a deep contorted bow. Then, in the thunder of the pouring rain he opened his mouth emitting a long sound, a pitch that seemed to arrive from nowhere. A siren that resonated in my ears, hummed through my skull and cradled my brain. In dumb awe, another did the same, then another, and more.

My next movements where something of an instinctual blur. I saw myself struggle through the ruins and saltbush, then trudge through the sandbanks in search of the Hermit. His figure emerged from the horizon, illumined by a bobbing light. Wading through the water I reached my father’s old boat, hauled aboard by the strong arms of the Hermit. Sailing into the vast unknown, we fled that town.

I can still perceive that faint image, a lasting memory of that time. The way they had stood like fossils in the pouring rain, bowing into their reflections, as low as is possible for any beast to bow. He had been a poet of that ethereal world. The rest had been no more secure than the song of a siren. The rest had been washed away, leaving nothing but ghosts and wandering memories. Let me finish with this. The final tale he shared with me as we sat among the elements one cold evening.

One evening after the hunt, a fox sat in the shadows of a pasture observing a wolf devour the meat of a fat sheep. As he watched the wolf feast, the fox grew hungry and became unsatisfied. In time the wolf fled toward a cave with a portion of meat, intending to return for the remains. Deciding to take advantage of the opportunity the fox stole a piece of meat, fleeing the pasture in search of a safe place to eat it without disturbance. Once within the woods he crossed a clear stream in which he gazed upon his own reflection. Believing it to be that of another fox with a larger piece of meat and overcome with greed, he decided to steal that also. With a low snarl he reached for the meat before him. As his mouth opened, the piece he carried fell into the stream and all was lost.

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'All The Wild Animals' is an experimental tale that employs the tropes of the fantasy genre to create a reality that is ambiguous, in which ideas of what is real and what is questionable are explored. The construction of the fantastic world also seeks to speculate the socially constructed ideologies associated with the notion of otherness, and specific rites and rituals associated with death, grief and loss.

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My name is Emily Johnson, and I am currently studying under the Bachelor of Arts program with a dual degree in English and Creative Writing. I thoroughly enjoy the study of both- the construction and analysis of literature- and other forms of artistic expression. My hope is to continue studying this area post graduation.
The Maple | Katrina Pike

There was no moon that Tuesday night. The full moon had been the week before and now the night was barely lit by tiny dots of stars. The soft shadows hid Charles as he walked in his flannel pyjamas through the garden. He had to hurry; there was a lot to do before morning came. He had to get back to the house before Sara noticed he was missing. She noticed too much these days. Tomorrow was her birthday and Charles smiled as he thought of the surprise he had planned for her; it was exactly what she needed. He heard a rustling in the dry leaves to the left of him but he hurried on. He didn’t even look. Things were going well and he placed his gift in the garden before hurrying back to the side of the house. The gift radiated a soft green as he walked away.

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The day was still dark when Sara woke to the pre-dawn chirping of birds. She lay there and imagined the beginning of another year. The great five zero year. She listened for the tapping of her dogs’ toenails on the polished floor as they waited for their walk. She blinked in the dark and swung her legs out of bed; she wanted to see the sunrise of her fiftieth birthday. A gift to herself. The dogs turned circles in anticipation of leaving the house as she stopped in the kitchen to turn on the coffee pot. Charles had added the coffee, but no water. Sara sat on the chaise in the entry and replaced her cat slippers with bright blue, mucky gumboots before she opened the verandah door. As always, the dogs scrambled off down the path that was the boundary fence of Charles and Sara’s land. Sara followed quickly in the soft dawn light; she wanted to reach the big maple tree at the top of the hill, and with any luck, watch the sunrise break from her favourite place. The dogs were under foot and she had to go slow. She didn’t make it; half way up the hill she had to turn to watch the sunrise through the clouds that signalled today would bring rain. The streaks of red, orange and yellow cut through the grey morning. The view from the maple tree at the top of the hill would have shown the gold on the ocean as well. It would have been magical. The light always hit the maple just right and turned it into a living ball. She knew it came alive and the thought made her happy. She frowned at the dogs.
'You shits. You made me miss my birthday morning.’ They didn’t seem to care and she didn’t sit down, ‘You shits. No tummy rubs.’

She set off for her one happy spot, but as she neared the dogs started trying to sit on her feet. She tripped.

‘You Goddamn dogs, you aren’t coming again.’ She knelt in the grass, hands wet with dew. She noticed the smell. It was sort of sweet or metallic and unexpected. It reminded Sara of the home butcher; the smell of his cold room. The sweet smell of blood. Max stood in front, facing the maple tree. He looked like a wolf with all his hackles up. Bella had forced her way beneath Sara’s arms where she stood and trembled, as if she was frightened. Sara couldn’t see anything from the downhill angle she knelt at. She pushed up and stood, stroking Bella as she moved away towards the right, a little further from the maple tree and further uphill. She had the vague idea to get above the maple and see the problem. She hoped it wasn’t a kangaroo killed by feral dogs or something equally horrible. A snap of her fingers bought the dogs closer to her and away from the bottom of the tree. They seemed interested and afraid of the area beneath the foliage, but not the trunk. She kept moving away.

Sara reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone to dial the house. She was counting on Charles already being awake, as otherwise he wouldn’t hear the phone ringing. His capacity to sleep through anything had always amazed and annoyed her. Lots of things about Charles annoyed her these days. He seemed to have become someone different when he turned sixty. He didn’t listen anymore, he didn’t laugh and he didn’t walk the paddocks with her. The phone rang out. She tried again but still no answer. She wrote a text message – Please come to the maple tree. Something is not right – pressed send. There was no kiss at the end.

When she looked up she was closer to the boundary fence and much further from whatever was below the maple. Beneath the foliage she could just make out shapes that could have been cow pats if there had been any cows in the paddock. She shuffled closer for a better look. The shapes came into focus and before she registered what she was seeing she had taken a few more halting steps. Chickens, headless chickens, placed around the bottom of the maple tree, tiny pools of blood all around them, all eight from her chicken coop. The bundles of feathers were
smoothed down with their little twig-like legs sticking out straight behind them. Then she noticed her headless cat, hanging like washing from the bottom branch. The blood pooled beneath the grey tabby fur. All Sara could do was stare. It was so awful. Almost all her pets, headless. She couldn’t remember letting the cat out but there he hung. She did remember locking the chickens in their coop last night, filling their seed dish and collecting their eggs. They had been locked up and safe. She dialled the house phone again, still no answer.

‘Holy fuck, holy fuck,’ she mumbled as she continued to stare.

The deep breath she was taking made her feel dizzy. The dogs started wagging their tails; she heard rustling and turned towards the neighbour’s side of the fence.

‘Happy birthday!’ and then in a singing voice, ‘Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday beautiful Sara, happy birthday to you.’

‘Holy fuck. Joe, you scared the crap out of me. You need to come here and see this.’

‘Hey, why so hostile? It’s your birthday, baby. You should be celebrating. I bought a gift for you to unwrap.’ His voice was all sugar and smiles.

Until he saw what she could see.

‘What the fuck, Sara? Who did this?’

He stepped around her and walked towards piles of feathers and fur. Sara could hear the scrunching of dry leaves under his feet and distant rumbles of thunder as the morning clouds prepared to deliver the promised rain. No bird chirped.

‘Is that your chickens?’ He wore a shocked expression on his boyish face.

‘And your cat?’

‘I don’t understand. I locked the chickens up last night; the cat was inside. How is this possible? Who would do this?’ Her voice grew louder. ‘Who could do this?’

‘Hey, hey, it’s alright. We’ll get to the bottom of this.’ Joe didn’t take his eyes from the maple tree, ‘Could it have been Charles? Maybe he found out about us and this is some sort of pay back?’
‘What? No. Charles isn’t capable of this. This .. this is murder. These are my babies. Even if he knew, it just isn’t who he is.’

‘Ok. Well, we won’t consider him for a moment.’ Joe held out his hands. ‘But, this is some seriously fucked-up shit. This is completely personal to you.’

‘I know, and on my birthday.’

Joe poked at one of the chickens with a stick. It rocked sideways and a feather came loose.

‘It looks like their little heads were sliced clean off, real neat like, no chopping or sawing.’ He looked at Sara, ‘It would have been quick, painless.’

‘Dead is still dead, Joe.’

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In the house, Charles was just waking up. He stretched, farted and rolled over. He didn’t really expect to see Sara but he had hoped to. He imagined kissing her awake and wishing her a happy birthday. She had been twenty-one when they married and, although most of their friends were divorced, he considered it his own personal good management of their relationship that they were still together. He bought the required flowers on the right days and took her to dinner once a month. He frowned when he realized he may have forgotten to perform his husbandly duties in the bedroom this past month but he reasoned all would be well once she received her birthday present. He didn’t hear the phone. He didn’t hear anything. His hazel eyes stared at the sunlight dancing over the wall of their bedroom. He did not blink; he barely breathed. He just stared. His eyes a soft green glow.

