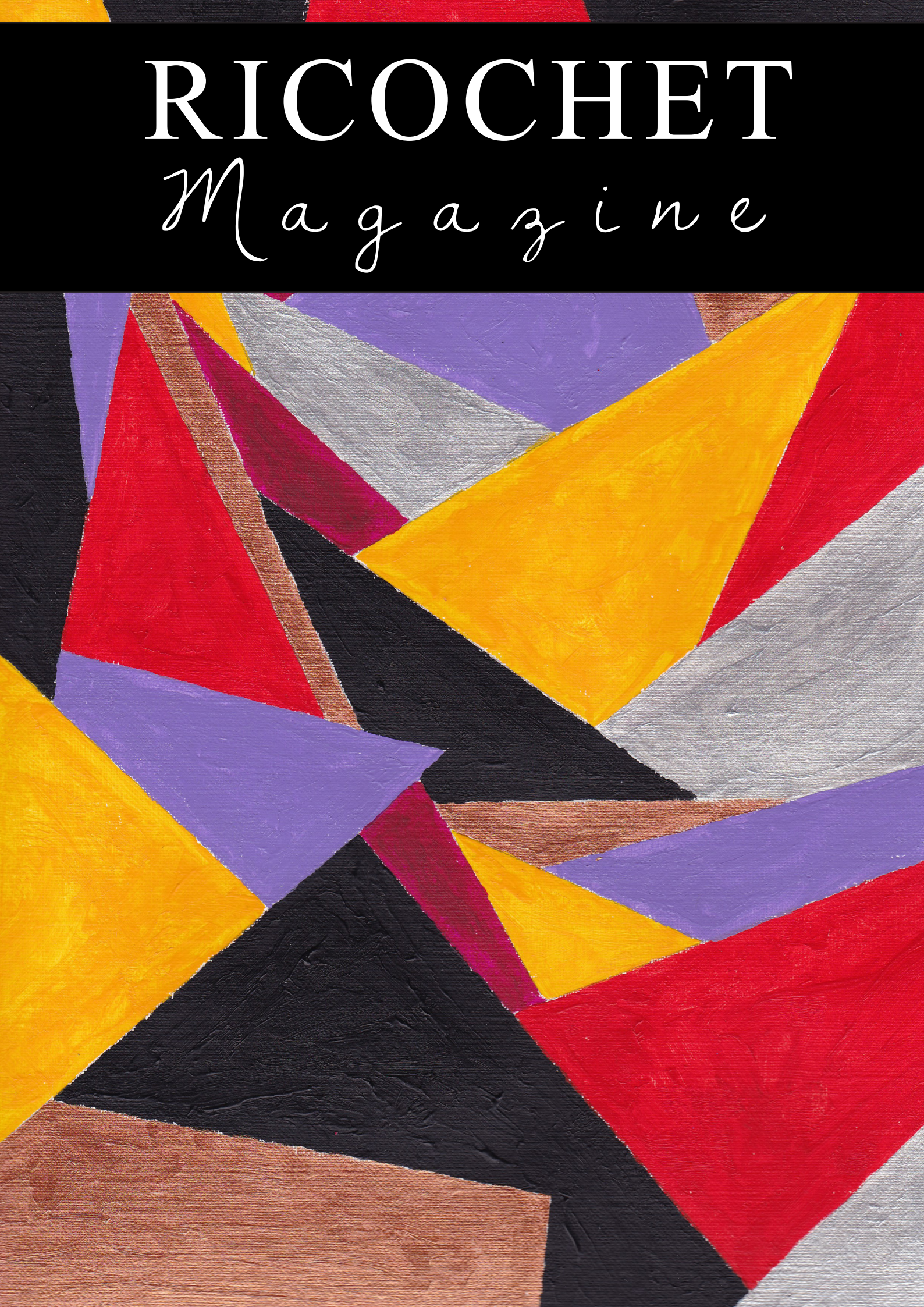
RICOCHET

Magazine



Ricochet Magazine
September Edition

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We welcome submissions at any time. Guidelines can be found on our website.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

It seemed fitting that we open with Corrie Macdonald's essay about melancholy, particularly the writer's penchant for looking back and wondering, because this issue—our biggest yet—simply echoes with yearning.

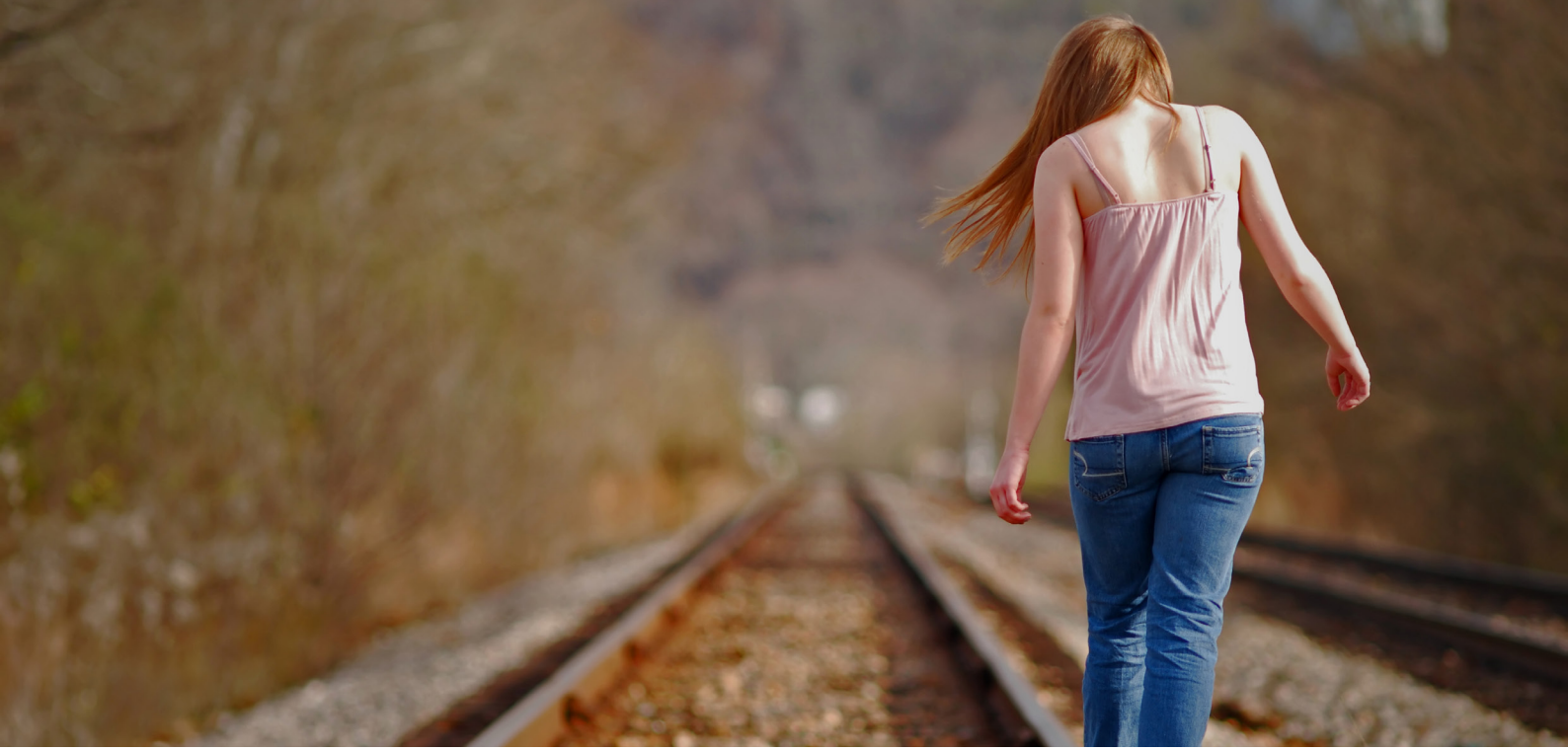
In Linda Brucesmith's 'Bubble', a woman desperate to have children is confronted by the sins of her past, creating something that is both a ghost story and a mournful character study. In Ciahnan Darrell's 'You', three members of the same family grapple with their hidden desires, while the gravedigger in Luke Peverelle's 'The Oldest Profession' wants nothing more than to be left alone, free to farewell the dead in his own unpretentious manner.

The poetry shares a similar sense of need. Take Jordan Tammens's lust-driven 'Spanish Enthusiast of Erotica', or Ryan Favata's bittersweet 'Heaven', where grief fleetingly gives way to laughter. As Corrie suggests in her essay, it's in our nature to ascribe meaning to the places around us, to recall them both fondly and sadly; just look at Ross Jackson's 'Clarice Beckett' and Tayne Ephraim's 'Grass Valley'.

We received our highest ever number of submissions when we were putting this edition together, and while this made our jobs tougher, it made them more exciting too. I think we've managed to curate a collection of short stories and poems with different things to say about the same subject: human loneliness, and our need to break its hold, to find our place, to belong.

We hope you like it.

Emily Tatti
Managing Editor



ON PLACE, MEMORY AND MELANCHOLY

By Corrie Macdonald

A scene assembles itself in my mind, unbidden.

A railway line, stretching into the distance. Its rails are brown and gleaming, sleepers rough-hewn and splintered in places. Gun-metal gravel divides each sleeper from the next. The tracks are bordered by more gravel, then naked strips of deep-red clay and, lastly, the khaki-green of the Queensland bush. Grey, red, green.

A blue winter sky arcs overhead. The sun is hot, and the rail is warm and solid when I lean over to press my hand against it. I try to step from sleeper to sleeper, but every now and then I miss, and a sharp stone jabs my bare foot.

Track, trees and sky surround me. I am alone and just slightly, thrillingly, in danger. The roar of a train will arrive long before the train itself, and the verges offer easy escape, but I know my mother's face would crease with worry if she knew where I was. I am a young teenager, pacing the tracks and reciting the words of a play that I'm learning at school, calling them loudly into the empty air.

This is a real place or, at least, the memory of one, from the small country town where I grew up. I can only recall walking these rails once or twice in the seventeen years that I lived there, yet this is the place that I arrive most often when I allow my mind to wander through the past. Out of the thousands of mental polaroids snapped during my 1970s adolescence, this is the picture that my subconscious flicks to again and again.

I'm baffled by the significance of that empty railway line. But it is, at least, a nice place to visit—far better than many others captured in the photo album of my adolescence.

I'm relieved, for example, not to return too frequently to my father's hospital bedside, where his hand shakes towards me across a white sheet, holding a small box that contains my sixteenth birthday gift. He died in that hospital room a few weeks later.

Thirty years on, I can visit his bedside in a heartbeat, but consider it a mercy that I'm rarely forced to go.

And yet, and yet. Those railway lines are not without their own tinge of sadness. Yes, their emptiness speaks to me of possibility, freedom, the joy of solitude. And I believe that I was happy on that day, in that place. But, as I remember it, the scene acquires a patina of yearning, which I can't explain. I don't think it's just that the forty-something me wishes to return to my unreachable youth, though that's certainly a part of it. It's more that the beauty of the moment, the happiness of that place, is somehow inexplicably sad in the remembering. Its very joy is threaded through with longing—but for what, I cannot say.

Of course, I'm hardly the first person to feel melancholic when remembering the places of my youth, or to struggle to understand melancholy itself. The contradictions of melancholy have inspired essays and analyses for centuries, as writers and thinkers have tried to come to grips with a feeling that derives much of its power from our inability to put it into words.

Nineteenth-century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (a real-life melancholy Dane) wrote often about the mingled pleasure and pain of melancholy, of a longing that can't quite be attached to any particular desire. As he says in his book, *Purity of Heart*:

> [it is] as if something inexpressible thrusts itself forward from his innermost being, the unspeakable, for which indeed language has no vessel of expression. Even the longing is not the unspeakable itself. It is only the hastening after it.

And generations of poets have reflected on the sense of loss embodied in certain memories. For me, nobody does so more potently than the late American writer Elizabeth Bishop, in her poem 'One Art'—her reflection on a life marked by lost family, homes and lovers.

'*The art of losing isn't hard to master*,' writes Bishop in her opening line. But, by the time we reach: '*I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,/some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent/I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster*', we know that there's nothing easy about losing not only the people, but also the places, that one loves.

'One Art' chronicles Bishop's many personal losses, but that's not why I find it so moving. Rather, it's the poem's 'looking backness' that gets me every time—the writer's brave effort to reconcile her feelings about memories and places that are both treasured and full of grief.

I used to think that everybody was as prone to this 'looking backness' as I am, that it was part of being human, but conversations with friends and family tell me that this is not so. Some people rarely look to the past, and use their energies for entirely different preoccupations.

Yet I also know that I'm not alone in spending substantial parts of *now* thinking about *then*. I was moved to read an interview with photographer Warren Kirk, whose life's work is to photograph the ageing homes, businesses and people of Melbourne's inner-west. His frozen-in-time portraits of wood-panelled living rooms, 1950s businesses and lined faces spoke to me immediately.

When asked about his passion for the old, Kirk's reply was simple: "I live life by looking in the rear-view mirror," he said.

While I wouldn't quite put myself in that category, I know just what he means.

I also suspect that writers are more prone to reflecting on the past, with the concomitant risk of melancholy. Perhaps this is because so many of us write to make sense of what we don't understand, gathering up the places, people and events that we've experienced and trying to mould them into some comprehensible shape.

I've come to see that this process of rethinking things is more than a necessity to me; it's a pleasure. Reflection adds a richness that I don't get the first time around.

And yet, and yet. I'm hardly Miss Havisham, with all the clocks stopped around me. My excursions to the more distant past are generally confined to flashes and moments, to daydreams, or places drifted to on the edge of sleep. The dishes still get done, a living is earned, life rolls inexorably on—which is as it should be. After all, as Kierkegaard pointed out so sternly to himself in one of his journals:

> It is quite true what philosophy says; that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards.

In my experience, nothing propels one forward in life more forcefully than children, and I often admire my eight- and ten-year-old sons' capacity to live in the moment. Yet, writing this, I'm starting to wonder: at what point might the looking-backness slip quietly into their mental landscapes?

Which fragment of their current world might become the scene that will lure *them* back in forty years?

As we walk the cracked footpaths to their inner-city school, or squat by a rockpool on the beach that we visit each summer, their mental cameras are snapping away. Snap, snap, I think. Snap, snap.

*An earlier version of this essay was published in the online magazine *Open Field*.

AFTER THE HARVEST

By Eric Botts

We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss—we grow sick and dizzy…
Unaccountably we remain.
—Poe, "The Imp of the Perverse"

Amid the bones of this year's corn, we step carefully over dead husks rotting ears broken stalks like they're gravestones. All things here live beneath the soil; geese deer squirrels passing through will be shot by hunters who've charged this field all day, guns at their hips and shoulders.

You ask, *What if we get shot?*

I say, *We don't look much like deer. I think we should be okay.*

Still, the question nags, and I can't help my nerves, can't help staring at the only cover in the field: that leafless tree, swaddled brown thickets, sifts branches like crooked fingers over an empty plate of Earth.

But then, *So what if we get shot?* something asks from my depths. That imp. It settles inside us and cranes its neck in our youth, urging our leap into rushing annihilation. We all meditate the Plunge at least once, ready to close our eyes lift our hands from the wheel press the pedal impassionately.