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‘Have you tried calling the house to see where Charles is?’

‘There was no answer. I sent a text.’ Sara checked her phone and waved it at him. ‘Nothing.’

‘Ok, um, what do you want to do? Move them? Leave them for Charles to see?’ Joe didn’t like Charles. Not just because Charles had Sara first but he considered him an odd sort of man. There never seemed to be very much happening behind the scenes of Charles’s mind. Which is how Joe had managed to snare the interest of Sara. Whenever something neighbourly needed to be done, he stopped asking Charles and just started asking Sara. Neither of them had expected anything
of it until the day the cow had gone down calving and Sara had rung to ask for help. They had spent the night in the cow shed, doing what they could. Their first kiss was a passion-filled explosion and it had been the same every time since. Joe had decided to ask her about leaving Charles. They had never spoken about that before. He assumed they would have to move away. It would be awkward to expect her to move into the house next door. But, the thought made him smile.

‘Do you think we should call the police? It seems targeted at me, don’t you think?’

‘Hmm, good point. I didn’t think of that.’ The cat swung like a pendulum as he poked it with a stick.

No shit, Sherlock. For a smart man he never thinks. Don’t crap where you live, Sara. How many times had she told herself that? And here she had taken on a lover, just freakin’ next door. Charles was going to find out. Hell, Joe might even tell him just to force her to make a decision. She didn’t love Joe. He just scratched an itch she shouldn’t have. She didn’t know how to get rid of him without Charles finding out. She had an awful feeling Joe was going to be a pain about ending it, that he was going to sprout on about love and how they were meant to be together. Really, it was all Charles’s fault. If he kept up his side of the marriage bargain she wouldn’t have shopped around. He didn’t even remember it had been over six months since they’d been out for dinner, longer again for other things. She wished she didn’t love Charles as much as she still did.

The thunder mumbled around them and the clouds seemed heavy and close. A slight breeze moved the branches causing them to scrape together, and make a sound like a low howl. Sara looked towards the maple and was surprised to see it emanating a fluorescent green tinge. The howl became a screech as the maple started to twist and shake. Her eyes opened wide and her mouth pulled back in a grimace, but no sound came out.

‘Jesus!’ Was all Joe had time to say before a thick branch came down on his head. It was not clean and neat. Blood exploded everywhere, spitting brain and bone over the ground near the chickens. His body fell into a heap near the stick he had used to poke the animals.
Sara didn’t scream. Not a sound, not a movement, nothing. She just stood there, shaking and staring at what was left of Joe. His crisp ironed shirt smeared with splatter and dirt. His head a mass of shattered bone and meat. Bits of his boyish face peeled away like bark, leaving a piece of skin shaped as an empty Halloween mask hanging from the branch.

Sara felt the ground move towards her left ear. She saw green images contracting into a ball of black, heard the rush of wind and then nothing. A light rain started to drizzle.

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When the dogs arrived back at the house without Sara, Charles got worried. He grabbed an umbrella and started looking. He checked where he had placed his gift in the side garden but it was still covered. He was impatient for her to see what he had been working on. Charles had purchased polished green rocks for the fairy garden over the internet. The note that came with the rocks said they were magic and would bring the holder exactly what they needed. Charles thought Sara needed magic to bring her all the love he felt but didn’t reveal enough. He knew he had been forgetting many things. He checked the coop but saw she had already let the chickens out, so he strolled along her usual paths and whistled the birthday tune. He stopped when he got to the maple. He saw Joe first, or what he thought was Joe. The body was laid straight but his face swung from a branch. He noticed the piles of feathers and one dead cat. His heart was racing as he started desperately looking for Sara. He saw her laying in the grass and when he touched her, she was cool and breathing shallow.

‘Please, please Sara. Oh, please. Open your eyes.’ He shook her, saying her name over and over, each time shaking harder.

‘No, no.’ She woke with a start and frantically pushed Charles off her and into the wet grass. ‘No, no.’ Her hands whacked at where he touched her. She scrambled into a crawl and tried to escape.

‘Sara, it’s me. Me, honey. It’s Charles. You’re OK.’ He managed to catch her and pull her into his arms. Her whole body trembled. He let her go as she leaned forward and vomited.
‘What’s happened here? Did you see what happened to Joe? We need to call the police. Have you got your phone?’ She fumbled to pull the phone from her pocket.

‘Maple. Joe. Cat.’

‘Yes, we’re at the maple. The magic tree. You’re safe. I have you.’ He pulled her into a warm hug.

‘The maple did this. It glowed. It moved. It’s bad, evil. We need to leave.’
‘No,’ Charles whispered; his eyes glowed a soft green.

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Within the story, I wanted to explore the genre blend of dark fantasy and horror whilst also exploring the question of moral corruption. There is good and evil within each of us and horror stories have a way of exploiting our fear and insecurities. The tree is used to incite the innate fear of being caught doing something socially immoral and consequently brutally punished. By exploring the concept of nature as the balance within society and the potential for human failure to be judged and punished accordingly

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Katrina is a second year Creative Writing student that lives on a farm with fat black cows and retired chickens. She has the desire to be a published author and when not searching for just the right word she can be found watching action movies or sipping tea.
Writing for Children and Young Adults examines some of the issues pertaining to writing for a children's or young adult audience. This semester we looked at how the young adult genre has grown in the last few years to become the most popular literary genre with its own conventions, and problems. Young adult literature reinvents itself every few years. The stories that follow echo this daring remodelling of form and genre, and yet remain faithful to the idea of their young audience.
We all have a shelf life. No one is guaranteed a permanent spot any more: not in car parks, queues at the check out or the next operator who shuffles you to 5th in line. I come from a time when things were built to last. Today is my 95th birthday. I have witnessed many things over the decades, including what I’m about to tell you...

Come a little closer...get comfortable. There you go. I wasn’t always looking so disused y’know. I’ve matured a bit since I was left to while away the rest of my days up here in peace and quiet. Ripened like a good port, was the message they wrote to mark the auspicious occasion. Ninety-five years is a milestone ol’ sport, almost shy of a Centenarian. But, I ask; what’s the point in laying bare your life story if you’re only going to be knocked off the shelf? My body has shrivelled inside this old, dusty jacket; as soon as your skin is looking parched, whiskery threads sprouting out of places they shouldn’t or, heaven forbid, your spine begins to warp, that’s when they start shaking their heads. Just a dust collector, they tut. A wrinkle or two I can tolerate, but it’s the dog-eared creases and haggard scars around my mouth from opening and shutting that have not been kind to me. Book me in to the grim repairer, I’ll say. Stitch me up and spray me with some good quality lacquer, (or is that liquor?); I’ll come up as good as new! These chapters would spin a good yarn if you will give me just a moment of your time. I am convinced I am here for a reason. Although I have no photographs to show you what I have endured, my words in sincerity should suffice. The truth is, my day of reckoning occurred later, after the incident. However, I will recount to you all that I know.

1919: the fateful year I arrived in Ireland. In those days the village was called Garradrimna, located in County Meath, or as the locals called it, ‘The Valley of Squinting Windows’. A young couple, Marcus Thatcher and Nora Delaney, were the talk of the town. Nora was desperate to marry Marcus; more-so for his inheritance than his reputation. They fell pregnant quickly during their courtship, but after a stillbirth, their baby was supposedly buried at the bottom of the garden. The story goes that Marcus left Nora and married another, while Nora immigrated to England.

Now, that could be where it all ends, and it has been for decades. Some say I lost the plot. I say some incompetent excuse for a book-keeper removed some vital chapters and put them back in the wrong order, (apparently book-keepers know
more about numbers than words. Go figure!) Since that last mishandling, I have been in rather bad shape, which is why they have stuck me up out of harms’ reach, most likely to be forgotten about. Oh and that darn label they put on me:

‘Reserve Section: Do not borrow’

Then on top, another bit of ferreted tack that reads:

‘Handle with care: small parts may break off and cause injury to children.’

What has become of this world? As I said, I was built to last. But what happens when nobody wants to use and appreciate the things that have stood the test of time? I have this theory —yes, even we fictional folk have theories — we are living in an instant world: instant message has taken over from the handwritten letter, instant soup has filled many a larder to save the backyard hens becomin’ chicken broth, instant gratification comes in the form of a thumbs-up button, (much less a pat on the back from your Ma or Da). Now I can hear your head-cogs whirlin’ and gnashin’. How could this stuffy ol’ codger possibly know the difference between a face-in-a-book and Facebook? Well, I have observed, (too many a time for my likin’) the young’ns following their Ma and Da around, twiddlin’ their thumbs on a funny lookin’ contraption named after some kinda fruit. All I hear is ‘I’, me, me, me. So naturally, I gotta find out what these blazin’ finger-tappin’ i-Books is all about. Thing is, there’s no charm; no comfortin’ feel between your thumbs smoothin’ pages, no peculiar musty smell; just plastic and harsh light. Mark my words, do not drop them i-books. I never heard such profanity over a dropped piece o’ fruit. Lord Almighty. Books last, that’s all I’m sayin’. As long as you look after ‘em.