Still, most of us would not enter the dead cornfield during the pre-Thanksgiving *pop pop*. Oh, but that imp, some days its whisper rises repeats: *So what so what so what so what?* From the surface we reason to it, life is good *So what?* or at least bearable *So what?* or we have families *So what?* and friends *So what?* and lovers *So what?* and— and— *So what so what so what?*

We stop over some unharvested ears, thinking to take them, til we notice the dry brown crags, the stiff kernels crumbling from their cobs at the slightest touch.

So we leave them for some lucky goose deer squirrel that gets this far into the field without becoming poultry venison taxidermy. Limply, you move to toss away an ear.

Wait, I say.

You stop.

Throw it hard as you can.

We reel back and hurl our cobs, watch them flip over this expanse of lifelessness blanketing life.

God, if you could only see it—mine, I mean—ready to plummet through the wind to the yellow cross-hatch below with little more than a *thud* and a sifting of husks, all that wilful energy forced into this dead thing, dissipating into dead things.

God, if I could only see yours—the cob, I mean—struggling against the Earth's constant pull down down, struggling to break free in its rising.

But the arc is constant, and Earthly things are centripetal things—always seeking the centre. Even as we will ourselves to rise rise up, we can't resist what comes, that strange gravity, that turn of the arc that draws us gently from the peak of our climb back to soil.

The imp would send us there early. As if the peak were too far, the arc too long. As if we should plunge from here and now to— *So what so what?* it asks. We must formulate responses: So the climb. So the exhilaration. So the aching muscle rushing blood swelling breath. So the anticipation to finally learn that— But even before the learning, there's the *view*. The view from *right here* is all there is because what was has gone and what will be we cannot know til it, too, is.

So what? asks the imp and will continue til we round the apex and finally finally see the Longview. Our bodies will shudder as we look out upon the world because it *is*. And then we will be ready, not to learn—that's the wrong word—but to remember the end of that strange gravity, deep beneath the bones of corn, drawing us inward by more than strange gravity now, by the viscous pull of convection into soil mantle core, both enacting and belying destruction.

We become Earth. We become Sun, Red Yellow Giant, Blue White Dwarf, Black White Hole. We become the Small Mass, Bright Black, Singular, and we remember.

I. NOBODY CARES

By Anna Knowles

The man sits in dead middle,
the tired chairs of therapy, in August
of 2012, withered,
eyes almost shut, body twisted,
crushed air breaks in, blows
the hair from his face. Thirst and middle-age
fight him together. He leans to the right,
flannel layers ripple in the heat.
They will not release him early but he can
talk about it. Every night he calls the angels, stands
naked in the hall, weeping. The therapist says
he is going to relapse that night—probably
with some of us. Deep in his gut
the liver drops out glowing shapes,
eclipse as shots in a glass.

II. EVERYBODY UNDERSTANDS

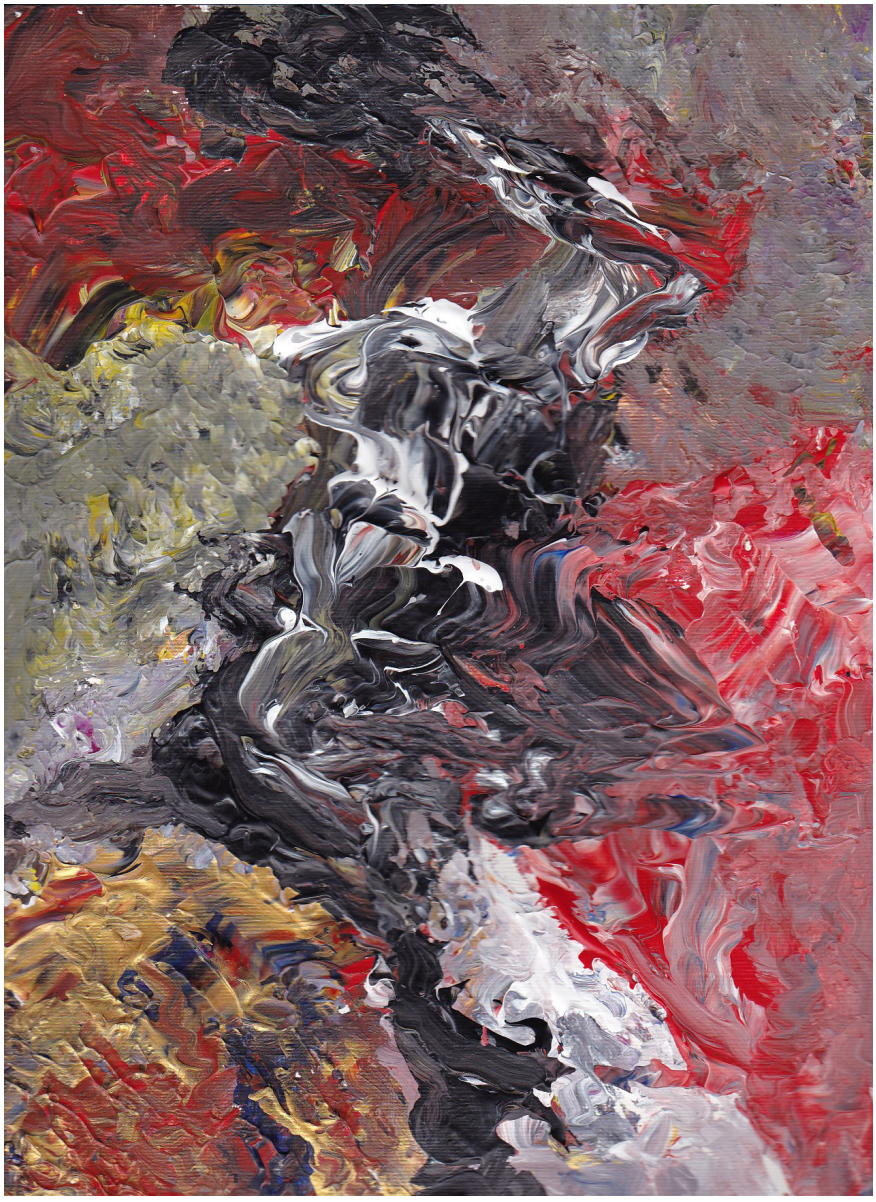
By Anna Knowles

The tidal fluorescents, strung in the form
of muscles the size of small children
wane above a grief-kicked wall
of bulletin board. The man beneath
the lights is a crazy man. The man
next to him hiccups, one leg strapped to a monitor.
No words are wasted but he is, his hands
jolt like the rest of him from the back of the room.
The other man shakes his head—he looks across at us.
He is fixed on the poster of Reagan
mid-bowl, hung at a diagonal
with one arm flung to reach us, the other
arched back holding himself in air.
We are always waiting for the sentence to change,
balancing beat chairs on new angles for redemption
until they break and the threaded light chains down.
Soon, we'll be thrown in another room
and ushered through the shakes. The drunk will nod-off.
The medicated one will leap above the guards,
her tattoos, unravelling.
Here there is the waiting room hush,
the scratch at the end of the hallway, the knees
pushed aside to make room.
He looks at us beneath the lights. He says,
There is no God, only la cuchilla
thick with wreck, spreading black air.

A SESSION

By Valentina Cano

As an aside,
the man removed the top
of his head,
scalp dangling like limp kiwi skin.
He took one of the butter knives
and carved a small door
into the anemone-like mass
now visible.
From it, screams rolled out
on the hems of thoughts long lost.



HEAVEN

By Ryan Favata

It’s funny the things we think of when caught
in the blue wail of crisis, reaching far

from the given moment toward some
sense of else: a dog’s tongue loose

out of a car’s window; the smell of rain
after mowing the lawn two years ago; or,

when you died, for instance, I thought of
the pictograph shot to space in 1972

of a nude man and woman—the man waving,
the woman not, the nine planets

below them with a small line drawn
from the third. I laughed for the first time

in days, thinking of you catching this earthling
resumé on a celestial cloud, eons from now,

and drawing a greyhound at the couple’s feet,
an asterisk here and there.

BUBBLE

By Linda Brucesmith

bub•ble *n.* ***1.*** *A thin, usually spherical film filled with air or gas* *2. A pocket formed in a solid by air or gas that is trapped* ***3.*** *Something insubstantial, groundless, or ephemeral* ***4.*** *A protective, often isolating envelope or cover.*

"Ben, wake up, the baby's coming." Ella snapped on the lamp and pressed herself up until she was sitting on the side of the bed. Cupping her stomach with both hands, she took old woman steps to the wardrobe where she slipped a dressing gown over her nightie.

She watched Ben push himself up onto his elbows. "Oh, Ell," he said. For one alarming moment she thought he might cry.

"Come on, slow poke," she said.

Moving like an automaton Ben pulled on jeans, a shirt and sneakers, took her elbow, walked her to the garage and bundled her into the Mercedes. In silence, they drove into the warm February night.

Rain polished everything. On Kingsford Smith Drive, Ella thought back to the last pregnancy she had started, thought of the babies—two, she was certain—who had disappeared without a whisper. *Pseudocyesis*, they had called it. False pregnancy. This time she'd avoided doctors.

She touched Ben's forearm; he twitched away then reached for her, pulled her fingertips to his lips. The headlights of oncoming traffic played on his face. She smiled then turned to the window where the Brisbane River flashed past and black boats were anchored like tethered beasts.

On the inner city bypass they accelerated; she clutched at the car door handle and placed her palm to her five-month round belly. When they reached Emergency at the Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital they parked outside and hurried to reception where she made little gasping sounds. Ben wrapped an arm around her shoulders. He kissed her hair.

She was ushered to a delivery room. A doctor with a trim beard and a bald head examined her. When he removed the ultrasound he studied them both. Time slowed. Ben gathered her in his arms before anything could be said. She felt like a child facing the cancellation of Christmas.

"I'm sorry," the doctor said. "It's a phantom pregnancy, what we call pseudocyesis. I'm afraid there's nothing there. I think," he turned to Ben as Ella crumpled, "it would be wise for your wife to stay overnight."

"That's why I don't do doctors," Ella said as her tears started. The room stretched and shifted around her. "You're wrong, you know."

Ben cupped her face in his hands. "Shh..."

"No," she whispered. "You'll see." She pushed him away. The rhythm of her breathing changed. She closed her eyes, pressed her lips into a thin line and bore down.

"For God's sake," Ben snapped at the doctor, who was writing in Ella's chart. "Give her something!"

Ella put her hands to her belly.

Bring them back, Ellie. Her mother's voice.

She sighed at the flexing and turning she felt through her skin, moaned as she pushed the notion of identical twins, girls like two pins, into the world.

She said she wouldn't settle until she saw the babies' faces. They increased her sedation.

The next day—her thirty-ninth birthday—she woke with the feeling that the world had been righted. When she saw Ben's funereal expression she kept the sensation to herself. An extended hospital stay followed. She felt like a child in a bubble; the air inside was rarefied and everything outside was contorted and populated by people looking in at her gently, speaking to her slowly.

She was discharged as torrents fell from plump storm clouds. Ben tucked the papers they had been given under his arm and they set off over puddled pavements for the visitors' car park. When they reached the car he opened the passenger-side door. She settled into the leather seat.

"I've got a surprise for you," he said as he paid the parking attendant and waited for the boom gate to open. Instead of driving her home to Warburton Lane, their palm-fringed house with its sweeping verandahs in moneyed Hamilton, he took her to Carnation Drive—a wide street lined with manicured kerbs, gardens and mansions—in affluent Ascot. He slowed the car to display the scenery. Speechless, she stared out. They passed a grassy park with a rotunda in the middle of it. The playhouse with its slide was still there. Flowers sagged in the rain—the squared garden beds were just the same. Stunned, Ella looked back; the seat belt snapped tight. When Ben stopped the car and told her the heritage-listed confection of a house at number fifty-six, two doors from the park, was theirs, she felt as though she had been hit. Inside, their furniture had been arranged under ornate ceilings; the smaller pieces of décor were still boxed and waiting for her return.

"You like it don't you, Ell?" he said as they stood in the lounge room.

"How could I not like it?"

Her hand trembled as she gestured at the study, the dining spaces off the kitchen. A gravelled drive swept from the street, through the gardens, to the garage. She waved at the bedrooms and ensuites above.

She wound her arms around his waist and put her cheek to his chest.

"But why here?" she said.

"A new broom sweeps clean," he said.

The house filled with the sounds of babies. Cries and gurglings clutched at her from cupboards. They reached for her from rooms she had just vacated. She pursued gigglings only she could hear, moving endlessly between bedrooms and the lounge and the kitchen until, at last, she did as the hospital medicos recommended—as Ben had been urging her to do for years—and started with a psychiatrist. Each week, they met in the study of his home in Windsor where they sat facing one another in leather armchairs. The psychiatrist folded his hands in his lap and didn't say much; she was surprised to find that she enjoyed his listening. To start, he suggested she should undergo fertility tests. Ben too. When she made the appointment for them, Ben looked at her like a startled rabbit.

"You're such a prude," she said.

The tests confirmed her perfect health and she was delighted. Then, when they revealed Ben's infertility, she fell into a confused melancholy. The psychiatrist prescribed anti-depressants and although they filled her head with fuzz she took them dutifully. To cope, she afternoon-napped—sinking into a deep, all-consuming sleep each afternoon at two o'clock, emerging at three o'clock. In her dreams she saw a grassy park filled with pale children, a rotunda, a playhouse and gardens.

She told the psychiatrist her babies visited the dream playground with her.

She cried a little and told him her sisters had been identical twins. Just like her own little girls. She went on to say that her sisters had disappeared from a playground. Twenty-nine years ago. She had been babysitting them at the time. They had been six years old.

"Ah," said the psychiatrist.

She studied her hands, willing him to say more. The silence pushed at her temples.

"My God, can't you see it's the same park?" she burst out. "We're living in the same street. Ben's moved us back. I'll go mad!"

On the day her sisters disappeared she'd taken paper and pencils. To sketch the flowers. She'd drawn a rose, glanced up to see the girls laughing and shrieking in a crowd of cavorting children. *All the attention. Always them.* She'd grimaced, gone to the bike rack, dropped her things into the carry basket. *I'm off*. She'd cycled home. When her mother screeched to a stop on the road fronting the park almost an hour later, the girls were gone.

"Ben doesn't know," she said. "I didn't tell him." She searched the psychiatrist's face.

"I see," he said.

"I didn't think…" she started. "You have to understand it was always all about them. How sweet, how alike, what a marvel. No one ever talked about me. Or even to me, really. Unless it was to ask whether I could tell them apart. Whether they played pranks on people. Which one was the oldest and by how much. What fun they'd have with their boyfriends one day. I was sick of it."

The psychiatrist nodded.

"It broke my mother," she went on. "The way she looked at me. From then to the day she died, I was a monster. She kept saying, 'Bring them back, Ellie.' She wasn't right anymore, right in the head, I mean. 'Bring them back.' I can still hear it. She said it was my fault they were gone."

The sessions continued.

Ella shared stories of the babies' first words, their first steps and their birthdays—of her sisters' button noses, amber curls and dimpled smiles. Finally, they revisited her pregnancies.

"In my dreams, the girls look just like my sisters," she whispered.

The psychiatrist sat like a sphinx.

She froze as the pieces reorganised themselves in her head and a new picture emerged.

"There never were any babies, were there? Of mine, I mean." She put her elbows on her knees, dropped her face into her hands. When she looked up, her face was wretched. "It's Sophie and Lily. I've brought them back."

The psychiatrist adjusted his position, waited.

"I want them to go away," Ella said.

"The way you wanted them to go away in the playground," he said.

Ella blanched. "No. My God! Of course not!" She folded her arms over her chest and tucked her hands into her armpits. Her sobs, when they started, were wrenching. Eventually, she pulled a tissue from the box on the coffee table by her chair and blew her nose. She crushed the tissue into a ball and dropped it into the wastebasket under the table. She looked at the psychiatrist. "Yes," she said. "Yes, I wanted them to go away. Yes, I did."

On a bright morning two days later, Cecelia Burrell arrived on Ella's doorstep to introduce herself as their next door neighbour. She was carrying a tray of pink-iced cupcakes.

"Hello, I'm Cecelia. You must be Ella," she said when Ella opened the door, her hair damp from her morning shower. "I was out front yesterday when your girls were in the garden. We met over the fence." She smiled. "They told me pink was their favourite colour—isn't that the same for all little girls?" She pushed the tray at Ella, tripped over her words as Ella's face fell. "We're having a birthday party—for my daughter—her name's Rosie—Rose—but we call her Rosie. Next week – she's about the same age as the girls. I wondered if they'd like to come…?"

Cecelia's voice trailed away.

"What did you say?" asked Ella. She leaned towards Cecelia and widened her eyes at her. "Is this some sort of joke?"

Cecelia glanced at her cake tray, up past the gold chain around Ella's neck. "What?"

Ella raised her hands, warded Cecelia off. "Just stay away."

She closed the door.

That night she made love to Ben. Afterwards, as moonlight and the scent of orange jessamine streamed in through the bedroom window and they lay together studying each other's faces, she wondered at his distraught expression.

"I'm sorry, Ell." His voice was like an echo split from its source.

"There's nothing to be sorry for," she said. "Is there?"

He traced the line of her jaw with his fingers. "I know how much you wanted children."

She bit her lip.

Beneath the sheets, he stroked her ankle with his toe. "I never wanted them. I wanted you." He was whispering. "I had a vasectomy. I thought you wouldn't have me if you knew. Then I thought I'd lose you if I told you. So I didn't all these years. I should have. I'm so very sorry." He sounded like a child. "I wish I'd said. It's ridiculous. I'm sorry."

"I don't understand. When?"

"When I was married to Helen. We agreed two were enough. Then I met you…"

Her skin prickled at the magnitude of the deception. She peeled his arm from her waist and the sheet from her body, padded to the chair in the corner of the room. She wrapped herself with the dressing gown she had dropped there earlier and sat. Her legs curled beneath her.

"You're sorry." Ella experimented with the shape of the words. She stared at him, struggling with ends that wouldn't be tied.

"Ell…" Ben sat up. The sheets bunched in his lap.

"No, *you* listen." She told him about her twin sisters. Their disappearance from the Carnation Drive playground.

"You should have told me," he said.

She snorted, told him about Cecelia, Cecelia's cupcakes, about Cecelia's daughter's birthday and Cecelia's suggestion that their children, their twins, should attend the party.

"The woman's crazy," he said.

"She's not crazy, Ben."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's my sisters. I can feel it. They're back."

He stared at her, then fell back onto the pillows. "Good night, Ell." He turned his face to the wall.

She left him there to sit under the starred sky outside. Around her, night birds fluttered and called. Possums scrabbled in the trees. When she returned to the bedroom hours later, he was snoring gently. She spent the rest of the night in the chair listening to the clicks and hums the house made, contemplating him through the shadows. In soft light of early morning, when the rhythm of his breathing changed and she saw him shift, she went to the kitchen and made coffee.

When he showered and dressed then joined her smelling fresh and expensive they sat at the breakfast table and sipped in silence. When he finished he put his cup in the sink, turned to her, opened his mouth, closed it and left the room. Soon after, the garage doors hummed and tyres crunched on the drive. She leaned into her chair, dropped her head back, counted the sculptured flowers moulded into the ceiling. *Thirteen*. In the bedroom, she slipped into a housedress and sandals. She went to her car.

An hour later she set up an easel and canvas, oils and brushes in the study. She took a slender bud vase from the cabinet in the dining room, moved the small table under the mirror in the hall to the study, put the vase on top, took clippers to the garden, cut a fine, long stemmed rose and set it into the vase. She sighed, settled herself at her easel and stroked colours onto the canvas.

When the tapping came, she started. The hairs on her arms rose. *No*. She whimpered. She went to the study door, opened it and stared down at two little girls staring up at her through grey eyes set in pale faces. They wore identical pink cotton sundresses. One had white ankle socks, the other buttercup yellow. Their patent leather sandals were the same. Ella shivered. Beads of sweat appeared on her forehead.

"We couldn't find you, Ellie." Buttercup yellow. *Sophie*. Always the pace-setter.

Lily stood with her arms folded over her chest, her hands tucked under her armpits.

Ella crouched before them. "I'm so sorry."

“You wanted us to go away,” Sophie said. Her little girl’s forehead creased into a frown. “What did we do? Why didn’t you like us?”

Ella’s eyes filled.

Lily unfolded her arms and took Sophie’s hand. “We’ve been looking and looking for you.” She pressed her cheek to Sophie’s shoulder.

When Ella sank to the carpet, the girls entered the room. They went to the bud vase—sunlight was slanting through the crystal—and contemplated the rose. It quivered. A petal peeled slowly from the bud. They went to the canvas, inspected the beginnings of Ella’s work.

“Come see the roses in the park, Ellie,” Sophie said.

“With us,” Lily said.

“It’s only fair,” Sophie said.

As the girls approached her, Ella stood. *I suppose it is only fair.* She took Sophie’s hand in her left, Lily’s in her right. Their fingers were cold.

They left the front door open.

As they passed number fifty-four and walked towards the playground, Cecelia Burrell watched from a window. “Change of plans, Rosie. Let’s stay in and read. We’ll go to the park tomorrow.”

As she looked out, the sun set softly behind dark clouds filled with rain. The last light whispered, then disappeared.

YOU

By Ciahnan Darrell

You look down an unremarkable road extending into a grey sky, one leg in a seventeen year-old compact that isn't quite red anymore. You see the few options available to a married man with $1,200 in his chequing account, $6,000 in savings and $250 left on his credit card. Your job affords you a roof, utilities, a medium-sized flat screen, and a thirty rack of domestic beer a week that you kill between Thursday and Sunday. You'll have your job until your father dies or retires, and then you'll have the same job, but a greater portion of the meagre profits. Your clothes aren't new, haven't been new since the sixth grade when your sister was born, but thanks to your wife they aren't threadbare or out of style either. You don't care very much, but she tells you your wardrobe is classic, understated, with styles and colors that have endured countless fads.

You've been married sixteen years, since you both graduated high school; you're thirty-five, she's thirty-four and hinting that it's time to start a family. You're ambivalent—you don't really want children, but you don't not want them either, and you figure that this is how things go: birth, school, marriage, work, children, retirement, death—and you're fine with it. Every so often you sneak out into the neighbour's cornfield and burn a cigarette, a menthol, and you like to think she doesn't know, but she does and she hates it but doesn't say anything, probably because she's saving up to do something selfish that you'll hate, though you can't think what.

You're looking west, but you'll drive east. Your father's one-pump convenience store awaits with its dust-stained sign that your father put up just after your sister died. It's your job to change the letters as one special gives way to the next, as gas prices change.

Your father's getting old and the shrapnel in his leg and his heart are giving him trouble. You frown, squinting into the sunless sky, following a hawk. You'll need to buy a new sign when he dies. Not before then.

Your life isn't a bad life, just a life. You don't look at your wife anymore and she doesn't look at you—she never really looked at you, sex wasn't her thing. She lays down whenever you ask, though, so you can't complain, not like your buddies at the bar whose wives' legs clamped shut a few years into their marriages. If you look at her during intercourse she's somewhere else, near or far you can't say, but she's not with you. You love her though, no doubt. You're not an introspective person, beer and your truck and the game on Friday nights does you fine, but in the rare moment that your wife's mortality occurs to you, you get uncomfortable. She was never a cheerleader or homecoming queen, but you were never the quarterback or homecoming king. You wrestled through middle school, like every other Midwestern country boy who didn't play football, quit when they stuck you on junior varsity your sophomore year, and were lucky enough to escape without cauliflower-ear.

You don't want to travel, don't wish you were famous or had a million dollars; you get by fine. Six days a week, you sit behind the register at the convenience store waiting for customers, your mind blank or running figures so you'll know how much strawberry pop to order. You're not prone to fantasy—it isn't that you're particularly disciplined, just that you're not a daydreamer, never have been.

What you do have, from time to time, is an image: the westward road. It appears—you don't beckon it. And when it appears it just is. It doesn't shimmer, doesn't glow, doesn't call to you. You don't get excited or yearn or itch with wanderlust. The road's simply there. You look down it and the world goes on.

You don't wonder where it leads.

You watch your husband drive off as you finish with the dishes. You haven't said anything yet. You want to, but you don't know how he'd react if you told him, if he'd leave you. You don't want a divorce.

And what is there to tell? You're not even sure what happened. All you know is that you and your girlfriends bought all the makings for champagne cocktails and Sex on the Beach and went to Urbana for Tammy's bachelorette party. You rented a hotel room. You know there were two of them, strippers, and that when you woke up your skirt was hiked up and your panties were on the floor and there was a stain on the sheets and you were sore.

You glance at the clock on the microwave: he left for work five minutes after he was supposed to. You live two miles from the store so he won't even be ten minutes late, but late is irresponsible and Saturday is his father's poker night at the Elks, so he's going to get the withering grimace from his father and partial shake that means 'I'm disappointed in you.'

There were two of them, maybe three. You think you remember one of them saying that Tammy's bachelorette party was their last gig of the night, and that they stayed even after the hour they'd been paid for was over, and that one of the dancers called a friend and everyone had been drunk and the friend came with pills. You love your husband, so you try to think. One of the dancers had looked Italian... the other might have had sandy hair and brown eyes like your husband. You can't remember what the friend looked like, but you think he could have been black.

Black.

Your period is three weeks late. Suddenly you remember a penis. You'd never seen a black penis before, even in a magazine.

Three weeks.

Maybe you aren't pregnant, maybe your cycle's just off. You've been stressed, lately, money was already a problem and they just reduced your job to part-time. Stress can do that, you think. Make you late. You've been feeling like your life is closing in on you. You're a thirty-something, no longer young, no children; you live three and a half miles from the doublewide you grew up in. You'll never go to college. Maybe all that is making you late. You cup your breasts to see if they're getting sore. They're not. Your periods are always heavy, you have bad cramps and get horribly bloated, but you're not bleeding right now and you don't have any cramps and you're not bloated.

But maybe you're not pregnant.

What if you are though, and it's the black guy's baby? Did I smell cum when I woke up, you ask yourself.

No, you were too hungover to smell anything.

If it was the sandy-haired guy—if you're pregnant—if it was the sandy-haired guy, you might not have to say anything to your husband. He might never have to know. You love Glenn. He may not be exciting or romantic, and you might not care for the ball cap he slaps over his thinning hair or the way his stomach is starting to fall over his belt, but those are minor things.

He's dependable and honest, and you like the way he warms you up on a cold day, even if you have to grab his arms and wrap them around you to get him to do it. You're not going to say anything—you'll just tell him that you're going to stop taking your birth control at dinner, and hope.

You've been wanting to start a family for over a year now, though you haven't said anything because you kept hoping he'd suggest it. He didn't. Hasn't. So you decided you were going to ask him. You were already nervous about asking before you woke up in that hotel room, not because you thought he might say no—he's never denied you anything you've asked for—but because you wanted him to be excited about it. You were worried it would hurt too much to bear when he wasn't, even though you knew he wouldn't be because he's not the type to get excited, not since high school, not even by man-things like NASCAR or football or guns. He used to fish some, and he still goes every so often, but it's not something that really matters to him.

You wonder how excited he'd get if you had a black baby.

But maybe you're not pregnant. You'd have your husband back then, and your life, and you'll go back to hoping that he'll remember high school and the early years and what it was like to be in love, and that he'll realize that the baby you'd make together would be proof of your love, half him and half you, and that he'll smile as he watches it grow inside you, and that he'll get excited for your future together.

Maybe later you'll sit down to go to the bathroom and stand up afterward and turn to flush and see blood curling like smoke in urine and water.

Your son's late so you start on the railing. Paint that was once blue has turned grey with age; it's time to take it off. You're surprised to find that the railing's made of oak. Sorry I'm late, pop, your son says when he shows up. Have fun at poker. You frown and give him a dismissive wave, but he's learnt to ignore it. Mutt trots after you.

Glenn's a good kid. You're proud of him. He shoulders his responsibilities like a man, works hard, loves his country and votes Republican. You've forgiven him for not joining the Marine Corps.

It's poker at the Elks' lodge every Saturday, but tonight you're going to give it a miss. You open the door to your truck, Mutt hops in, you turn the ignition, put it in gear and ride off. You can hear her scolding you. Give me a break, Jean, you say as you pass the lodge, it's just one night.

You met Jean at your high school graduation party; she was up from Indianapolis, a friend of a cousin or a cousin of a friend. You enlisted; she waited for you to come back, married you when you did, two tours later with a leg full of shrapnel. The Lord took her back at fifty-two. Cancer.

She knew you'd never leave the house if she didn't, so she made you promise to go out once a week to socialise. Church didn't count, she said. Go some place where you have to talk to people. People are good for you. You'd seen what people were in Vietnam, but you didn't argue, didn't correct her. She was dying. The women in your life have left you one by one: your mother took ill when you were a child and was gone before they knew what she had. Meningitis. Your daughter threw a clot and dropped dead in your living room. Jean was the last. Your last. Your one and only. You'd been married thirty-one years. Now, you have only your son, the store and Mutt.

Mutt appeared one day and never left. First you fed him, then you got him a collar and tags, built him a doghouse. Eventually, you let him follow you inside and bought him a dog bed. He never needed a leash.

The sun has almost set by the time you reach your house. It's cold, but you stay outside a while, leaning against your truck and watching the light bleed from the sky, drip on the cornstalks and alfalfa. Mutt christens the fencepost.

Tomorrow you'll go to church for the pancake social, and then to the store to finish scraping the railing and install a new sink in the bathroom. You don't know what you're going to do tomorrow evening; maybe your son and daughter in-law would want to go out to Sissy's for a rib dinner.

The sun set, you and Mutt are through the door. Coat on hook, shoes on mat; you're in the recliner in front of the tube. You start to reach for the remote only to realize you don't want to watch TV. If Jean were here she'd be wrapped in an afghan with a hot toddy and a book. But she's not.

The house is quiet. Mutt is snoring softly.

Your daughter died a yard and a half from your chair and you find yourself staring at the spot where she fell more and more, facing the prospect of retirement. Retirement: an empty chasm you fall into and never stop falling.