Anyway, where was I? Must have a slight tear in my prologue, or perhaps the gaps keep gettin’ wider between the happenin’ and the tellin’. Humour an ol’ sport here would you and turn on that lamp. It’s gettin’ late and my words tend to fade with the afternoon sun. That’s better. Still comfortable? Good, then we can continue.

Nora and her new beau, Finnegan, later moved back to Garradrimna, where the villagers delighted in telling Finnegan about his wife’s promiscuous past. Sadly, Finn battled the demons of the drink and made little as a labourer to support their only son, Rian. Over time as Rian became a grown man and moved to Dublin to pursue various labours (and lassies, no doubt). Nora quickly became as petty and unhappy
as the rest of Garradrimna and plotted revenge on the Thatcher family for rejecting her years before.

I’ll just stop yer here, and give yer a little disclaimer; y’see it’s not all foggy in this recollection of mine. In fact, what is within is most certainly not what is without. Books with humble beginnings don’t last the distance. Yet I almost did not survive to tell the tale! My Creator, or what I know of him, lived in this very town and studied the townsfolk for most of his dreary existence. Even as the unspeakable events unfolded, he watched from his tower, drafting passages that went like this:

As the crows fly low on the darkening horizon, a blanket of mist settles on the valley; the sleepy village lies hidden, except for a church steeple rising, and upon it, a limp, flesh-coloured morsel that, from my high vantage point, looks as suspiciously curious as it does appealing to the crows circling above, their steely eyes catching a glimpse of the commotion below, and, without warning, swoop. All that can be heard in the moments after are the sounds of hollow air under flapping wings and the incessant scratching and pecking of beaks into stone. Nearby, curtains part ever so slightly to allow a series of squinting eyes...

I don’t expect you to believe the whole story; in fact it’s all a bit too Turn of the Screw for me. I don’t need no prepositional clauses or subordinated meta-inflections to prove I’m publishable. Just heed that my voice is older than the trees they will knock down and mash to a pulp to restore my vital organs, as much as it is worn like the bullock they will slay to provide me a new skin. Unfortunately, the life that I lead has come about due to my controversial beginnings and is filled with more fire and water damage than I could wish on an encyclopaedia! Then again, I must be thankful to my Creator, as I wouldn’t have the experiences I’ve had from sittin’ on a dusty shelf the whole time since comin’ off the Press.

Alas, I was saved by a merciful stranger who placed me on a wooden cradle and floated me down the Meath Valley River. My gutters were awash with ink from my ruptured veins: filaments torn by the ruthless hands of the villagers. Missing pages, like missing teeth, are not painlessly replaced, (nor were they painlessly extracted, mind you!) They may tut and twiddle and fart and fiddle over my appearance and the labels I have been given but it will not stop me, much less define
me. As a spritely chap once said, and I quote, ‘you can never tell a book by the cover’. It seems to me that if Edwin Rolfe’s words back in 1946 still have relevance, why not the books that contain them?

I mustn’t go off on tangents here, but what I am gettin’ at is: it’s better to have lived a life of ups and downs than bein’ perched on the shelf watchin’ the rest of the world go by its nonsensical business. I have known others to do such a thing, and lived terrible, insufferable lives for it. Ah-hem. Pardon my posture, for I am all a’shambles; it has been some time since eager eyes have paid me this much attention.

Pray read on...

Time passed, and Nora and Finn’s son Rian returned to Garradrimna, where he befriended Kiel Thatcher and courted Keira Kelly, a local school-mistress. Unbeknownst to Rian, Kiel and Keira had already been intimate when Keira became ‘with child’. Keira was exiled from the village; the Thatcher family disowning her to once more protect their dignity. Forced into hiding, Rian vowed to avenge his beloved Keira, and his mother, Nora, for the Thatcher’s merciless abandon.

Now you may be thinkin’ that The Valley of Squinting Windows holds a special interest while researchin’ a project on local history or the like, but it is only a facet of my being. What if I told you I am a part of history that was banned and burned in the Twentieth Century? Yes, indeed my name does make an appearance on the ‘black list’. It’s more of a gift than a curse, though; like bein’ branded a criminal when yer know in your heart yer were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. ‘Such is Life’ as one infamous bushranger said right before he was strung up. The dead do have voices; often you will find their medium is through a book. Just like Ned Kelly has been immortalised in the pages of numerous purported accounts, there is no denyin’ he was a criminal, a murderer and a thief; yet his spirit is more alive than any vulgar-mouthed lout that drives a pick-up and calls himself a citizen of The Promised Land!

I can’t speak for the places I’ve never been, so I’ll stick to the origins where my forefathers bore their Irish roots and meddled with the lassies across the English Channel. Their stories may differ, but their beginnings are tied to the same roots. The Emerald Isle is oft’ an authors’ romanticised backdrop; them rollin’ green hills,
sandstone cliffs that offer no grander view, and of course, the reward of a cheek-throbbin’ whiskey and cosy place to perch up by the cracklin’ fire to pore over a few hundred pages. Shucks, what imagery! I should have been an illustrated edition.

I’ll now go into the part you may find especially intriguing...

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*It was on Rian and Keira’s wedding day that an old gossip from Garradrimna informed Nora that she had been there as a young lass the night Nora gave birth all those years ago. To Nora’s disbelief, her and Marcus’s child had been born alive and, perhaps more astonishingly, Marcus’s brother and his wife had taken the newborn to be raised as their own son, named Kiel Thatcher.*

And so I leave you with the page so thoughtfully bookmarked by my last reader, who also cordially threw a lit match upon my papery skin and set it ablaze. Hence, if there are a few scorch marks, or holes in the plot I cannot be held accountable. Neither can the Librarian who may be teeterin’ over your shoulder to catch any unsuspectin’ reader in the reserve section without a pass! Best check yer surroundings in case the metal chip in my spine sets off them bleedin’ alarms. That’s stealin’, just so yer know and in my time such a sin would land yer straight in the clinker, or worse!

Alas, I am not here to waffle on about my wretched shelf life; I am here to tell a tale that will surely hearken heavier a heart. ‘But…’ I hear you mutter under your breath: ‘What of the final piece of the puzzle?’ The grand finale: the village goin’ up in flames? The ultimate revenge plotted on the Thatchers’ for their injustices?

You were holdin’ it all along. Well done you. That tattered bookmark you unknowingly picked up when you unfurled my pages was in fact the missin’ page from my epilogue. Apart from a few stains and singes, I am whole again. There was never a better moment to celebrate this milestone; at ninety-five I am finally able to exhale my last few lines and rest in peace. *For now,* at least.

So, my friend, prop me up and we shall resume. Come hell or high water; we will resurrect an ending to this!

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**Epilogue:**

Upon discovering Keira’s ‘condition’, it is said that Rian murdered Kiel, among other members of the Thatcher family, weighing the bodies with lead and disposing of them and their legacy in the Garradrimna marshes. The newlyweds departed by train for Dublin, and an uncertain future.

...Unblinking, the eyes behind the windows of Garradrimna stared on.

**The End.**

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*Dear Reader*: enclosed in my jacket is an item you may find of interest. I feel it rounds off my story quite nicely, don’t you think?

*~ Meath Valley Town Crier ~*

**SCANDAL RE-SURFACES OVER BANNED BOOK**

**August 29th, 2015**

Shortly after publication in 1920, there was an outbreak of hostility in Delvin, where Brinsley MacNamara's novel *The Valley of Squinting Windows* purportedly takes place. The uproar was a catalyst for the high profile court case initiated against MacNamara for any individual who believed they had been defamed in the novel. This consequently led to the banning and destruction of every copy in print.

While MacNamara insisted that Garradrimna could represent *any* village in Ireland, geographical landmarks mentioned in the book, as well as correspondences between the villagers and ‘fictional’ characters, suggest that Garradrimna *is* in fact based on the author's hometown Delvin, County Westmeath. Most notably, the book closely chronicles the murders that took place on the steps of the De Lacey cathedral, later identified by forensics as the ‘bog bodies’ buried in the Meath Marshes with their considerable fortune, (or mis-fortune, to be apt).
Nearly a century later, MacNamara’s novel has undergone several reprints, particularly when curiosity of the event resurfaces; so expect to find a new edition coming soon to your local bookstore. However, for those who prefer the ‘real deal’, the remaining original can be viewed in the Dublin Library, reserve section.

As a historical side-note, ‘The Valley of the Squinting Windows’ has since become a popular colloquialism in Ireland to describe a place where prejudicial gossip is common.

**Author’s Note:**

_There’s an old Irish proverb ‘better a death that follows trouble than a shame that follows death’. Since the Garradrimna Murders, no-one to this day has stepped forward to claim the ‘inheritance’ uncovered in the Meath marshes, alongside several stiff-lipped members of the Thatcher family._

_Blood is, and will always be, murkier than water._

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You could say that my life began with the written word. I was penned in 1920, and brought to a fiery end some two years later by the villagers of Garradrimna, who threw me and my brothers and sisters upon a heap and torched us. I emerged, however; a phoenix that rose from the ashes, barely charred or buckled by the heat. The words my enemies spat like poison arrows gave me no choice but to flee my home county and escape to my final resting place, atop the highest shelf in the Dublin public library, reserve section.

Tomorrow I am booked in to meet my Maker, to have my gutters spliced and replaced with metal, to be bound from back to front in some fandangle new jacket and hopefully, one day, resume telling my tale. For I am mere paper and ink, a beginning and end, no more, no less; a shelf-sitter that refuses to be bound by the modern man or machine. And so my story, _The Valley of Squinting Windows_ continues...
'ShelfLife' is a creative non-fiction artefact, or historical re-birth, that came into being from the simple line: 'My Life Began With the Written Word'. The theme, in fact, was inspired by the notoriously elusive Gary Crew Award (USC, 2016), leading the author to pursue several attempts at researching the history of the written word, comparative linguistics, book burnings and murder and mayhem in Ireland during the 1920s. Not surprisingly, a plethora of creative stimuli emerged and, despite resigning from having her name on that perpetual trophy for another year, incited further plotting, (plotting the story that is, not revenge...) 'ShelfLife' indeed began with the written word...500 of them to be exact, which sparked a swashbuckling time-travel adventure (of the Google variety), through the portal of no-return (look up: The Valley of Squinting Windows by Brinsley MacNamara) and culminating in a 2500 word submission for Creativity and Literature (with the swash-buckling Dr. Ginna Brock at the helm). Ginna’s inspired teachings of frame narrative, intertextuality, pastiche and unreliable narration (along with the convoluted ‘Jamesian’ sentence, or two) through keeping a weekly journal of readings and reflections have shaped the creative process and final product that is ‘ShelfLife’. A special thank you to Doc Brock! *

As if Bianca Millroy has a story to tell, she’s just the author of this story-within-a-story, framed by a true story – and yer can’t get much more metafictional than that! My tale, because I’m the book, should really be told here, not hers. But since you’re readin’ this, expectin’ a biography of sorts, I best start behavin’ or I will be a battered excuse for a bookend! Bianca is a mature-aged* Bachelor of Creative Writing student who often lets her characters escape and run amok on the page. Havin’ said that, Bianca believes freedom of creative expression is one of life’s truly remarkable pleasures and is workin’ towards a Masters of Professional Practice and publishin’ her first novel, ‘The Solitary Light’. Also creative non-fiction, the novel is based around a lighthouse, shipwrecks, unearthly apparitions, Irish fishermen (a trend, it seems) and only a slightly unreliable narrator. The author in question currently resides in her Attic on Buderim, (the idyllic writers nook, she assures me) and upon graduatin’ in November, intends on stayin’ there until she lands her dream job as a travel writer. Bianca enjoys sunrises, stand-up paddle boardin’, cookin’ without a
recipe, the odd red wine and a good yodel, hike or road trip through the hinterland, (although doesn’t recommend trying these all at once). Alas, I could go on, but then I’d be tellin’ yer a story!

*Please note use of ‘mature’ as a very general term used for students who are in the demographic bracket between non-school-leaver and yet to receive a letter from the Queen. In this case, 20-something will be quite accurate.
There was once a pretty village that nestled on the sunny side of a mountain, with fruit trees blossoming and pine trees that leaned over the roads like tall ladies with parasols. The people of the village were contented. Their animals were fat and happy, their crops verdant and plentiful. All of the water they could ever need ran down from the mountain in streams and rivulets, through the fountains and wash houses of the village and onto the pasture land below. Here lived two brothers, twins, though they were opposite in every way.

Biaggio, the eldest, was not a handsome man. He was much shorter than his brother, and so quiet and thoughtful that many in the village believed him to be a simpleton. But he was a scholar, patient and cautious and successful in business. While Biaggio was respected for this skill, the people kept their fondest regard for Aurelio. Like a ray of sunshine, he was dazzlingly handsome, and the people were as charmed by him as if by an angel from heaven. If Aurelio had any flaws it was that he was too easy-going, too eager to have people like him. He was quick to choose the pleasurable over the uncomfortable, including responsibility, and since they loved him so, his family and the rest of the townsfolk forgave him.

Biaggio, such a contrast to his brother, soon became the object of ridicule. The villagers would snigger and point at his mismatched hose, the bow in his legs, the twist of his spine from hours spent poring over books. Aurelio knew that the villagers mocked his brother, and since he delighted in the frivolous, he became an expert at impersonating Biaggio’s bow-legged walk.

Before long their father arranged a marriage. Biaggio, as the eldest twin, was to wed Claudia. For years Claudia had been sequestered in a convent to teach her the refinements of a noble lady. Such an education, you assume, would bring forth a gentlewoman, groomed to be the perfect wife. But Claudia secretly yearned for a hedonistic life, her body draped with the finest silks and velvets, delicious morsels at her fingertips. In the convent there had been no mirrors for the appreciation of her own beauty, and yet Claudia was completely enraptured with herself. Alone at night when she undressed for bed, she would feel the softness of her skin, the bounce in her long red curls, the slimness of her waist and curve of bosom. Hidden beneath the
modesty of her grey gown there was a young woman intoxicated with her own sensuality.

On the day of the wedding no amount of dark green velvet or white lace could hide Biaggio’s thick body or coarse features. It was a beautiful wedding. The sound of flutes and strings accompanied Claudia as she glided like a swan down the aisle. When the time came to lift the veil for their first tender kiss, it was Aurelio’s gasp that caught the attention of the entire congregation, and unfortunately the bride. While Biaggio’s lips worked over her own, Claudia gazed over his shoulder at Aurelio, seeing for the first time a man whose beauty rivalled her own. Reluctantly, the kiss ending, she looked for the first time into her husband’s face, and carefully concealed a grimace. As they left the church Biaggio marvelled that God had given him such a perfect prize. Claudia held a sweet smile on her face, lost in a daydream that it was the brother by her side. Following behind them, almost skipping, came Aurelio, as besotted as a puppy.

It wasn’t long before Aurelio and Claudia became paramours. During the day, while Biaggio tended to business with his father, the lovers met at Biaggio’s villa, and their lovemaking was so passionate, their cries of ecstasy so euphoric, that the earth trembled and the foundations of the villa rattled like thunder. In the town square, below the villa, the people were frightened by the shaking earth. Some days the tremors were strong enough to topple statues into fountains and flush the starlings from their trees, sending them swooping about in confusion.

On one particular day the earth tremors were so fierce that the mountain above them began to groan in pain. For the first time that anyone could remember the water that flowed through the village, like its life blood, slowed to a trickle and then stopped. Screams of fright came from the wash house where the women had been up to their elbows in suds. This bought the men running from the fields, and on the way they noticed that the channels that fed the fields and stables had also run dry. This was a catastrophe! By the time Biaggio heard the people yelling in alarm, the villagers were in a panic and had gathered in the centre of town in front of the civic buildings, some still carrying pitchforks and hoes.

Biaggio stood beside the mayor as theories were thrown around as to the cause of the sudden loss of water. Maybe God was punishing them? Maybe the end
of the world was coming? Perhaps it was a neighbouring village on the other side of
the valley, jealous of their good fortune? The crowd grew even more unruly when
the mayor tried to placate them. ‘What are you doing to fix it?’ they shouted and
‘why are you still standing there?’

Biaggio stood quietly at the mayor’s side listening to all the quarrelling. Finally, he stepped to the front of the crowd, raised his hands, and from deep in his
barrel chest he thundered ‘Silence!’ and the crowd hushed immediately. ‘People of
my village. Let us not be hasty. Surely we cannot come to these conclusions without
further investigation?’ he looked from one face to another, ‘We can have no idea
why the water has stopped flowing! Someone must travel to the source of the
water.’ At that moment, after a particularly earth-shattering orgasm in the villa
above, the village shook so fiercely that many in the crowd fell to their knees, and
the Mayor grabbed Biaggio as if his very girth would protect him from harm.

Now Biaggio was not a foolish man. He had extensive knowledge of the
natural world from his studies, and shrewdly recognised an opportunity for himself.
If he solved the problem of the missing water surely the town would be grateful to
him? Maybe even reward him with a position as the mayor, since the old mayor was
due to retire? He was already imagining himself and Claudia presiding over official
functions, as would be required in such a capacity. Imagine the influence he would
have over the business decisions within the town. The villagers were now suggesting
more and more preposterous reasons for the water’s disappearance. Dragons and
vengeful giants, sorcery and the supernatural. They turned to each other and
remembered every minor dispute and grudge, some that had been held for
generations. He had heard enough.