Jean loved to read; you don't. Your leg hurts too much to take the walks you used to love, and you don't drink or smoke or hunt or fish.

She loved to quote from the books she read, one phrase in particular: *Pues y nada*, she'd say. *Nada y pues*.

It's about time Glenn and Sarah get around to giving you grandchildren, you think—give you something to do.

The room's grown dark so you get up and turn on a few lights, walk past a bookshelf.

Pues y nada, she always said. *Nada y pues*.

She loved her hot toddies.

You've never had one, and you've never been a reader, and you don't know where it comes from, but you see a book she used to read a lot. I love him and hate him all at once, she'd say about the author. Love and hate, all at once.

You stare at the book. Maybe you'll sit down and see if it's in there—*Pues y nada*—and if you can figure out what the hell she meant all those years.

*This piece first appeared in the *Ishaan Literary Review*.

HURRICANE

By Charles Bane Jr.

The morning dawned grey, and we were moored where spoonbills nested, roseate in place of the sun. I fell over gently on my back and we looked at one another, out of breath.

Good morning, I said

Good morning, starling.

Her cell beeped, with a text.

For Christ's sake, I said.

She wrapped in a sheet and walked to the galley table.

It's my father, she said; there's a hurricane watch.

I thought for a minute. The boat was all our investment. I said, let's moor opposite Good Samaritan Hospital, inside the channel. We need to start out.

Look, she said. The spoonbills had exploded overhead at the sound of our motor, like flowers Chagall would paint onto a sky.

In half an hour, the waves changed direction; it made you sick inside.

Do you want to stay with her? she asked.

Yes, I answered.

Say something, she said, to make me brave.

Wait, I said, let me anchor.

A dozen boats were moored in the Intracoastal Waterway, across from the hospital; all had anchored so that violent wind wouldn't crash one against another. They would not turn their bows to each other, or their sterns, on the coming battlefield.

I asked, do you remember when we were children on Shelter Island?

Oh yes, she said, I was reading Dana Girls mysteries all summer, and I thought you were brave to take the horseshoe crabs by their tails and throw them into the sea.

I'll toss the hurricane, I said.

No, she said, we'll grip the tail together.

We were holding one another on deck and the skipper of a small boat nearby raised his hat, and laughed.

HOT PARTS OF TOWN

By Colin Dodds

The hot parts of the town
are the rectum and the genitalia,
where unacknowledged need enacts itself
and the shit comes out,
by the trucks and the dumpsters.

They're always taking out the garbage
on Sixth Avenue, by the hot dog corner
and what's left of the video store. Always.
the grim white trucks keep coming,
hazard lights blinking, mustachioed men
loading mesh metal cans into the ever-chewing back.

Throw yourself down where the sidewalk
and the chain-link fence forms a crotch.
Neither the city nor you
can bear the endless flirtation
of all the doorknob gropes
and sodacan kisses much longer.

LOVE FOR A REGULAR NIGHT

By Colin Dodds

God bless the moon
for making the city so asymmetrical.
Full-faced, it meets me
at the subway's dirty stairhead.

For awhile, life is so full
that I don't notice the moon or the stars.
There are taxicabs and buses, bars
full of people insinuating themselves.

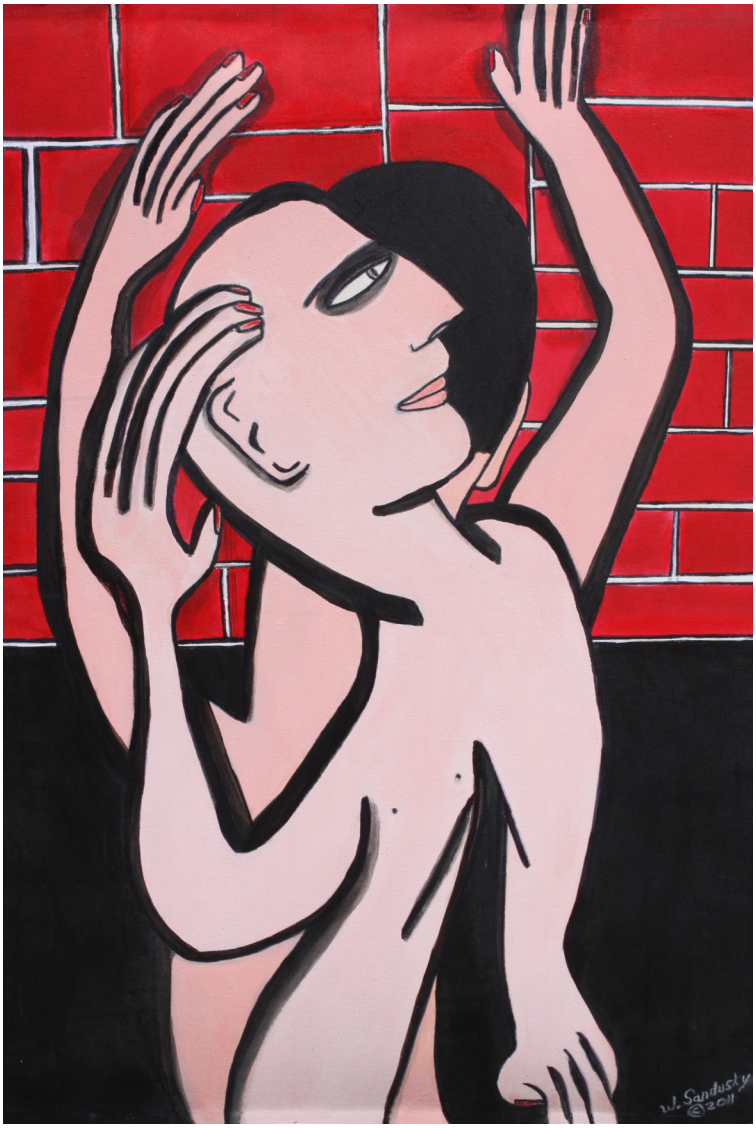
The lovers, braggarts and scroungers,
pass to the rooms above the street
or the tunnels below it,
stars and moons on their t-shirts.

My eyes stay level for a few years.
I was, I will explain, drunk enough already.
And any creator will take that
for the proper compliment it is.

SPANISH ENTHUSIAST OF EROTICA

By Jordan Tammens

We meet on a cobblestoned plaza.
The bitter wind tussles her spiky hair
and clumsily rolled cigarette.
A cocktail of cheap tobacco and Corona
stings my throat.
We bicker in Spanglish:
“I have learned the ingles reading porn”.
Her chuckle chimes with chains
and a muffled crucifix
nestled in anarchist leather.
I snicker nervously
as she defines five different words for cock.



REMEMBER

By Martha Krausz

The day
when all the world
spoke to you like a good poem,
quiet but clear
and the incidental shapes of day
came to trace the profile of your desire
when every image that appeared on the glass
was a vision you had had,
and every sound
a song you had sung.

And all that was in your way
stood like a title before your story
answering and beckoning at once
your only question.
Remember when you were alone.

ALONE

By Wayne F. Burke

He lived in a back room
of DD's Bar & Grill.
His name was Pete
or Art or Earl
and he had come to town
from somewhere else
long ago.
Aloneness clung to him
like a coat;
alone in a crowd
alone in the street
alone smoking a cigarette
that he cupped in the palm of his hand—
his face was a mask
hammered from stone
and DD rode his ass
if he, Earl or Art or
Pete, did not sweep or
mop fast enough
or clean the glasses
until they shone.

DISPOSALS

By Daniel Hedger

I wake up and realise I haven't put the bins out. You might think that putting the bins out is the regular domain of the husband but, until recently, it was not. My marriage was not a chauvinistic one: she put the bins out.

At the moment, there's just a sunken impression on her side of the mattress. It's not the actual mattress she used to sleep on, but I sometimes lie on her side of the bed and then roll back to look at the impression I've made. In any case, these days I'm on garbage duty. The clock radio on my bedside table reckons it's five o'clock but I manage to drag myself out of bed. The truck swings into my street around six and I can't afford another forgotten week. The baked bean tins will be overflowing.

I shiver out of the house, partly because I haven't put my slippers on but mainly because I sleep naked and haven't put anything else on either. I drag the two bins, red lid for household waste and yellow lid for recyclables, out from their place in front of the garage door. Their wheels creak.

It's recycling week and the consoling drinks I had with the guys a fortnight ago have left the big bin full of glass bottles. I'm now regretting that we only drank beer. There wouldn't be so many bottles if we had all just shared some wine, like I imagine posh people do. As it stands, I'm having a wrestling match with the wheelie bins to get them down the driveway. Not posh.

My theory is that if I stand in front of the bins as I walk, and brace myself up against them, they won't hurtle down the drive if I slip. Then I slip, and my theory is proved wrong. The yellow lid of the recycle bin flaps open and a deluge of bottles rattle out. The plastic frames bounce against the concrete on the way to the bottom of the driveway. Glass bottles smash and roll across the footpath and onto the road, clattering. A garbage bag oozes out of the smaller, red-topped bin, unleashing a stench to wake the neighbours. Maybe if I'd gone to the gym in the last six months the weight of the bins wouldn't have bested my ridiculous body. Maybe.

Household waste indeed.

I bend down to pick up the bigger pieces of glass now scattered across the footpath and road. Should a car pop a tyre while driving by, it would be too easy to see which house is to blame for the mess. And I don't want to be woken again.

One of the shards cuts me and my finger starts to bleed. I stick the injured finger in my mouth, which is a bad idea.

All this drama had made me forget, but now standing still, I become aware of the cold and my nakedness. A chill blows through the crescent, and parts of me try to escape inside my body. One of the thoughts I have is: you're in no shape to be seen without clothes. Another is: stop talking to yourself, Fatty.

I look up my street and see the twin bins outside each house, red lids and yellow lids side-by-side, perfectly placed for the mechanical arm of the garbage trucks. When I was a kid, an actual human would pick up the bins and I remember running after the truck with my brother, trying to catch up and jump onto the back, because we were idiots then.

Looking at my neighbours' homes, I wonder which members of those households put the bins out and whether I'm still an idiot. I look down at my bins, still on their sides, bottles and cardboard containers and egg shells littering the driveway.

I walk up the street a little to my neighbour's nature strip and lift the lid of their recycling bin. No stubbies in this one—only frozen chips, pasta dinosaurs in tomato sauce, that kind of thing. For no reason that I can think of, I push the bins over.

As the contents spill out onto the road, I hop over the food packaging and skip to the next house. I tip those bins over too. Crushed milk cartons dribble out. Before long, ten bins from houses on both sides of the street are tipped over, their innards disgorged across the bitumen.

Symmetry.

A knock at the front door wakes me back up. The clock is now telling me it's seven o'clock.

"Morning. Sorry to disturb you so early," a neighbour I don't remember meeting says.

"Don't worry, I was up," I say, picking sleep from my eye.

"There's been some vandalism in the street," she says. "Everyone's bin has been tipped over."

"Wow," I say. "Was the garbo drunk?"

She looks at me funny.

That night, I drive to another suburb, one where the garbage gets collected on Wednesday mornings, so the streets are again full of wheelie bins. It's recycling week here too and it's only a coincidence that this suburb is where my wife is now living, Scout's honour. And I can't explain why I'm in front of her new home, with my hands pushing over her bins.

I look at the detritus: a red wine bottle, a box of mini-pizzas, a Lean Cuisine. There's an empty box of condoms on the grass. I feel cold, even though this time I've remembered to wear some clothes.

We weren't pool people. That's what we'd told ourselves when looking for our home together. Pools were too hard to maintain and we didn't want people inviting themselves over just because it was a hot day. We would rather stay indoors and not have to pretend to want more company than each other. But I look at this other house, this new home, and just know that it has a pool out back. I'm not sure when she became a pool person.

The front of the house has one of those low brick fences, only about a foot or two high, just like the one at my house. This wall couldn't keep anybody out. It's only there for decoration, or for sitting on, waiting for the postie, a half-arsed attempt at a barrier between the home and the outsider on the footpath.

Demarcation.

The mortar between the bricks looks loose and chipped, and when I push at it a little, it feels like the bricks would come apart fairly easily. I push a bit harder and a brick falls out onto the footpath. I kick at the hole I've made and before long the whole stupid structure has crumbled. They don't make homes like they used to, I guess.

I get back in my car and drive off to find more bricks walls.

The local rag arrives and when I come to the letters page, there's that *Thumbs Up/Thumbs Down* column, which is always good for a laugh, to see what people are caring about this week.

“Thumbs down to the hooligans who have been knocking over bins in my street,” one reads. “Where is the Neighbourhood Watch these days?”

The writer has a point. Why didn’t anybody stop me? Probably smart enough to be in bed asleep. Smart enough to have remembered to take the bins out earlier.

Another one says, “Thumbs down to the criminals who have destroyed many of the brick fences that are a distinctive feature of the houses in this area.”

I think ‘criminal’ is a bit strong, but I feel a tinge of pride that the writer assumes there was more than one of me.

It continues: “I will now have to replace the fence at a cost to myself, which had stood for forty years, with no help from council.”

When I read the second bit, my pride goes away. It’s replaced by that other feeling. I close the local rag and down the rest of my coffee in one gulp.

It’s Monday night again, but I’ve remembered the bins before going to bed. I’ve even remembered how to walk down the driveway without slipping over. I’ve either gotten stronger or the bin is easier to handle this week, being only the garbage and not the recycle bin. Red top easy. Funny how I think about rubbish like this.

As I stand by the road, arranging the bin on the nature strip, I see a group of three kids, teenagers by the looks of it, walking down my street. I think about what the collective noun for teenagers should be. A chat room of teenagers. A hashtag of teenagers.

I think about when I was that age, how I would have been up to no good, roaming the streets on a Monday night. How I had no right to be up to no good on a Monday night. How much existential pain had I experienced then? Almost none.

But I was angry at the world all the same. The world and its street signs, which would be stolen and hidden under my bed until after I moved out of home, leaving Mum and Dad to find STOP, GIVE WAY and the one with the speed bump on it when they cleared out the room. If I couldn’t remove a sign, I would draw a face under the speed bump, so it looked like the face was wearing a hat. I still smile if I see that when I’m out driving.

One of the teenagers yells out to me: “What are you looking at, you pedo?”

I realise I’ve been staring into space but also directly at the three kids on the footpath. I bend down and pretend to tie shoelaces on my thongs.

After work on Tuesday, I drive back over to that other suburb, the one whose garbage is collected on Wednesday mornings. Out the front of her house, laying out the bins, is a man. I don’t know how good looking he is, I can never tell with blokes, but he’s got to be at least a couple of years younger than me. He’s handling two wheelie bins—red lid for household waste, green lid for garden waste—all by himself. What a hero.

I slow down at the driveway and lean out my window. The man looks up at me from his important rubbish business.

“Shit, mate, what happened to your wall?”

“Vandalism,” he says.

“Bloody kids, hey?”

“We don’t know who did it.”

There’s a pause and then I fill it by saying, “Hey, I’ve got a builder mate who could fix up your wall for a very reasonable rate.”

“How reasonable?”

By now, there's a four-wheel drive behind me, waiting because I haven't pulled over and I'm blocking its way. As I start to speak again, the four-wheel drive leans on the horn.