‘Never fear, my friends and neighbours, for I, Biaggio, will go immediately to
the top of the mountain and investigate these phenomena.’ A smattering of
applause answered him, though many were still engrossed in petty squabbles, they
shoving each other and waving their farm tools menacingly. Without further ado he
leapt from the stage and set off to the edge of town where a path led up the
mountain alongside the now dry creek bed.

No one travelled up the hill with Biaggio. Even his brother was absent, though Biaggio acknowledged that he would have been more of a nuisance on this
journey, he knew his brother lacked common sense. The day was hot, and the path treacherous with rubble that had fallen with the tremors of the earth. At the crest of a ridge he paused and looked back at the village, and the tiny houses nestled in the valley below. Looking up at him, some shading their eyes, were the villagers. He noted that he could not see the blue of Aurelio’s tunic in the crowd. He turned and leapt over a pile of rubble and disappeared from their view to the other side of the ridge.

Before him was a small meadow, a level expanse that swept up to the next rise of the mountain. Here was the source of the water. It usually flowed from a cave concealed behind rock. Instead there was dust still settling from a rock fall, and the two round boulders on either side of the cave were now exposed. Between them a huge spear of granite from the top of the mountain had toppled forward and blocked the flow of water. It was tapered, like a bullock’s horn, wider at the top than at the base, where it’s tip had embedded deep into the creek bed. In the midday sun its surface gleamed with hints of quartz which made it seem magical. It was solid enough though, to seal the flow of water leaving barely a trickle for the town below.

Biaggio could not believe the destruction. He took a moment to study the lay of the land, walking from one side of the pillar to the other, running his hands over the striations in the stone, looking at how deeply it had penetrated the creek. The cliffs on either side of the cave were insurmountable. Nor was there any chance of clearing the cave from the sides. He moved a good sized rock from the base of the pillar using his stocky legs as leverage, and sent it tumbling to one side. He stretched his back and rubbed his hands together before placing both hands on the side of the grey monolith and giving a push.

At first there was nothing. The tower of rock refused to budge, so firmly was it embedded. Biaggio brought his powerful legs and arms into play, heaving and rocking the stone until it moved ever so slightly. He stepped back from his task. Now he knew where it was most vulnerable. He moved to the side of the rock, reaching both arms around as if he was embracing it. He imagined the villagers waiting below. He thought of how no one had come to help him to solve the problem with the water. He thought of the sniggers that he had always ignored, the subtle disrespect he was accorded as he conducted his business. He knew that he was the object of
ridicule, and quite frankly it usually didn’t bother him. But today was different. Today he had felt as if he alone was the only one capable of clear thinking and deductive reasoning.

He stretched his neck from side to side until it clicked, and using his stocky legs braced against the side of the cave entrance he commenced to move the monolith. He considered his beautiful wife who he loved and yet who was cool and distant to him in the boudoir. He thought of his brother and how he could never depend on him, wondering where Aurelio might be at this moment? The people of the village reminded him of the sheep in the fields, moving as one when frightened by a shadow, incapable of individual thought. Back and forth he pushed and shoved the spear of stone until with a final mighty heave it fell to one side, dislodging the red clay that had held it so firmly. The creek began to run in a gush, its swirls and eddies soon clearing the muddied water. It quickly found its course, and to flow down the mountain. Biaggio took his time returning to the village, lingering over the narrow curves in the path, deep in thought.

The villagers were ecstatic. Here was Biaggio, their favourite son, who had saved the people from certain doom. Hadn’t they always said what an asset he was to the village? So brave! So strong! They pushed each other aside to pat his back as he passed, he seemed so much bigger than before. Some bolder than others even dared to embrace him. From where he stood on the stage in the town square Biaggio looked down at the villagers, at his beaming parents. The Mayor moved beside him and with a bow to the cheering crowd, removed the red mayoral robes from his own shoulders and reached up to place them about Biaggio’s. Embracing him about the middle, the old mayor then stood on his toes and planted a kiss to each cheek. The crowd roared and cheered, thankful to Mayor Biaggio for saving the town.

He smiled at them and searched the crowd for his wife and his brother. The laughter and cheers slowly silenced. The people looked to each other in fear. Biaggio’s face had transformed from joy to puzzlement to realisation, and then finally to fury. He drew himself up to his full and quite magnificent height, looking imposing in the mayoral robe. He gave a quick bow to the crowd and left the stage, striding up the roadway to his home.
Biaggio’s transformation as he strode to his villa was astonishing. It was as if he had leapt heroic from the pages of one of his favourite books. With each stride he seemed to grow taller and taller. When he marched into the marble courtyard the servants scattered like pigeons.

Out of the bed chamber stumbled Aurelio looking pale and shocked as he wrapped a white towel about his nakedness. ‘Biaggio? What are you doing here? Has something happened to Papa?’ Claudia slid from the bed chamber like a cat hiding in the shadows. She pouted her lips and avoided looking at either brother, instead arranging her long red curls fetchingly around her naked body.

‘Biaggio. Brother, no! It is not what you think, I can explain!’ Aurelio marvelled at how big his brother looked in his new robes. Claudia was silent, her eyes darting from one to the other as she tried to think. She noticed how weak and pathetic Aurelio looked, as he stood trembling before his brother. Biaggio was magnificent and imposing, now grown taller than the lintel above the door. She thought he was almost handsome, though his face was flushed red with fury. They had to tip their heads back to take in the full glory of him.

‘Ah, but my dear brother,’ he replied to Aurelio’s question, his voice oddly calm ‘since when did you ever wish to know my thoughts?’ He reached down, for he was a giant now, taller than the first floor balcony, and with a finger and thumb from each hand he plucked the two of them from the ground, Aurelio’s towel falling to the marble floor. ‘I fear you have underestimated me, baby brother!’ Biaggio stood to his full height, as high now as the pine trees that saluted the road to the villa. ‘And you, mia cara,’ looking to his wife, ‘did you think I would not discover your betrayal?’

He held both of them in front of his face. Aurelio hung flaccidly from his brother’s hand, as submissive as a kitten held by the scruff of its neck. Claudia’s low yowl of anger matched the kicking of her feet and her grasping claws. She tried to reach Biaggio’s eyes.

‘A shame that I was held for a fool by all the town, and by you both.’ He shook his head, ‘and yet, observe!’ He turned and held them up so they could see back toward the village. ‘It would seem provident that I bided my time.’

He had cleared the roof of the villa now. Looking out over the terracotta rooftop they saw the road back to the village. From behind the pine trees, on either
side of the road stepped a man or a woman, the villagers from the town below, standing witness to the scene before them.

‘So sad for Mama, eh my brother?’ and with a flick of his wrists and smack of his lips Biaggio swallowed his brother whole. Claudia reacted like a wild creature in his other hand. She hissed and spat and used unladylike words. She tried to scratch him with claws that were now too small to do any damage. Biaggio was beyond her reach.

‘Oh mia cara, my kitten! Such fierceness, such fire!’ he paused as if thinking ‘I do hope this does not bring on indigestion!’ He shrugged. With a single gulp she was gone. Biaggio spun on his heel and strode back down the road, his robes a swirling red flourish behind him. The villagers bowed their heads and fell into step after him.

***

A fairy tale is the perfect vehicle to highlight the duality of the human condition, in particular that between power and impotence. By using magical realism and symbolism to add layers of meaning I subverted the prince charming trope and twisted the ‘happily-ever-after’. Just like the real world, there are no winners.

*  

I’ve worn a lot of hats in my time but the author hat sits the most comfortably. It’s been hanging on the hook waiting for me to slip it on for a long, long time. My family say it’s the most flattering hat I’ve ever worn. When I wear it I glow. I’m exactly in the middle of my degree and here in second year I can see why my writing didn’t work before. I can’t wait to see how it looks in third year. Or at the end when my hat turns into a mortarboard and I toss the tassel to the other side.
CMN266: Creativity and Literature - Chaucer to the Romantics

Creativity and Literature - Chaucer to the Romantics picks out interesting highpoints in the history of English literature, choosing both canonical and anti-canonical texts. Many students used the idea of palimpsest in their stories, playing with the idea that we write on top of other writing.
Red Hands | Summer Heathcote

The house was dead. I hated my mother.

“Got your stuff?” she asked from behind blowfly sunglasses, already miles away.

I nodded, fingers numb where they clutched at my suitcase handle. “Where are you and Bill headed this time?” I mumbled, eyeing the man in question mutinously.

“Oh, here and there,” Mum simpered. “We’re headed to Hawaii for a bit.” I hated her more.


“Behave for your Aunt,” Bill said, waggling a finger at me.

“Your Aunt, not mine,” I muttered, heading for the house.

It was a colonial monstrosity, massive porch, massive door, massive everything. Flickering darkness from every window and a sigh with every gust of wind. In short: creepy as hell.

“Claire!” Jackie sang out from her rocking chair on the porch. “It’s so lovely to see you dear, how long has it been now?”

I shrugged, oddly touched by the warmth in her tone. “Not since the wedding, Auntie.”

“Oh,” she said, standing on shaky legs.

“You alright?” I asked.

“Fine,” she said, but I didn’t miss the way her eyes flitted upwards to stare at empty air. Old ladies are weird. “How long are you planning to stay?”

“A while, Mum and Bill want to make the most of their ‘them’ time...”

“Well,” Jackie smiled. “We’re happy to have you.” She opened the door onto a lifeless hallway, cheerful yellow wallpaper flaking off to reveal the drab grey underneath.

“We?” Cold fingers grazed my neck, stroking down my back in an attempt at comfort. I shivered, turning to look back at the car. “I thought you lived alone?”

The kicked-up swirls of dust were settling back into the gravel path. They were already gone.
“I do,” Jackie said, smile wavering. “Slip of the tongue. Come inside, why don’t you?”

The house was alive. I hated my mother.

Doors would slam shut of their own accord, windows sneaked upwards in the dead of night to let in the chilling winter air. Hollow rooms with sheet-covered furniture seemed to rotate around in a miasma of despair, causing me to step down one hallway and end up back where I’d started. But nothing ever hurt me.

Jackie was not so lucky.

She would come down to breakfast with bruised wrists and a frenzied light to her eyes. No matter how often I enquired as to how she came by the bruises, her answer never changed. “It’s nothing to worry about.”

Until it was.

That night I woke to suffocating darkness, sheets twisted round my legs like chains. The stale terror smell choked me and I thrashed on the bed, fighting for freedom.

“Shh,” she whispered, “shh little one.”

“Auntie?” I stilled, shuddering as a bony hand smoothed down my sweat-matted hair. “Auntie, help me.” Her fingertip, fever-warm and sharp as it trailed down to stroke my cheek, tore through my skin like butter. Reaching for the bone underneath.

“Please don’t cry,” she begged. “Just shut up baby, just be quiet.”

I screamed, long and slow. Staring up as her face broke through the dark. Always smiling, even as her eyes glowed like hot coals.

“I said shut up!” She roared and hands pressed down over my face.

The darkness descended once more.

“Claire?”

Someone was screaming, a keening wail that knifed through my head.

“Claire, wake up!”

The world was a churning red, blood on the floorboards, soaking through the cradle, deep under nailbeds. The girl, fourteen years old, yellow dripping down her
legs and staining her pants, tears from her eyes, begging. Always begging as the cleaver neared.

“Claire!” The slap shocked me awake.

“Auntie?” I gasped out, the bone-deep chill withdrawing its eager hands from around my heart. I touched my cheek, the same one that had been ripped open in my dream, now stinging from the slap.

Jackie slumped down next to me, thin, veiny hands wrapping around my own. “Are you okay, sweetie? Must’ve been some dream.”

I looked at her, her panicked eyes and trembling lips. “Yeah,” I said, “there was a baby. And a girl. Before that, you were there, you... suffocated me.”

Jackie flinched.

“I was really scared,” I added awkwardly, embarrassment beginning to overcome my terror. I gave a dismissive laugh. “It was just a dream though, right?”

We were both silent. The more I looked into Jackie’s frightened eyes, the more fear gained control.

Finally, Jackie sucked in a breath through her teeth, straining the dust from the air. “Of course. Just a dream, dear.” She stood, smiled. More of a twitch of the lips than anything. “Breakfast’s at seven thirty so don’t sleep in too long. There’s no second chances!”

I nodded, rubbing my still-stinging cheek. “Yeah, alright.”

As she disappeared through the doorway I stood, walked over to the vanity. On my cheek there was a long-faded scar, pink and raised. The cut that made it would have had to be deep. Down to the bone.

I shivered. Just a dream.

That morning I went in search of answers. It was a big house, with various wings and little hidey-holes dotted here and there. I was convinced there was probably some dusty old attic or dank dungeon around with some kind of information. Somewhere, there was an answer to my dream.

“Claire?” Jackie asked as I poked around the kitchen. “Are you alright sweetie?”
I closed the kitchen cabinet I’d been peering into, turning to face her with a smile that felt like plastic. “Of course, Auntie, why wouldn’t I be?” For the first time in a week, Jackie was bruise free. My smile wobbled.

Jackie’s grew. “Of course, why wouldn’t you be?”

The silence between us festered. I couldn’t meet her eyes. They were drawn to the counter behind her, where a large meat cleaver rested.

“I’m gonna take a walk.” I gestured to the door. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

“Of course, dear,” she said as I reached the exit. Her thin, pale face seemed brighter than usual, lips turned upwards in what almost seemed like a smirk. “Be careful.” With her wild, grey hair, she looked almost like a story book witch. The kind that liked to fatten up the little boys and girls for dinner.

I shivered. “I will.”

The whole house stank like a little visited op-shop: aged clothes stuffed full of moth balls and abandoned, sticky toys. It was perfume on the tongue, bitter and cloying and not something to be swallowed lightly.

Despite this, it was kind of beautiful. The East Wing, which Jackie seemed to avoid like the plague, had an old-world charm of dark wood floors and haunting, empty rooms that spoke of love and terror ages past. Or, maybe, terror recent.

The house was dead. But not without life.

Down the end of the East Wing’s corridor was a locked door; the first one I’d found all day. The rattle of the doorknob was pretty much the most thrilling noise I’d heard all week. “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” I muttered. “And guaranteed it’s behind this door.”

“So... how am I gonna do this?” I rubbed my hands together, glaring at the doorknob. Readying myself, I aimed a hard kick at the door. The shock juddered up my leg, bringing tears to my eyes. “Argh!”

Settling for another glare I tried to reason with the door. “Look, I don’t have many options here. Pretty much the ideas are brute force: failure one. Asking Jackie for the key, not gonna happen. And you opening out of the kindness of your heart. So... please?”

With a groan, the door crept open.
“Huh,” I said. “Well that’s... terrifying.”

The room was small. Set out much the same as my own, only dustier. Where my bed would have been, there was an old-fashioned cradle. Despite the decay of the room around it, the cradle’s wood still had a lacquered sheen, as if it saw regular dustings and maintenance.

It looked the same as the one from my dream. Slowly, as I stared, dumbstruck, it began to rock.

“Rock-a-bye baby. On the treetop.”

The low croon coiled around my legs like a cat’s tail, deceptively soft. It sounded like Jackie but when I looked around, there was no one there. The cradle was empty, I was certain, but I thought for a moment that I’d caught a glimpse of a baby’s pink romper through the bars.

“When the wind blows, the cradle will rock.”

The air around me seemed to stir, brushing me with the same brisk, dead fingers I’d felt on the day I arrived. They didn’t scare me as much as Jackie’s voice did. But they were still freaky enough that I wanted to run. And keep running until I found people. Preferably big, strong people with guns.

“When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall.”

The cradle started to tip violently toward me. The lining was stained, dark brown-red like rust. Or blood.

“And down will come baby.”

The colour became more violent. Raw steak red. Dripping out of the wood. Slithering across the floor with hands clawing up out of the boards. A thing of blood and gristle crawling steadilily closer. Laughter, Jackie’s. Hysterical. Mixing with the wails of a baby and the screaming. That horrible screaming. And the cleaver. The horrible scraping of metal on wood. She’d already killed the baby. I was going to-

“Cradle and all.”

Die.

“Mum?” I whispered into the phone, hands shaking so bad I nearly dropped it.
“Yeah sweetheart?” Her voice was distorted by the distance between us. She sounded happier without me.

“Could you come get me?”

Bill interrupted, “What do you want us to do that for?”

“Hey Bill,” I said, surprising myself at the lack of venom. “I didn’t know you were listening in.”

“What’s this all about, Claire? We’re busy, here.” She didn’t sound worried. Once upon a time, the fear in my voice would have had her out the door and in the car faster than I could whisper her name.

“Aunt Jackie’s not well,” I hissed, scanning the kitchen. “She’s acting really weird.”

“She’s old, Claire,” Bill said. “She’s had a rough life, what with losing her girls and all.”

“No, you don’t understand, I think she tried to smother me last night,” I blurted, “and things are happening. With the house. And I’m really scared and I want to go home.”

There was a pause. A sigh. “Honey,” Mum said. “It’s a big house, I’m sure all sorts of things happen with it that might freak you out. You’ve always had such an imagination! But it’s just a house. And your Aunt Jackie is just a little old lady who doesn’t deserve you saying such things about her.” Her voice was like steel. “So be nice, okay?”

“Please,” I whispered. “Mummy, I’m scared.”

Mum sighed. “Fine,” she said, voice clipped. “While I very much doubt she tried to smother you…”

“She did,” I insisted.