"Yeah, wait a tic," I call out, looking backwards.

"Move, dickhead!"

"OK," I say to the man with the bins. "Let's say I just pay for the wall. That's how reasonable."

And the man just says, "I think you'd better move on."

When the next edition of the local rag arrives, it has an interesting little article on those houses in the area whose bricks walls got destroyed and how envelopes of cash have been turning up in their letterboxes. One of the people interviewed for the story is quoted as saying: "It's nowhere near enough to fix the wall, if that's what this is about. What is this, some kind of joke?"

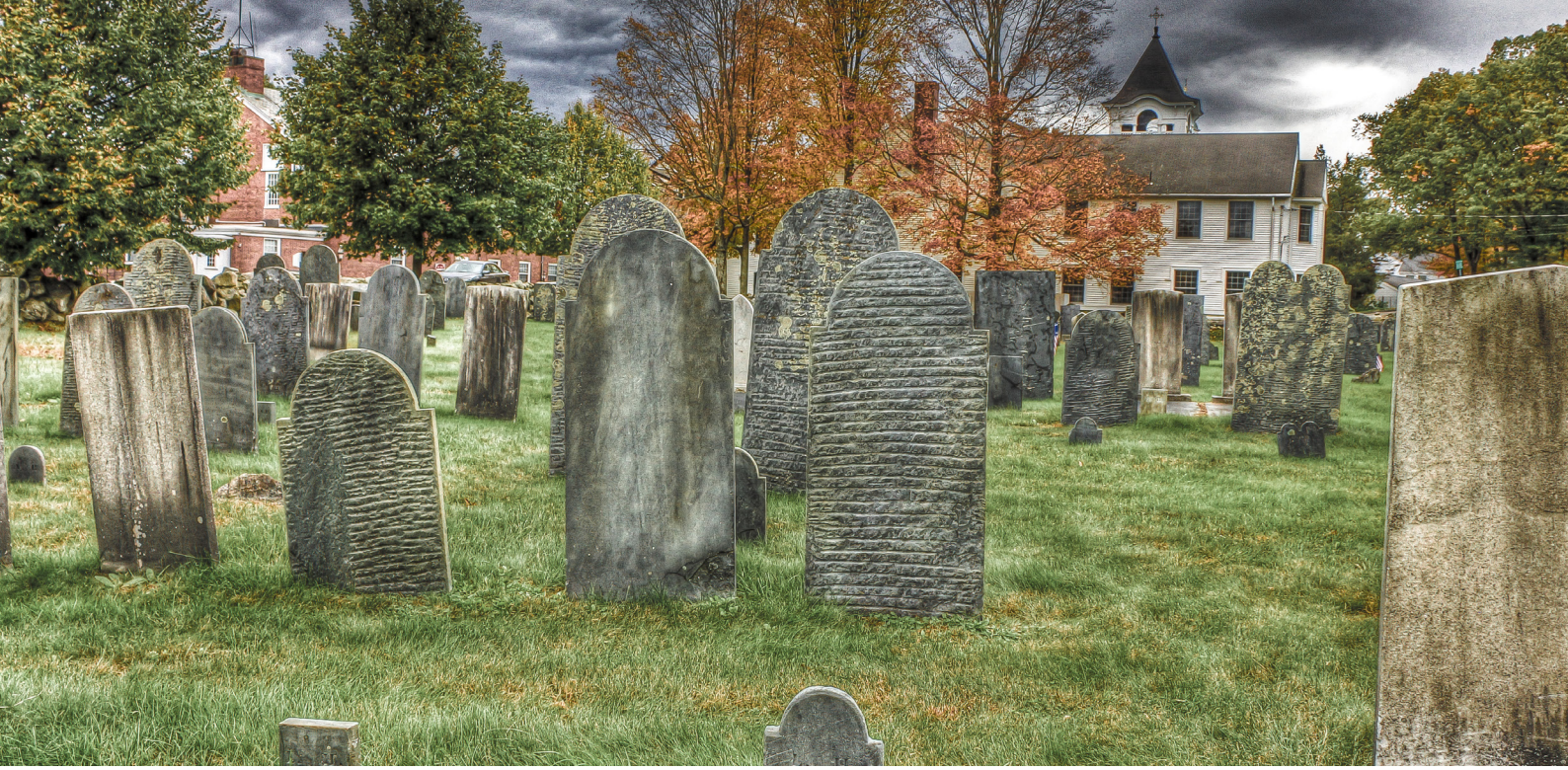
A month or so later, I'm watching telly after work with a cup of tea on the coffee table beside me. It's warm and comforting, just like the packet says. My feet are up on the couch, which I'm allowed to do now, but it's not all it's cracked up to be.

Under the teacup is the local paper from weeks back, the one with the Opinion page about all the vandalism in the area. It's still on the coffee table because I wanted to keep it, to remind me, but it seemed silly to frame it. Maybe that's why people used to keep scrapbooks.

About an hour into some police show, I hear a familiar crashing noise outside my house. It sounds like old bricks falling from a height of about one or two feet and smashing onto a concrete surface, like a footpath. Like the footpath outside my own fence.

There goes the neighbourhood.

On the TV, the cops are chasing an assailant, sure to catch him. I know how this one ends. I pick up the weeks-old local rag, mug rings yellowing the newsprint, walk outside and throw it into the wheelie bin.



THE OLDEST PROFESSION

By Luke Peverelle

P*lonk.*

That was the sound it always made, a sound sweeter to his ears than birds chirping. Maurice grimaced and let another spadeful of dirt fall into the grave. After a few more of those, he gagged, and sent a mouthful of saliva and chewing tobacco sailing through the air to join the small mound he'd created.

They'd caught him doing that at his last job, hauled him in front of the sexton and demanded an explanation. Maurice had honestly thought about it, then replied, "What are you worried about? Not like they're gonna get up and tell me to stop. They can't feel it, so why should you?" And then he'd smiled, satisfied with this explanation which he'd only just thought up.

He hadn't been long for that job, and he'd been damn lucky to get this one, what with checking of references and calls to previous employers. So now he was very discreet, as befitted this most ancient, sacred tradition of gravediggers. After all the flowers and speeches and sobbing, it was just him and his shovel, and if he didn't pay the poor dead bastard some final respect, then what sort of a man was he?

Well. That was one of the reasons, anyway.

It had rained earlier that day and the pile of sod he'd excavated was settling, congealing into an oozing mass. Filling in the rest of the grave proved to be of little difficulty and before the hour was out, he was off, spade over his shoulder and whistling a tune.

Meanwhile, Terrence Arthur Miles (father of three, husband of one, paramour of several and an avid member of the Hawthorn Cricket Club) went to his eternal rest.

"And so we farewell a man who…"

Maurice bit back a curse for what felt like the umpteenth time and focused on the hole in front of him.

Still, it was hard to ignore the priest's droning, the wailing of the wind and the wailing of the mourners gathered not fifteen metres away from him. At least those who *were* doing that were fairly preoccupied with their grief. Then there was the other contingent, those who were glaring at him and muttering under their breaths about "the indecency of it all."

Indecency, shit, at least he hadn't pulled his dick out. He'd seen that more than a few times, from derelicts, from drunk teenagers, hell, even from colleagues. A memory flashed through his mind as he levered yet another chunk of turgid earth. Danny Butler, a new kid on the block who had spent two years as a tradesman. Likeable enough, sure, though his constant diatribes on his Greek girlfriend and "the shit her family eats, man, you wouldn't believe it," had gotten on Maurice's nerves somewhat. But all that came to a screeching halt when he'd come speeding towards a burial party one morning, pants around his ankles and screaming about how he couldn't stand having all those dead eyes watching him. The full-frontal assault had made the local news and a number of illicit images had since made their way onto social media websites. Apparently poor old Danny's member was now a meme, whatever the hell that was.

Last Maurice had heard he was twiddling his thumbs in a sanatorium interstate. He wished him well. Not everybody could hold their cadavers, as the oft-sniggered saying went.

But this, dick or no, was a travesty. Digging the grave while the funeral was happening, Jesus tap-dancing Christ. He considered dying of sheer embarrassment, but then they'd need two graves and it was only him on the roster today, so a convenient eight-by-four probably wouldn't be forthcoming. He'd just have to soldier on, keep digging and pray that whoever was in the coffin had led a long and detailed life. That tended to bring out the nostalgia in people.

He chanced a look up from the all-too-shallow grave and saw a teary-faced young girl ascending to the small podium they'd erected next to the grave-to-be. Probably a granddaughter or something like that. Good. She'd have plenty to say, and the inevitable hiccups and sobs would only draw it further out. *Chunk*. Another spadeful, another second closer to finishing this job and getting the hell away from these people.

"Grandpa was always laughing at something."

Maurice scowled. Laughing. It always came down to that. Like laughing was the gold standard for a life well lived. Why didn't anyone ever talk about anything *real*? Saying that someone was always laughing was like saying someone was always breathing, or drinking coffee. Vague. Overused. And it left everyone present with that nagging frustration. The realisation that even if their dearly departed had been a paragon of virtue, it wasn't enough to say so. Nothing was.

And that, Maurice mused, was the crux of the issue. The issue being grief, the all-consuming pervasive monster. Laying someone's life out on a slab was pointless. It didn't bring any comfort. Why did she die, not him? Why this cancer-riddled young footballer and not the homeless crack addict? Endless the questions, non-existent the answers.

It would be a far better thing to just strip everyone of names. You couldn't mourn someone if they didn't have a name, right? Not really. Everyone would just collapse into this formless mass and anyone left could light a candle, say a prayer and leave.

The wind intensified and he heard a shriek. Before he could turn to see what was happening, he felt something slam into him and then his face was kissing the dirt. He swore, but found his voice muffled by the mud. When he pulled clear of it, he saw a sodden white dress, and a pair of wide blue eyes. He stared back, waiting for the…

"Waaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Crying. The little girl had fallen into the pit he'd dug, blown over by the wind. Even now, panicking mourners were hustling out of their seats, rushing to see if she was okay. And sure enough, a few were glaring at him as if he was the one to blame. An old lady burst into tears and a few kids clustered about her, mumbling commiserations. The muttering became a dull roar, all of it directed at him.

Maurice monitored the social media sites for the next few days, but thankfully no scandalous images of him and the girl in the hole surfaced and he kept his job.

A dull orange light flickered in the distance, and he frowned. That made three times in the past fifteen minutes. It might be a malfunctioning lamp, but…

Another flicker, and his breath hissed between his teeth. That tore it. He locked the door of his little hatchback, grabbed his keys to the side gate, and marched back towards the cemetery.

He found his shovel lying beside the garden shed, and at the behest of some unknown impulse, he grabbed it. The worn, pitted shaft felt reassuring.

So… what would it be this time? Recent experience suggested horny teenagers. There was something about headstones that got the blood pumping. At least, for them it did. Maurice hadn't had sex in eight years, and that was perfectly fine by him. He saw enough bodies in his day-to-day that he didn't need to see more of them. And even without his grisly job, he'd never been much interested in that particular activity.

Wending between the plots and the poplar trees, he saw the mysterious glow was, as he'd suspected, firelight. It shuddered and danced, between the graves where he couldn't yet see, and cast harsh shadows against the grass. Damn them. If some stupid fools went and set fire to the place, he'd never hear the end of it.

Still, there was no one else around, was there? No guards, this late at night. No surveillance cameras this close to the boundary wall. It was him, the lone gravedigger, armed with only a shovel, against a horde of faceless ne'er-do-wells. He composed his features into a merciless frown, squared his shoulders and strode into the light.

The first thing he saw was a metal brazier piled with coals and sending cinders and curls of fire into the dark sky. The next thing was the six black-cloaked figures kneeling in a circle around the brazier, joined in some sort of unearthly humming. The third thing was the small, blood-splashed body of a goat that was sprawled before the fire. And lastly, he saw a seventh figure, dressed similarly to the others, creeping towards him with something in his hand.

Maurice acted. *Whump*! The shovel's head swung in a blurring arc, and hammered the figure clean between the eyes. It let out a groan and crumpled to the ground.

The others turned at the sound and let out varying sounds of shock and alarm. They'd obviously thought themselves alone and having him appear out of nowhere was, ironically enough, spooky. Well, it was a dark night and despite the fire, his skin was dark enough that he tended to blend in on moonless nights.

He nudged the supine body at his feet with his foot, made sure that he was out cold, and then motioned to the others with the shovel. "Piss off."

Sullenly, they picked up their fallen comrade and departed, vanishing beyond the fire-light into the trees. Maurice watched them go, then settled down on his haunches and waited.

Once enough time had passed, he toppled the brazier, sending coals tumbling to the ground to smoulder quietly amidst the long grass. On another impulse (he seemed to be having a lot of them), he made a small divot in the ground with his shovel and deposited the goat's body inside, quickly covering it over. One last look around and he was back off to his car, whistling a jaunty tune.

When he returned he found three missed calls on his mobile and made a face. With the air of a child being called to the principal's office, he started dialling.

Click. "Maurice? What the hell? I've been waiting for over two hours, where are you?"

"Ah…"

A snort of disgust. "Typical, just fucking typical. I knew you were a lazy, unreliable…"

How to explain it? How to explain that he had been leaning against the powder-blue door of his hatchback long, long before the light had first flickered from the inky darkness? Because he'd had a funny feeling? Because he'd felt this was a night of portents, and that being here was a matter of grave, nay, cosmic significance? How to explain this, to a girl who wasn't even that interesting?

"… and fucking *creepy* to boot."

Hmm. Perhaps she was more perceptive than he'd first thought. Maurice had habits that were considered odd by some, but it wasn't like he was hurting anyone. And people tended to discriminate on the basis of his job, but that was easier to understand.

"Do you even have anything to *say*?"

Maurice did not, and hung up.

He never did get that second date.

"Have someone else do it!"

His boss folded his arms and shrugged, a characteristic gesture Maurice had come to hate.

"It's just for an hour or two," Mr Washburne said, face like stone. Bland and uncaring. That was a fair commentary on the man in general. "The mourners will be in their hundreds and we don't have the parking space. And it looks to rain, so the coffin can't be left out in the elements."

Maurice snorted. "We couldn't invest in some sort of umbrella? Or cover?"

"I would prefer not to take the risk, Maurice. The deceased's family is quite influential."

That almost got him talking. Yapping, launching into an explosive diatribe about how once you were in the mud that was that and wasn't it funny how people thought those sorts of things hung around after you were dead but really it was all just a big joke to soothe the minds and egos of those who were too cowardly to entertain the notion that you couldn't actually take it with you.

"Maurice! Are you listening?"

"Not really."

Mr Washburne's brows quirked into a jagged frown, and his arms unfolded, to hang loosely at his sides like swords waiting to be drawn. "This is no trivial matter, Maurice. You can either do this one simple task, or start looking for a new job. Your choice."

Not much of a choice. So here he was, thirty-four minutes before the pallbearers were set to arrive, staring out the window at the driving rain and sharing the room with a corpse.

They'd left the lid open. The faint odour of aftershave and deodorant wafted up from the plush bedding they'd lined the mahogany box with. The man inside it had his hands clasped over his heart, eyes shut. He'd had very little hair left, but they'd done what they could to make it look decent. His suit was tailored to the inch.