“Obviously you’re quite worked up,” she ignored me, “so we’ll pick you up in a few days.” Her reluctance was almost as obvious as Bill’s vehement protests. “Behave until then, please…”

“Yeah,” I whispered, trying to ignore the ache in my heart. “Thanks, Mum.” I looked around the room and caught a flash of white in the doorway. My heart dropped to my stomach. “I’ve got to go.” I replaced the ancient receiver into its cradle carefully, shuddering at the way the room grew cooler as Jackie entered.
“Going home?” Jackie asked, wrapping her grey hands around mine. “So soon?”

I nodded, words stuck in my throat.

She gave me one of her tremulous smiles. “Probably for the best. This house has not been very kind to the young. My children died here you know, in the East Wing. Horrible business.” She patted my hand once more before pulling me into a hug. “Lock your door,” her breath was cool on my neck. “Lock your door if you want to live.” She let go.

I looked down at my hands, stained brown-red. Like rust. Panic rose up my throat like scrabbling hands. I smiled at Jackie, ignoring the tap, tap of the blood dripping from her fingers.

I fled.

The house was hungrier at night. Waiting for fools like me. I wanted my mother.

The door was locked and rattling. I tightened my grip on the meat cleaver, fingers a bloodless white. A baby began to cry; a thin, high wail that made my ears ache.

“Auntie? Is that you?” I whispered from the centre of the bed.

Hands beat frantically on the other side of the door. “Let me in!” she screamed. “She’s going to kill me!” It wasn’t Jackie. Far too young for her. It sounded so much like me when I got worked up that my heart froze in my chest.

“Who’s going to kill you?” I asked, slipping off the bed and toward the door as quickly as I could. Every footstep like a mile. I reached for the handle, fingers wrapping around the chilled bronze.

The crying stopped.

“Please,” the girl moaned. “Oh no, please, Mummy don’t. Don’t hurt me please.” The door thumped ominously and something slid down it. “No...” she sobbed. Wet hacking coughs. The clatter of a meat cleaver against the floorboards. I looked down at the one in my shaky hands.

“Hello?” I said, “Are you okay?”

Nothing.

I opened the door.
Aunt Jackie was in the corridor. She frowned at her red hands. “They wouldn’t shut up,” she implored, “I wouldn’t have done it if they’d just shut up.”

I slammed the door shut, dropping the cleaver in my haste to turn the lock. It spun, pulsating in the air before slamming into the wall next to my head.

Looking at the knife stuck fast, I started to cry, tears dripping down my cheeks as I searched frantically for an escape.

“I told you not to open the door,” Jackie said from behind me. “They can’t get to you if you lock the door.”

“But it is locked!” I sobbed, spinning round to face her, back hitting the door.

She smiled, a wicked witch on the cusp of victory. “No second chances,” she glided toward me, wrenching the cleaver from the wall.

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The short story above utilises the YA devices of the teenaged protagonist/narrator in Claire, the struggle of good versus evil with Claire and Jackie and family conflict between Claire and her mother over her mother’s new partner.

The story has changed greatly from the draft to final, with the dropping of minimalist style to something more detailed in order to maintain word count and keep the story set in a certain amount of time.

If the story where to continue, it would presumably be with a new potential victim for Jackie and Claire and Jackie’s children working behind the scenes to prevent the tragedy.

* Summer Heathcote is attending USC as a Creative Writing student while she waits for the (inevitable) zombie apocalypse to occur. Hobbies include ending stories on a cliff-hanger (because she knows people hate it when that happens), eating her weight in pizza and talking about herself in the third person (she’s not sure about that last one...).
**Unexpected Gifts**  | Lisa Derwent

**Memoir written for Year 12 Arts Exam 2016**  
**By Melanie Pierce**

**** When I look back I had no idea that I had been wandering in a world of *without*. A world *without* *Meaning*, *without* *Aspiration*, and mostly *without* *Passion*. Once found, these became my *MAP*, and my link to the *Art of Living*. I see that the ones that follow a *MAP* of their own making have a rich life, and then there are the ones that don’t. What happens to them I hear you ask? They plunge into the murky water. Submerged. Drowning. Hands occasionally poking out from the brown swill, fingers waving in desperation. I’ve held out my hand, but mostly they don’t take it. I can’t force them. I can only hope that they find the ladder on the side of the well and choose to climb it. ***

### 2 YEARS BEFORE

When I woke the air descending to my lungs via my nostrils gave no clue that life as I knew it, the quiet predictable succession of moments, was about to skew into the realm of interesting.

The first noise I heard was Mum’s Monday morning voice gliding down the walls of the hallway and between the door-jam into my bedroom: loud, yet appreciatively not shrieking.

‘Wake up, sleepy head. The school week has started.’

Things were normal now, or as normal as you can get when a spouse and a Dad dies. Insurance paid off the mortgage, which meant there was no stuffing our life into cardboard boxes and taking the trek over the bridge. There’s safety on our side of town, where everything is as orderly as a manicured lawn.

Of course we miss him, but as Dad would want, life has to go on. It can take some time though. Death intruding with such close proximity steals the blissful ignorance that attaches itself to any form of risk taking.

Mum’s voice slides into the bedroom once more. ‘Come on honey get up. You’re now running late.’
It’s not that I dread Monday morning, it’s just that I’m noticing a sameness about it; the regularity that comes with knowing the tuckshop queue on the first day of the week will be long.

By this point, Mum pops her head in the bedroom door. ‘You know, good regular habits established in these formative years go with you your whole life. Psychological well-being starts in childhood.’

‘MUM,’ I say, peeling back the bedcovers. ‘I’m 15.’

‘Yes, yes, I know your birth certificate says you’re 15. Your bra size says you’re 15 - but your brain is still developing right up until you’re 25 or more. You want a good life don’t you?’

I sigh out a ‘Yes, of course, Mum’ in my stop-lecturing-me voice.

My usual 20-minute bathroom stop is followed by a grab for the popped toast as I sling the schoolbag over my shoulder and scuttle out the door.

‘Bye, Mum. Love you.’

‘Love you too sweetie. Have a great day. Remember: Good choices equals a good life.’

Those of us who live close ride our bikes to school, and the others have the misfortune of having their bum cheeks massaged by the springy seats of the rickety old bus.

Annie used to come by bus. She had been my BFF since Grade 7, the start of high school. Two holidays ago, she and her family moved to live with her Grandma. ‘It’s not forever,’ she promised. ‘Only until Grandma gets better, or worse,’ she added, dropping her voice in the we don’t like to speak about the possibility of death tone. With one last tangle of arms and a trickle of tears we said our goodbyes. ‘Skype me,’ she bellowed out the car window as the family drove off.

I was standing at the bubbler near the bike racks, where I used to wait for Annie, when I first sighted that auburn coloured hair, flying wildly in the wind, atop a bike that was careering down the hill. Unkempt, untethered and very nearly reaching the bike chain. Surely it had never been cut, and surely it often got tangled. What a deliciously satisfying chore it would be to de-knot that hair. In my town an aspiration to be a hairdresser was a girl going places.
I didn’t have to look around to know, like me, every other girl in the school had their hair up and tied with school-issued green ribbons. Private schools shamelessly curtail the kind of fashion freedom this girl enjoyed.

And then I saw it!

*Shut the front door.* Green, grey and white stripes with the peter-pan collar. *She’s coming in here.*

The bike made the turn through the school gate, and was heading straight for the rack. I was close enough to see that those big brown eyes had that look about them like they grew up in a city, or somewhere with a lot more going on than here in Burnsby. I’d seen that look before in Annie’s cousin’s eyes who had visited during the last holidays. That was some summer: Especially for Annie’s neighbour, Matilda. She was only 14 and hooked up with the cousin. All the parents found out. Her Mum was mortified. Annie kept saying ‘I can’t believe she did it for the first time with a boy who: one, comes from the city, and two, has a tat. What kind of kid gets a tat?’

The owner of the auburn hair had alighted by this point, parked the bike, and was scrambling into her schoolbag and dragging out a green ribbon and then a hair tie. Within seconds it was pulled back, tied-up, and adorned. She was now one of us.

At that moment the bell chimed, and everyone scrambled to class. The auburn-haired girl disappeared up the path leading to the office.

Five minutes later she materialised at the classroom door. Sure steps took her straight to the teacher. Extending her hand, she introduced herself: ‘Rainbow-Skye Lyons, Miss.’ Her voice was one of those husky types.

‘Good to meet you Rainbow-Syke Lyons. What do you like to be called?’

‘I like Rainy, but some people call me Rainbow.’ She spoke with a deliberate slowness so her facial expression could keep up. It had the result of adding an extra layer of coolness to her demeanour. ‘Parents had a little hippy fest when I was born,’ she said, ‘clearly they weren’t the ones having to go through life with weirdo nature descriptors for a name.’

‘Rainy it is then. Take the spare seat next to Melanie,’ the teacher said pointing at the space beside me.