Maurice had disliked him on sight. He didn't know who he was, or how he'd died, but Maurice knew deep down the sort of man he had been. Could tell just by looking at him. He'd probably railed against it. Death, ending, the injustice of it all. All his sins laid bare, made stark reality by the biggest reality of them all.

Maurice's lips twitched into a sneer, and he shook his head. He could hear the bastard now, pleading his case. He could just hear it; a soft groan, and a querulous voice. "It was all wrong."

Maurice did not turn. He did not scream. Instead, he continued to sit. Then he spoke, every syllable dripping with contempt.

"Wrong? I'm sure you see it that way. My question for you is, how could it be right? Think hard now. How could it be right?"

There was a silence and then the voice began again, croaking and faint. As if hindered by whatever barrier it was pressing against.

"They all came. They all spoke. But it wasn't enough. There was meant to be more." A faint shuffling and Maurice turned to see a sleeve of charcoal black shifting somewhere in the coffin's bed. "There was meant to be *love*. I was… I was meant to win."

"Win? Win what? It's not a fucking carnival game."

"Why do I waste my time here?" The voice sounded almost testy now and it was rising in strength. "Why do I linger on? I should have another chance. I was cheated. You—how can you—know about any of this? You're lying." A tremor of rage now, amongst the words, building into a shriek. "They all lied!"

"They all do. And call it love."

"Shut up." The rustling was getting louder, to match the voice. "I won't be here any longer. I won't be fooled. I will have my time again. I will have all of it! I want there to be more. I want it to be perfect. I want…"

Maurice slammed the lid closed. The silence was restored. No sounds came from within.

He went back to his place by the window, shaking his head in disgust. "You're dead, old man," he muttered. "You take what you're given when you're dead."

The rain continued to fall. Soon, he knew, he would be called upon. To fill the grave, as he had done so many times before. He would stand by, attentive and solemn, and wait for grief to run its course.

And when the mourners had departed and it was only him and his shovel, he would pry open the coffin. Let the first spadeful of dirt fall, to cover the face that would have twisted with fury. Would have brought a nightmare to all those who had gathered to say goodbye, only to greet a monster.

It was the only way to farewell the dead. It was the only way to know for sure. It was his best-kept secret.

And it all started with that sound.

Plonk.

WOOD

By Valentina Cano

I am counting on you
to sing of the geometry of trees.
Their branches and bark balanced
by xs and ys,
dancing in the pale pool light,
a moon drowning.
You have to mention
the fluted fences
that block words
from car parks
and people with no interests
but in slick-free sneakers.

AUTOMATIC HOUSES

By Trina Gaynon

It will be a companion
to the horizon.
—Frank Lloyd Wright

Choose the centre of the site, pointing it toward the light.
Lay down a grid.
Arrange rooms along wings that embrace the green outdoors.

Separate open public spaces
From small private spaces with their modest clerestory windows.

Pour the slab for radiant heating.
Stain it red.

Stack cement blocks.
Weave them together with steel rods.

Butter layers with more cement.
Wrap concrete piers in brick.

Add the concrete roofing.

At this point your home is quake and fireproof.

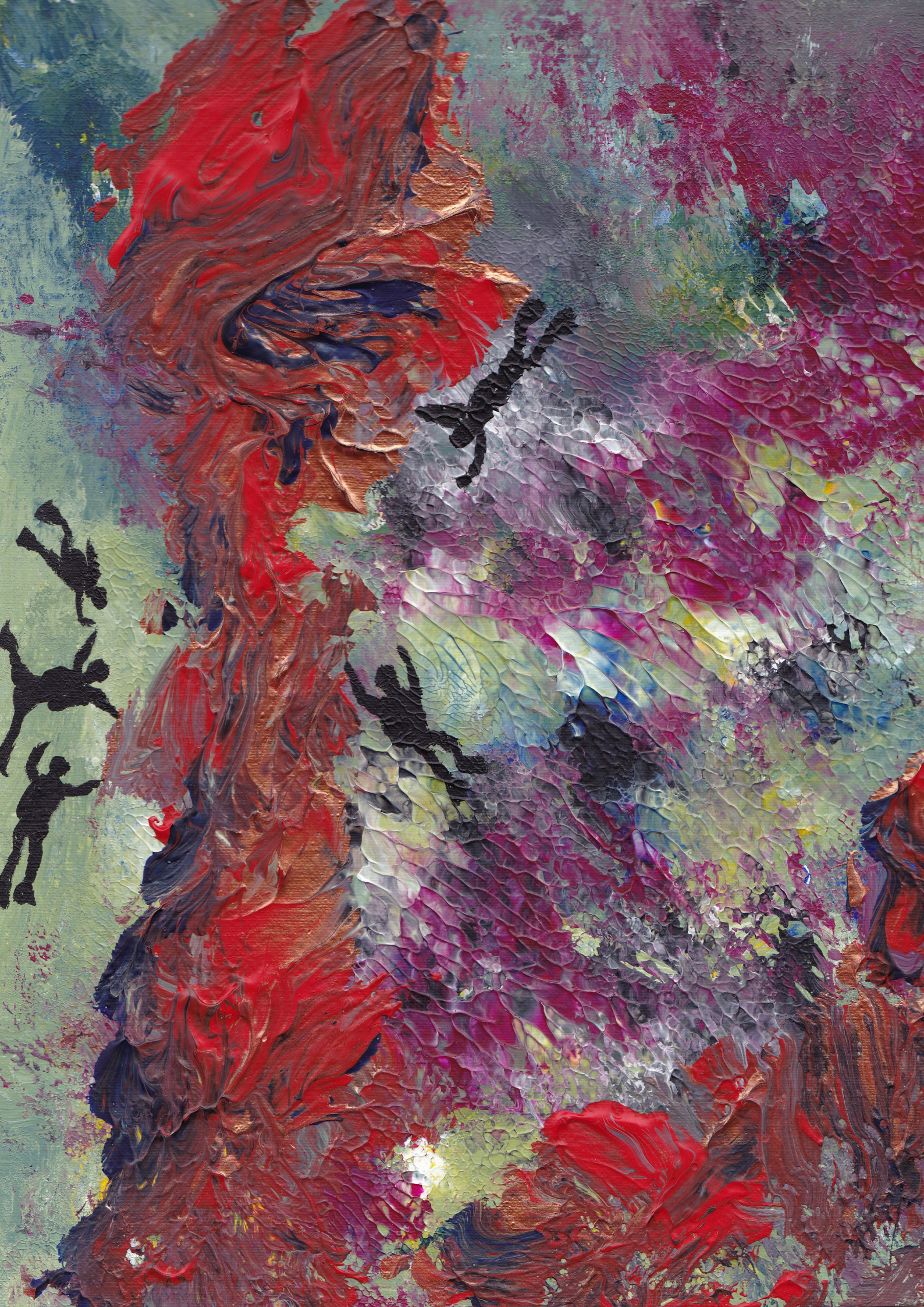
Attach modules for electricity, plumbing.

Such houses crouch low to the ground, surfaces exposed
To whatever weather assails masonry and unpainted wood.
Sure you can sacrifice foundations and basements,
Also hip roofs, valleys, dormer windows,
And the two car garage needed for storage—
All of them are beyond your skill set.
You'll be left to put in a small kitchen, built-in furniture,
Recessed lighting, and a deep hearth at its centre.

AND FINGERPRINTS TOO

By Trina Gaynon

Long after the daily papers
Have gone into recycling
The news lingers in ink smudges
Around every light switch,
On handles of each door,
Even around the pulls of kitchen
Drawers and cupboards—
Entries to dark and crowded spaces.



SOMETIMES WE NEED TO SWIM

By Alexander Drost

Stacy Blick was bigger than a house. She was polishing her gut—twirling the hole where they cut her from her mother—because she liked the tangle of it. She blushed when she farmed in there.

Stacy Blick only slept on Tuesdays. She was a growing young girl, a fat girl, and needed the beauty hours. She liked Netflix. She liked to cook Chinese food. Boys did nothing for her—they were just, you know, there. She would talk to them in her dreams sometimes. She would say, "I've never had a Tuesday. I missed the whole white storm."

Except she never would. And it wasn't long before Wednesday that her mother tried to wake her. Stacy was polishing her gut, and she tried to wake her. There was still time for a warning, a little warning, why not. The Blicks knew their odds, they had seen this sort of thing before.

Father Blick was shovelling. It wasn't that he was worried, it was just that—well he'd seen things. He consulted with Patrol and shovelled with them sometimes, checking the depths, the pack. He lived honestly and people liked him very much. They all depended on him. He ran the tests, he sent the warnings. Nobody knew the mountain better than Blick did—this was his life. He built the family house and lined the concrete with logs of twisted steel. His house was a fortress. It could handle these storms.

Mother Blick was a hysteric, in a way. A large woman herself with a heavy bust: *It needs to be THIS way*. The air was always so fresh in the mountains. She loved the views—the amber glow of the city far below, their own patch of the slopes. She raced dogs and came in third at state once.

Mother Blick was your lady for ink and paint and canvas. She thanked her husband for the views. But her paintings made her think, and thinking made her worry. It made her large like her daughter. She needed them all, the family. That's how she managed for all these years.

But she was truly thankful, of course. The fumes must have been getting to her. She must have been inside too much. She ordered sundresses off Amazon too much. The snow had been stacking for days, she was watching.

He could have built the house somewhere else—the snow shouldn't have been this high, she knew that. She'd seen something like this before.

Mother Blick spent the next hour napping. It calmed her. She wanted to pick up the shoes, to wash the dishes, but she had to be rested when Stacy woke.

Stacy's brother was already awake. He was resizing his cap. Always resizing. That hat was pointless. His sport was pointless. It made him feel pointless. Could they not have cancelled it? Snow day. He would've really liked that. Stacy's brother put his face to the window. The glass just fogged. His dad was pathetic, the snow was not stopping.

Most likely none of them saw it. A tree wobbled for strength then fell into a dusty white settle. The tree was the shape of a bat, made of pine too if you think of it like that—Stacy's brother did.

Mother Blick thought of canes. She got a good look at the tree when the cloud finally settled, and she thought of the lathes that turn to shave them.

Father Blick thought of ladders.

Stacy's brother thought canes were pointless. It was all pointless, the stuff they all liked. His father wore ugly pants. He was going to fire at him: *Hustle! Hustle!* He tied his shoes. Some shoes never come off. And some stay scattered on the floor with their tongues out. They look like dead birds, or—if you were Stacy's brother—hats. Hats with pins and rats with cheese, stale bread and mud.

There were broken branches and mounds the size of Fords, Tony Wallace's Ford above them still asleep, still in the back napping, just buried by the mountain's release.

It was a wall; a wave of white thunder.

The rumble sounded like a jet, a plate shift. It sounded like an army marching. It was ice and snow and splinter and granite in a blender against the windows. There was a deer in it, and a nest. There were groans and muffles.

The snow burglarised through the door. The shoes Mother Blick relocated jumped on top of the rising ice. She saw a hoof in it, still kicking, and the bent limbs of the pines thrashing around her. The windows cut loose, and the television made a run for it. She needed to climb. She was screaming. Later, she only remembered swimming through and pulling herself onto the stairs. "The avalanche was coming up from the floor." She remembered, "Swim. Swim."

She found her husband in their bedroom, fingering his phone, scrolling away. Her son was resizing his cap.

Snow had overpacked the bottom stories of the house by then. The house was moaning. They made it to the attic but someone needed to wake Stacy.

Stacy Blick was asleep and dreaming, farming her gut and twirling her hole again. Until the snow entered her room, lifted her bed and finally woke her.

Her bed was so light, why did she need that one, her mother thought. She was spoilt. Her mother should have known better. That would be Father Blick's logic, on the roof in the night, the house still moaning.

Stacy's bed floated upward and over, pinging her to the wall. Her face flattened like a flap-jack. She was awake but couldn't budge. "I can't budge!" she said to anyone.

Her mother found her fingers in the dark. She hoisted and shrieked unable to budge her. She was sinking herself, and her jeans got cold. She was getting numb.

Mother Blick found a limb in the dark but couldn't shift it. She wanted to curl up beside her baby, like she used to, but there was no room.

Her husband was calling from the attic. He knew what to do. She heard him break the glass and push. Something howled.

"Now!" he shouted.

He hauled his wife onto the roof and bent in a way that looked like his body should have broken.

Their little girl moaned. They all shouted her name down from the roof. Her brother resized and stretched his cap. They shouted again.

Her father called, "Stacy."

He kept repeating it and she liked that. Calmer this time, and time again, calmer, calmer.

He had a grandfather named Eustace, but Stacy was what they called him.

"Stacy, Stacy," he said.

Something went cold on her. The bed was pinning her harder to the wall. She couldn't roll over and stroke her gut anymore. She couldn't cook Chinese food. She was frozen and fat—but that didn't matter to her.

Her mother held out a plate.

Here you are, love. Nothing was ever burnt.

Stacy Blick. Big Blick, she thought.

Who everyone had told would die someday, finally did.

THE HAZE IN THE SMOKE

By Cindy Matthews

First thing Dad does every morning is smother his lungs with smoke. He's in bed, the clammy sheets still wedged between his legs. One hand fumbles for his glasses while the other goes in search of the plastic cigarette case and his lighter. I hear his first inhale before I unlatch my bedroom door. When I climb into bed with him, he runs his fingers through my thick bangs and drops kisses on my forehead.

"Where's Mom?" I ask.

Dad places a finger to his lips and shakes his head.

I return to my bedroom, pull off my pyjamas, and tug on my school clothes. I find Mom in the kitchen. Dark circles underscore her eyes. Her bony shoulders poke through the fabric of a see-through blouse. Mom's wearing the same shorts she wore yesterday. From where I sit I can hear her breathing, deep sighs which catch on the warm, humid air. She tosses plastic cutlery into a black garbage bag. The spoons jab the plastic webbing but she doesn't care. Mom believes plastic will one day eat our minds like locusts wiping out a wheat field.

"Resl, you didn't come to bed again. That's the fourth night in a row," Dad says. He stands by the door jamb between the kitchen and living room.

A cigarette dangles from Mom's lip and smoke kisses the ceiling fixture. She slams a cupboard door. Hard.

Dust particles float in the smoky haze. A thin layer of dirt shrouds every surface. It's late April and tractors pull tillers through the loam, whipping up sandy soil before the seed injectors fold around unsuspecting earthworms. A gritty residue on the counter reminds us where the toaster goes.

"I'm spring cleaning, Mr Nosy." Mom squarely faces Dad. Her usually soft voice is laced with venomous spit. A trace of nature's filth lingers in her brown hair.

Mom drags two crammed garbage bags out the back door past immature perennials. It's the sixteenth bag this week. I don't say anything.

Soon we'll be able to rent out closet space. I hoist myself onto the counter and grab the Cheerios. I grab my favourite cereal bowl from where it air-dried the day before. I spill some cereal into the bowl and splash the cereal with some milk. Through an open window I hear a couple of blue jays screech before swooping to the feeders. Mom's done with the garbage. Her back is to the stove and she's rocking to and fro, watching me. I am careful that the spoon doesn't clang against my teeth and set her on edge. I pull up my tights and step into my loafers before jogging to my bus stop.

After morning recess, the entire student body assembles under a large oak tree on the front yard of the school. Everyone bursts into cheers when the principal kisses a pig for charity. A reporter takes pictures and records details for the weekly newspaper. The rest of the day is a blur of grammar lessons and geometry quizzes.

Later, after the bus drops us off, a white van lingers ahead of me and the little kid from next door. I get extra allowance when I remember to take her straight to her house. The bus stop is a kilometre from my front porch.

I keep a low profile and say to the kid, “Hurry up. My show starts in a couple of minutes.”

It’s my job to keep the little kid calm and safe. Mom says she’s got something wrong with her, something in her brain. When she was a baby she didn’t breathe oxygen right away. I know she’s retarded but I never let on. The little girl goes to a special class down the hall from the AV room. She never speaks and her eyes are vacant. I can always tell the kids who are different. Their hair doesn’t grow right and their foreheads are too big for their faces. Some have googly eyes that don’t line up. The ones who can talk speak with a lisp or use the wrong words and say um a lot.

Sometimes I have nightmares about bad things happening to kids. Like getting born with flippers instead of arms, or kids with extra large skulls. The neighbours’ calf had two heads. Mom told me to stay in my room the day the farmer pulled the two-headed calf from the heifer. But I snuck out just in time to see him smack the heads with a shovel. Afterwards I barfed in the drainage ditch. Living on a farm, we avoided giving the animals names like Trixie or Max. We just referred to them by the numbers on their tags.

I kick a pebble along the road. The way the van creeps ahead makes me think it’s waiting for me. I try to estimate the distance between us and the van, and the van and my front porch. It’s the same porch where I busted my chin open carrying glasses after a tree-planting party. I whistle for the kid. She’s lagging behind, dragging a stick along a trench. Old cigarette packages, stubby empties and used rubbers pepper the ditch. The kid never answers when I call her name so next time I shriek like she’s a dog with a chunk of carrion in her jowls.

The van is now between us and the mailbox. The engine is purring and dark blue smoke chokes from the exhaust pipe. One of my chores is to fetch the mail, so I drag the kid by the wrist until we’re right beside the van. The driver’s window is open. A smell like burning leaves seeps from the opening. A male voice asks, “Do you want to see what I’m holding?”

What if it’s a kitten, I think. I’m interested in what he has so I let go of the kid’s hand and boost myself up on the van’s running board. I peer inside. I hold the edge of the open window and tip my head inside. The man is wearing coveralls with beige and blue splotches like Mom and Dad got on their clothes last time they painted the living room. There’s an opening in the cloth below his belly button. It looks like a torn feed sack. I glance all around but I don’t spot a kitten.

The little kid just stays beside the van. At least I don’t have to worry she’ll run off. She’s not the sort. She is silent like always, so I do all the talking. “I can’t say it. It’s a dirty word. If I say it, Mom will wash my mouth out.” I want to say ‘dick’ so he’ll put it away or cover up but I can’t. I just can’t.

He grins at me from under a scruffy beard. The curly hair is stained yellow like Dad’s thumb and fingers get from holding too many cigarettes. “You want to touch it?” the man asks. He’s holding his privates in his hand and they’re funny looking, all purple and blue. When the man smiles, all I can smell is beer and peppermints. I know that I need to leave and pick up the mail. But the van is still between me and the box.

I am as quiet as the little kid. It begins to drizzle and I know the kid and I should make a run for it. All I want is to plop in front of the TV and watch my show. “Hey, kid. Watch me touch it,” says the man. He spits in his palm.

“You shouldn’t do that,” I say. While he pushes and pulls his privates, I glare at the rhythm of his hand. The movement is hypnotic.

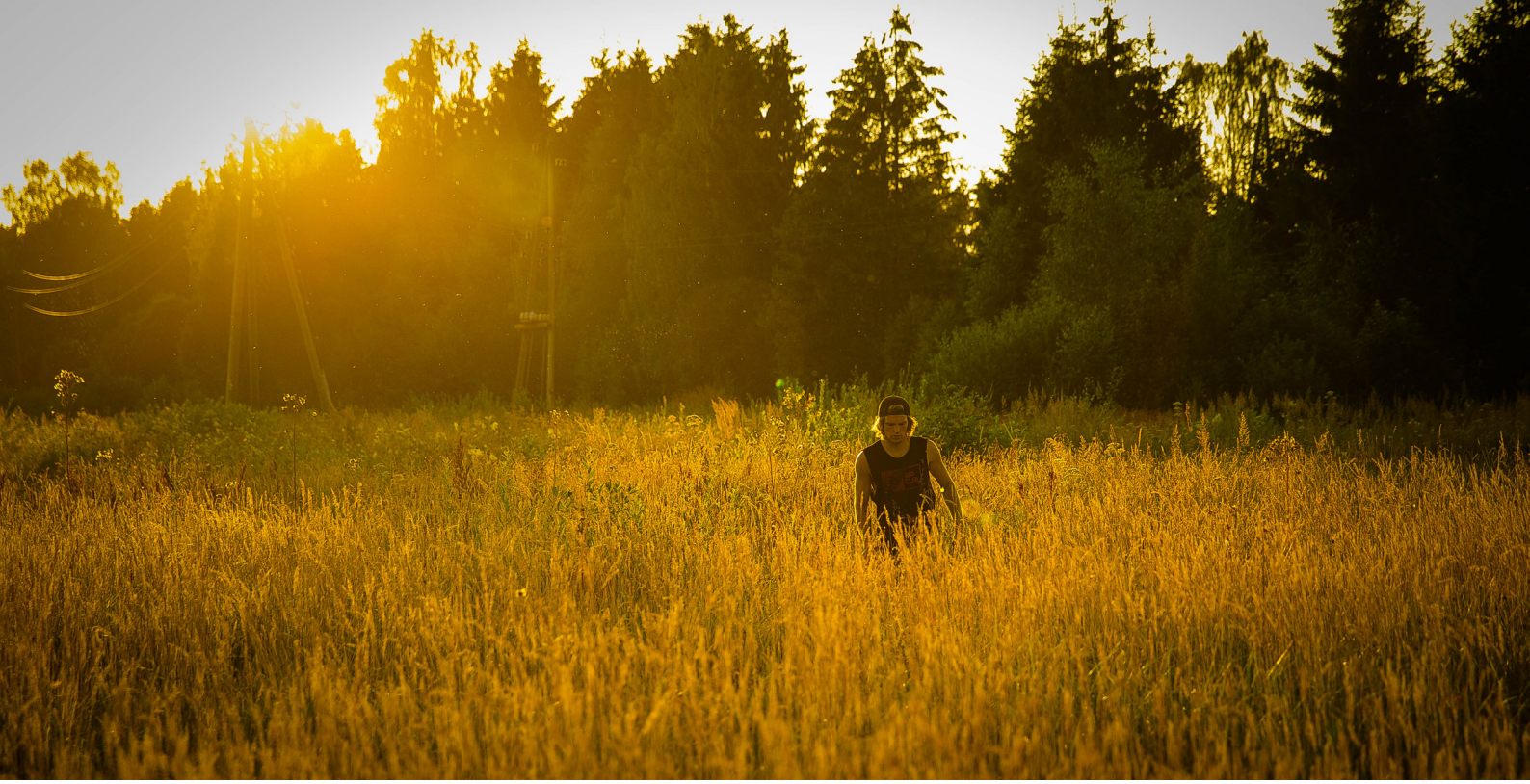
When I smooth my shorts with my right hand, I notice I've pissed my pants. I haven't done that since kindergarten. I hated losing my spot in the sandbox by taking time to walk to the girls' bathroom.

My lungs fill with the sweet, sticky smell of cow manure. There's the chug-chug of a tractor's engine pulling a manure spreader. I can tell the rig is right behind us. A voice shouts out, "Everything good here?" It's Mr Shipka. I grab the little kid's wrist and we go and get the mail. All I find is the flyer for the Newly New Shop. I know Mom will be happy to see it.

The van blinds my view of the ambulance on the other side of our detached garage. I yank open the door in anticipation of turning on my TV show and if she isn't in her bedroom napping, Mom will be leaning against the door jamb between the living room and kitchen. When I step inside, there are two men in dark uniforms strapping Mom to a stretcher. A glass ashtray crammed with cigarette butts sits beside a plastic pill bottle. It's orange and empty and it has Mom's name on it. Dad's face is pasty white like a loaf of freshly baked bread. I look from Mom to Dad and Dad to Mom. Dad's eyes are grey and flat behind his black-rimmed glasses. The flyer dribbles from my fingers to the floor. I step out of my loafers and peel my socks off my feet. They smell like brine. I don't say anything to anyone about the van. I want to know what's going on but I'm too frightened to move. The muscles in my legs are heavy and tight so I stay there by the screen door.

"Dad?" I ask. His fingers twitch and knit to the beat of a nearby clock. A cigarette stub smoulders in the ashtray.

The lighting near the couch makes Mom's dark hair appear dull. Her eyes are closed. I guess she's sleeping. Something smells bad, like dill pickle water. It's the same kind of smell after my parents play cards and drink from stubbies with the neighbours. I should be on the horsehair couch, watching TV, eating a mayonnaise sandwich and letting my dog stick his tongue between my toes. Instead I worry because the ambulance attendants don't care enough to tuck Mom's feet under the blanket the way she likes it. I hear a cat mewling to get inside. The ambulance attendants squeeze past me. They don't seem to be in a hurry. So I hold my breath and wait for Dad to tell me what's next.



GRASS VALLEY

By Tayne Ephraim

She sits in the entrance to the corrugated tin shack with her head slumped down and the loaded shotgun resting between her knees. High summer, heat shimmers from the plain. All the fluids feel drained out of her body. The sun is a heavy shroud that takes everything and leaves nothing behind.

Whenever her boyfriend takes the jalopy into Nevada City she sits like this with the gun ready to scare off the bears. The bears come down from the surrounding hills and dig their way into unwatched pantries and storage shanties. They'll eat anything they can reach. No one locks their doors here. The nearest house is more than a half hour up the valley.

When her boyfriend comes back with the bricks of hundred dollar bills in a brown paper bag they'll divvy them up into glassware jars and bury them by the roots of the Baja desert mangroves in the salt marsh at the bottom of their acreage. Roots like the hands of an Indian graveyard, she thinks. Their plot is over a hundred hectares. Nobody will ever find them. When they need the money one of them will trudge down the dirt track to the marsh, careful to cover over their tracks, and peel off a few bills from a brick. Visiting the branch, they call it. Her boyfriend still laughs whenever he says it.

He drives his beat-up jalopy with a handgun under the front seat. She remembers when he used to be so paranoid about being followed back that he would come home on a two hour detour down the back roads just to be sure. Now his empty beer bottles are piling up by the back door of the shack. He's getting careless, she thinks.

Thirty some plants they're at now. It's enough. The solar generator provides power for a small fan and a half hour charge of the laptop to email her mother in Kansas City. The well they bored themselves, the one that sustains both them and their crops. Good soil is the most expensive thing.

Work of the hands, she thinks. There's something almost biblical about it. The simplicity of that. The sowing and the reaping.

When she was back in Reno she would scrounge in the carpet for any tiny nugget that may have fallen out of the rolling paper. But now she finds herself sweeping handfuls of it off the table, throwing it on the compost. They've got shopping bags of the stuff stacked in the storage cupboards. The shack stinks with it.

Their neighbour is an ex-marine. He lives with his greyhound and has enough weaponry to arm a small militia force. Sometimes she hears explosions that shake the earth like a small quake from up the valley. He's at the head of the one road that snakes its way down to their acreage. Anything goes down, he tells them, anything at all, you call me and I'll close off this road, you hear. He's ready for whatever's coming. Bunkers have been dug into the surrounding hills, stocked with years' worth of canned food and ammunition. The shit *will* hit the fan, he says to them, sooner or later. Any time you want me to show you how to use one of these things, all you gotta do is just ask. Day or night, you hear. It's good to be prepared. He showed her how to dismantle the shotgun and clean and grease every one of its appendages and then how to reassemble it.

Terrence McKenna says it's good to reboot the system every year. Upgrade to the latest software. Wipe the hard drive clean. On her birthday, each year since she moved out here, she takes a leather pouch of dried psychobilin mushrooms and goes into the wilderness with a sleeping bag, water bottle and the shotgun.

There's good work and there's bad. There's a way and there's a fleeting mirage.

BECAUSE BATHROOMS ARE WHERE WE TALK OURSELVES IN AND OUT OF THINGS

By Anna Knowles

you take the bowl of soup with you
though its late and you can't see them

down the blackened hallway,
the shells of light

that one way or another coalesce
with the expected blaze of wallpaper

and like them, you are wedged
into the panelling of a bathroom mirror.

It's not exactly rapture
but it's part of your life now

to find saints on cards with iced-over
eyes sensing their own breath.

Their unlatched mouths seem to say
this is all there is and because you heard,

against every breath, you'll back away,
the bowl too hot to keep standing there.

When they tongued goodnight
to the rustling of trees outside

you thought about the engine
above an upturned car.

CLARICE BECKETT

By Ross Jackson

before breakfast, dripping rain
view softened by fog
the Beaumaris bus
a long sweep of road

beach bright in primary colours
morning innocence secured
by bathing boxes
mauve shadows under parasols

hers just the plain vase of flowers
others, not there at lunch, might add:
playing card, cut globe of melon
skull of yellowed bone

the sun's descent at dusk
a tone of mournful
convalescence
in sympathy with her nurse's role

streets wrapped in greyness
through which the painter stole
hazy street lamps from temperate suburbs
banked in darkness above the Bay.

COVER STORY

By Sue Zueger

The boys are whistling at Sylvia and Anne.
Their breasts shelved, waists cinched
as sand grains tick down the sides
of their hourglass bodies.

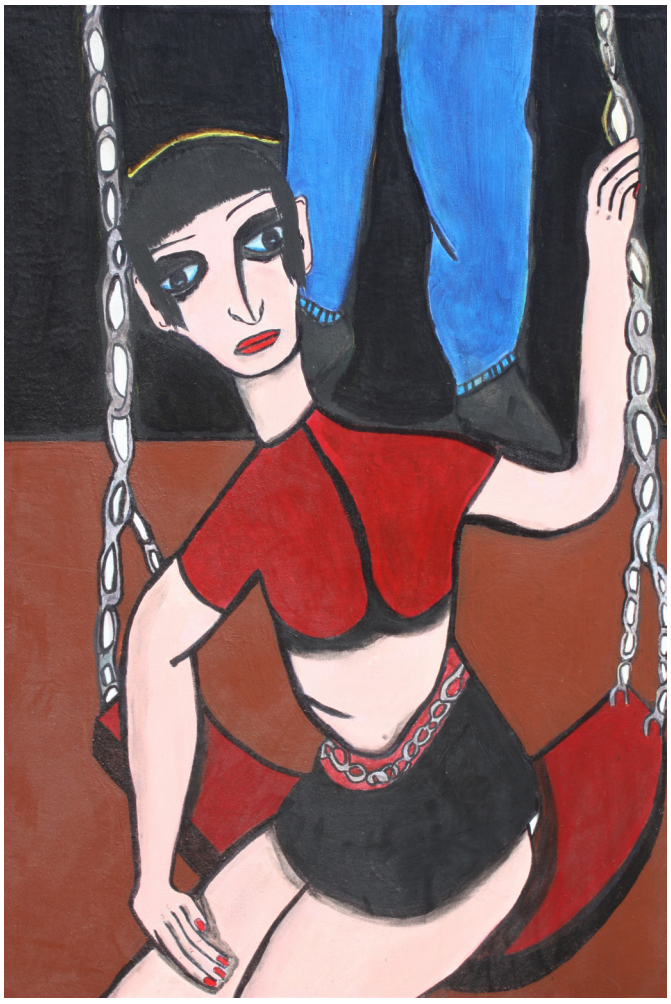
The bride on the bridge looks like a cake topper
covered up in white organza white frosting.
Her white teeth only smile smile for the camera.
Nectar-hungry bees ravish the jonquil, the hibiscus,
and return to the untouchable queen.