Rainbow-Skye Lyons was by far the most interesting specimen of a human that had entered the school grounds in quite some time.
‘Melanie Pierce,’ I offered as she sat down, hating the sound of my name. It was so ... so, ordinary.

At lunchtime, by default of having no-one else to hang out with, Rainy decided my company was good enough. I found out she moved here just the week before to live with her cousins. Parental divorce.

‘So you came with your Mum?’ I asked.

Rainy didn’t answer. Instead she reached into her pocket to pull out a picture of the dog she had to leave behind, and up came a cigarette.

‘Oops, meant to leave this at home. Do you smoke?’ she asked.

‘No, never tried one. They’re not really good for you,’ I said, wishing I hadn’t sounded so goody-too-shoes.

‘Right,’ she said. ‘Any cool guys at school?’

Rainy had a motto for life *FREE SPIRITS RULE.* She emblazoned it on her pencil case, wrote it - in a fake-tattoo kind of way - up her arm during the winter months when she could hide it under her jumper, and it became her excuse for all of her idiosyncrasies: When she slapped paint haphazardly onto the canvas, argued with the teachers, or had a crush on one boy after another. She’d often say stuff like, ‘Mellie, one thing my parents taught me was that if you’re stuck in a circumstance - like we are at school and like I am in this town - you gotta approach it with passion. Only way to embrace life.’

I wasn’t convinced that what she called passion was in fact *passion.* I just saw a girl with frustrations. But I was grateful for Rainy’s friendship. She became my motivational mentor, and sometimes because we disagreed. She was the reason I contemplated: *How do I want to passionately embrace life?* Through this lens I fell in love. Not with a boy, but with life itself. Don’t get me wrong I had a few boys showing interest.

Art class with Rainy was different to Art class with Annie. With Annie we’d sit side by side tracing first, then meticulously applying the paint, careful not to go over the lines. When I painted with Annie the aspiration was to copy flawlessly.
Rainy challenged me in a way I hadn’t expected. Standing in front of our easels she’d scream out the word *vanilla*, and in one swoop she’d lean over and flick her brush, spoiling my perfect representation of some idealised scene that I’d imagined, forcing me to turn it into an abstraction of its former self.

The first time she did it I was furious, like if she’d stolen my last breath mint when I desperately needed to mask the odour of lunch. But, it was through this process that I began to really *feel* Art. I felt its power to transform. Not just the Art piece itself, but me. I felt creativity coming through me, like a source and I was its channel. Art, all forms of it, became my passion, my obsession.

Rainy had become my Annie, only in that we were inseparable. We even started to call each other Bro: It’s a weird girl trend. After school, whenever we met up, it was always at my place. Whenever I’d suggest hers, she’d say ‘Nah, people have stuff on at mine today. Better we go to yours Bro.’

Mum and Rainy got on like hot milk and chocolate powder, and became sisters of the kitchen. Rainy didn’t care too much about school work, so while I hit the books, Mum and Rainy would spend hours mixing, mashing, moulding, and making. My stomach didn’t complain.

One day, when Mum was out, Rainy and I were curled up on the couch watching a movie. She began to tickle me, and we fell into a form of ladies wrestling.

I don’t know how it happened. I seriously hadn’t planned it. I don’t think Rainy had either. It was like a pause in time. One of those moments when you look back and think: *Was that even real?*

There was a gaze, a melding of my blue eyes and those big brown weepers. A kind of searching, but not for anything understood in a language form. And, then there was a joining of lips. Featherlike at first, just a brush, and then sensual.

I can’t tell you how long it lasted, but I was really grateful that afterwards we both fell into a giggle. You don’t want that first kissing experience to be weird.

‘Whoa. What happened there,’ Rainy asked, her lips parting into a luxurious smile.

‘I don’t know. But it wasn’t bad was it?’ I asked.

‘No way. Different to boys though.’
‘I wouldn’t know,’ I said,
‘You’ve never kissed a boy. Get outta here.’
‘No. That was my first.’
‘Wow. Well, you’re very welcome Miss Mellie,’ Rainy offered, jumping up to curtsy, in a southern belle sort of way, prompting another shared-giggle.

Nothing more was ever said about that. Rainy went back to kissing boys, and I suddenly knew why I hadn’t wanted to. Was it a good choice? Rainy had taught me that sometimes you just had to delve in, so I decided it was no different to trying strawberry ice-cream, you gotta taste it to see if you like it. Maybe one day I’ll try the other flavour, who knows.

Not long after, Rainy didn’t come to school for the whole week. She didn’t answer phone calls or texts.

‘Mum. I really want to go and check on Rainy,’ I said.
‘Sure love. I’ll drive you.’

We clambered into the trusty Toyota Camry, affectionately called Cameron as a token gesture to restore the gender imbalance in the house, and for the first time for what seemed like years we went over the bridge. I didn’t exactly know where Rainy lived, but I knew it was somewhere near the tennis courts, and she’d spoken about a huge fig tree out front.

Mum was talking about the influence of where you lived to how you developed, and reiterating for the umpteenth time how lucky we were to be living on the other side, when I finally spotted the fig. Mum waited in the car. I was about to knock on the door when it opened. Eww. My head reeled backwards, and I redirected my hand to cover my nose. That is some stench. The shirtless owner of the odour pushed passed. I’m not sure he even noticed me.

‘Rainy in there,’ I called out to him.
‘Out back,’ was the short sharp reply.

As I stepped inside my eyes widened. Cockroaches scuttled away from the open pizza boxes that half covered stains on the beige carpet, remnants of the contents progressing towards bacteria. Posters of Heavy-Metal bands dangled, the blue-tac no longer secured them to the walls. One bean-bag whose middle seemed
waif-like, and a lounge, no doubt thankful for its brown colouring else it might be embarrassed like you would if you spilt sauce on your clothes.

By this stage the smell had reached my nostrils, my stomach started to flip, and I suddenly felt the need for air. I couldn’t get to the back door fast enough.

Staring out at the overgrown backyard I wondered if Rainy was even there, and then I saw a blanket move on an old couch that was propped up against the paint-deprived concrete fence. I was unsure whether to approach when the blanket moved again, and a piece of long, straggly auburn hair fell to the ground.

I rushed over and gently nudged Rainy on her shoulder. ‘Hey Bro. Wake-up.’

She rolled her head and opened her eyes slightly. ‘Whoa, hey, what are you doing here?’

‘I’ve been worried about you.’

‘Just had the flu, no big deal.’ She sat up and looked straight into my eyes. ‘So you finally got to see my current abode. Crap hey.’

It wasn’t my place to judge, though my mind silently agreed. ‘I came through the house.’ I said, apologetically.

‘I live in the garage,’ she said. ‘Just me. When my parents split neither of them wanted a school kid around. My cousin wanted the rent, so here I am.’

‘How have you been looking after yourself?’

‘Dad pays the school fees, and sends me guilt money. It’s enough to live off.’

On the drive home I told Mum about the house. ‘It really was awful.’

‘You know love, family’s not just blood. Why don’t you ask her to move in with us? Just until she finishes school.’

‘Oh-My-God Mum. I can’t believe you’d be that generous.’

‘Well, we’ve been lucky enough to be looked after. It will give our life meaning if we can help someone else,’ she said.

I rang Rainy immediately. This time she picked-up.

‘Heck. NO,’ she said. ‘School bros don’t live together Mellie, but thank your Mum for the offer.’
'Think about it,’ I said. ‘You’d have the room downstairs, and we could help each other get through our HSC. Besides Mum’s taking more hours at work, so you can help manipulate the kitchen to produce food. Just one rule, No Smoking.’

‘Well absolutely no then,’ she said laughing.

One Saturday a month later, a day when the rain was belting down, there was a knock on the door. I opened it to see one of those cool Rainy facial expressions, slightly tilted head, wry smile, and dripping auburn-hair. A suitcase in one hand, and a school bag over the shoulder.

‘I see you brought your life,’ I said. ‘and I’m glad you changed your mind.’

‘The garage roof was leaking,’ she said, ‘and I got to thinking, sharing grandparents is the same as sharing a bus-seat with someone. It’s a misplaced loyalty to think you have to sit next to them for the whole ride.’

And so a new chapter began.

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‘Unexpected Gifts’ is written in the format of Young Adult Fiction (YAF) using some of the conventions of the bildungsroman genre. Identity formation is a huge part of teenage and young adult development, and is critical in YAF. The teenage first-person narrator in this story learns, through friendship, to follow her own instinctual creativity, and in doing so discovers herself. It has an intimacy scene, which is common in YAF, and with a modern twist the intimacy is same-sex. I wanted to portray the scene delicately with an emphasis on non-discrimination, to add to the support for the gay community. For me it is important to write stories that forward a compassionate response, and this story does that through a generous offer of sharing.

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Lisa hopes that learning what makes for good writing will help her fashion some words into a form that leads to publication, and that those words will resonate with enough readers that there is a desire to read more words that fall into sentences.