Gary says he has nightmares about the clerk at the SA
who wears a moustache instead of lipstick.
Men can't forgive an ugly woman.
We need to line our eyes, change and paint
our faces but show our cleavage

just a bit.

Adam searched for palm leaves
big enough to cover Eve's
mother-of-the-world-sized tits
while she bark-stripped the tree and wrote
letters to her daughters.
All the while some sibilant asshole tried
distracting her with pick up lines.

My own grandmother wrote me down
somewhere even though her father
quit meeting her eyes after
she was tape-measured for a new dress
and her belly confessed
her powerful sex.



DRIVING

By Dominic Stevenson

Mum taught me to drive because Dad had flat-out refused. Nothing personal, he said, but this is the kind of thing your mother is better at.

I was a lost cause. I had no physical coordination and a tendency to tense up under pressure. I was convinced that learning to drive would end up with me killing my entire family. My sister Jen went for her Ls as soon as she'd turned sixteen but I put it off until Mum came home one day with the Learner's Handbook.

You can't expect us to drive you around forever, she said, dropping the book onto my desk. I read the first line, which said: Safe driving is more difficult than it seems. I closed the book and shoved it in the back of my wardrobe.

My first lesson was in Mum's blue hatchback at the local primary school car park. Mum told me to put my hands on the wheel in the ten-and-two position. We went through the various car controls.

This is the steering wheel, she began seriously. The pedal on the right is the accelerator, and the one in the middle is the brake.

And this one is the clutch, right?

Don't worry about that right now. What I want you to do is practise accelerating and braking.

Okay. Shouldn't I have the keys?

Let's try it with the engine off.

I spent the next five minutes pushing the limp accelerator towards the floor, then easing off and pushing the brake. I lacked the fine motor skills that good driving demanded and lifted my foot clumsily each time I switched pedals. Mum thought I was doing this to annoy her, and asked if I was serious about learning to drive or if I just wanted to muck around.

In the next lesson, I learned about changing gears. Again, we sat with the engine off while Mum watched me cycle from first to fifth and back again.

Be gentle but decisive, she said.

She handed me the keys and told me to start the car. After practising in silence for so long the engine sounded vicious. Mum put her hands up in front of her chest, palms outward, as if she were going to high-ten someone. She tilted her left hand forward.

Push the clutch in like this and change into first, she said. When you want to start moving, you have to coordinate your movements. Like this.

She slowly tilted her left hand back to vertical, while at the same time pushing her right hand forward.

As you slowly push the accelerator in, disengage the clutch and you'll start moving.

I pressed the accelerator but forgot to let the clutch out. The car revved menacingly and Mum grabbed the edges of her seat.

Smoother than that, she said. She put her hands up again and made the same left-hand-up-right-hand-down movement.

This time the car revved briefly, then bunny hopped and stalled.

I was beginning to get a headache, and my bum and back were sore from sitting so tensely.

You're not watching, Mum said, and started to make her hand movements again.

That's not helpful, I said.

Neither is your attitude. Your sister was never this difficult.

I started the engine again, and this time I got the car moving, and drove about ten metres before panicking and letting the accelerator out. The car juddered to a halt.

Better, Mum said. She took her hands off the dashboard and readjusted her glasses. But I think that's enough for today.

Every Saturday morning we'd head out to the primary school. I eventually completed a few laps of the car park and was in control of the car at least 90% of the time. My palms still sweated uncontrollably whenever the engine was on, leaving two slick patches at ten and two, but Mum said that would probably stop once I became more experienced. Jen pointed out that after four weeks of lessons she'd already been driving to school and back. Mum told her to leave me alone, and said that everybody learns at their own pace.

Occasionally, Mum had to go away over the weekend for work. It felt like I had some sort of pass, free to do what I wanted without having my Saturdays ruined by three-point-turns and hill-starts.

One night I got a call from Jen. It was past midnight. Mum was away so I had spent the day watching back-to-back episodes of *Firefly*. I pressed pause and picked up the phone. She started speaking straight away.

Has Dad gone to bed?

Yeah.

I need you to come get me.

Why?

I'm drunk.

There was squealing in the background. Jen dropped the phone and swore as she fumbled to pick it up. I heard somebody ask if she was all right and another high-pitched voice yell, She's wasted.

Rob?

Where are you?

A party.

Stay the night.

No. Tommy's a total creep.

Go home with Alice.

Alice is a bitch.

Jen covered the receiver and I could hear her having a muffled conversation with someone. Her voice was getting more and more high-pitched. She came back on the line.

Rob? Are you still there?

Can't you borrow some money and get a taxi or something?

I tried. It costs eighty bucks to send one this far from town. Please, Rob, just come and pick me up. You're only down the road. You know I can't drive by myself.

I'll text you the address.

She hung up. A minute later my phone buzzed again. *1643 Old Coach Road.*

I put the phone on my bedside table and started *Firefly* again.

Jen sent another message, the exact same one as before. I ignored it. She sent the address three more times. I turned my phone to silent and tried to concentrate on the unresolved sexual tension between two characters on screen. After the episode finished I checked my phone again. I had twelve unread messages, all from Jen. The last one was a sad face, sent fifteen minutes ago. I tried calling her. There was no answer. I got out of bed and pulled jeans over my boxers.

The garage door sounded like it was going to vibrate off its rails. I turned the engine on and placed my hands at ten and two. I'd never backed out of the driveway before. I'd never even reversed. Mum called reversing an advanced technique.

I took my ten o'clock hand off the wheel so I could turn around to see behind me. As I crept backwards the side of the car scraped alongside the pencil pines bordering the driveway. I had to stop and readjust the wing mirror, which had been pushed back by the branches.

There were no other cars around. I wanted to turn the radio on for company but was too scared to take my eyes off the road. Once I got to the unlit highway I realised that I hadn't turned my headlights on. I pulled over. All the levers and dials had little hieroglyphics on them. I examined the symbols using the light from my phone screen until I saw a misshapen egg with lines shooting out of it. I flicked the lever and the gravel verge in front of the car illuminated. Right at the edge of the yellow light was a dead wallaby. Its flattened guts spilled out of the place where its pouch would have been. I checked my mirrors and rolled back onto the road, right over the wallaby.

1643 Old Coach Road was marked in wilted balloons tied to a letterbox made out of a tin jerrycan. I couldn't see the house from the road; the rutted gravel driveway ran into the bush and around a corner. I turned the car into the driveway and slowly travelled along, branches scraping the car every now and then. I stalled a couple of times, and each time the engine stopped the silence of the surrounding bush unnerved me. I had been fine when I had been on the road and moving relatively quickly, but inching along the driveway took all my concentration.

I could hear the thump of bass in the distance. I turned another corner and saw the house, an old pre-war weatherboard building with a much newer-looking corrugated iron roof. Bordering the house was a large yard with well-tended roses and retaining walls that looked ridiculous next to the scraggly bush surrounding it. A few people were milling about on the lawn, talking to each other with cans of premix spirits in their hands. A few shielded their eyes as they looked toward the headlights. I parked the car behind a dusty four-wheel drive and forgot to disengage the gears before letting the clutch out.

A couple of people wooed as I got out of the car and I could hear laughing in the distance. I went down a small flight of stone steps into the yard.

Have you guys seen Jen?

Nah, man.

I went round the side of the house, past a large water tank. The music got louder. I heard a bottle break somewhere behind me, followed by a loud jeer.

The music was coming from a huge P.A in the garage. The cars had been cleared out and a few limp streamers hung from the wooden rafters. I couldn't see Jen on the dance floor, and I knew I would be hopeless trying to ask anybody over the music. A small throng of girls danced next to the speakers, and a group of sullen looking boys with beer cans sat on some dilapidated couches in the corner, watching.

Every now and then one would nudge the other and whisper something. I turned around, thinking I'd go back the way I'd come. I glanced at the house. It was dark except for a couple of porch lights. I tried to make up reasons why she wouldn't be in there. Maybe she'd been able to get a lift from somebody after all. Maybe I'd missed her out in the front yard. She didn't even know that I'd come; I could just go home. I tried calling her again, but it went straight to voicemail. I dropped my phone into my pocket and stared at the house a bit longer.

The back door was unlocked and I went inside. In the kitchen were some empty spirit bottles laying among half-eaten bowls of chips and M&Ms. I walked through the kitchen and into a hallway. All the doors to the darkened rooms were open except one. I knocked and, when I heard no answer, pushed it open.

Jen was sitting on the floor, hands around her knees and face buried in her arms, a nearly empty bottle of vodka in one hand. I switched on the light, expecting to see somebody else in the shadows. But it was just her. I lifted her onto her feet.

Where are your shoes?

I don't know.

Do you want to find them?

No.

Leave the bottle.

She shook her head and cradled it to her chest. Instead of going back out through the kitchen I led her out the other way, toward the front of the house. The sound of the music faded and was replaced by voices of people laughing in the front yard. I opened the front door and we passed two girls and a guy sitting on a bench on the porch. They whistled when they saw Jen holding onto my arm.

Sure you want to go home with him, Jen?

She stopped and turned to face them. I hovered hopelessly behind her, my arm still interlocked with hers. The girl who had spoken laughed.

She's wasted.

Fuck you.

Come on, let's go. I pulled her towards the car again.

Fucking slut.

Jen turned around again and hurled the nearly empty vodka bottle. They ducked and it smashed through the window behind them.

I ran up the stone steps, pulling Jen behind me. A half-drunken can of Jim Beam spun over our heads and bounced off the passenger side window. I fumbled for the keys in my pocket and unlocked the doors. I opened the back passenger door and Jen stumbled in. The guy from the porch was following us and shouting. I slammed the door behind Jen and moved behind the wheel. I locked the doors just as the guy reached us. He began banging on the window and said he was going to bash my fucking head in.

I managed to put the keys in the ignition and start the engine. I ground the gear into reverse and the car lurched backwards. I was doing pretty well until I ran over the foot of the guy who was banging on the window. He fell to the ground clutching his foot and I clunked into first and took off down the driveway.

When we were on a straight stretch of road I glanced back at Jen. Her eyes were closed. Then she leant sideways and vomited all over the floor. Taking one hand off the wheel, I grabbed a green bag from under the passenger seat.

The car swerved as I handed it back to her. Jen took it and threw up again, mostly in the bag. The acidic smell of her vomit filled the car. I turned a few dials on the centre console and a blast of hot air came out of the vents, which made the smell even worse. Eventually I gave up and put my window down. Jen said she was cold and I said that was too bad.

When we arrived home I shepherded Jen through the side gate and around to the back door. She was still clutching her green bag of sick and I took it from her and dropped it in the wheelie bin next to the shed. I unlocked the back door, took a yellow bucket from underneath the laundry sink and shoved her down the hallway. She kept trying to say she was sorry and I kept telling her to shut up. I pushed her into her room and went to close the door behind her.

Rob.

What?

Can I have some water?

By the time I came back from the kitchen with a glass of water she'd passed out on the bed, mouth wide open. I pushed her onto her side so she wouldn't choke if she vomited and left the water on her bedside table. Then I headed back outside to clean the car.

During my next lesson I drove with my window down because I had not been able to get rid of the smell. I'd even bought one of those artificial pine-scented air fresheners and told Mum it helped me concentrate. Mum said she thought it smelled horrible, but that it must be working because I seemed a lot more confident in handling the car. She told me I could drive home. We stopped at the supermarket on the way, and as I was parking I hit a light pole. Mum didn't say anything about the pole, but gave me some money and told me to go inside and get apples and milk. When I came back she was sitting behind the wheel. I slid into the passenger seat and handed her the keys.

UNDER YOUR FEET

By Darlene P. Campos

Every time I went outside to play with my friends, Dad grabbed my legs and placed me in his lap. Then he would bow his head, close his eyes, and say "May the angels be under your feet." I never understood why he said that since we were not religious. We believed in God, like nearly all of Ecuador, but we didn't go to church except for weddings, baptisms or funerals. By Grandma's judgment, we were heathens.

As I approached my teenage years, Dad stopped saying his quick prayer. I assumed he didn't worry about me anymore. I was old enough to take the public bus alone, run to the grocery store four blocks away and cook simple meals for myself. But I missed hearing his prayer. It probably didn't have as much substance as one of Grandma's prayers, which dragged on for several minutes. It was nice to know Dad cared for me and enjoyed showing me.

"Dad," I said one evening. He didn't turn to look at me from his recliner. The World Cup was on and Ecuador was in the lead.

"What is it?" he asked, impatient.

"Why don't you sit me on your lap and pray for me anymore?"

Dad muted the screaming announcer on the television. He squinted his eyes and scrunched his mouth.

"You're seventeen years old," he said.

"So? You don't have to put me on your lap, but you could still pray for me."

"Since when do I pray?" he said. "I haven't been to church since your grandmother died five years ago. Now either watch the game with me or go find something to do."

I took a seat on the couch across from Dad's chair and watched the Ecuadorian team make another goal. The whole neighborhood erupted in joy. Dad stood from his chair and jumped up and down. I never saw him so enthusiastic about anything else.

The day after my twentieth birthday, I left home. I moved into a tiny apartment on the north side of Guayaquil. It was much quieter than living in the central neighbourhood. Dad visited me about two weeks after my move-in. He brought a basket of fruit, olive oil and assorted breads and cheeses. He took a seat at my little table and looked out the window.

"Are you sure you like it here?" he asked. "It feels like a ghost town."

"It's fine," I said. "I sleep easy at night."

"You know you can come back home anytime," he said and crossed his legs. "Your room is empty. I haven't touched it since you left."

"I'm okay by myself," I said, even though I wasn't really sure.

My first year away from home was the easiest. I found a good job at the public hospital writing and editing health related articles. It gave me enough money to pay bills and spoil myself on the weekend. Occasionally, I missed seeing Dad every day, but I reminded myself I was now an adult and I didn't depend on him anymore. As the second year approached, Dad started to worry me. He was diagnosed with advanced diabetes and my cousins who lived fairly close to him told me he got into the habit of taking long walks at night.

He would leave the house around seven each evening and wouldn't return until midnight or later. I asked how they knew this and they claimed to be following him to make sure he was okay.

One evening, I waited for Dad down at the corner. He came around at a quarter past seven, wearing dark clothes and a pinstriped hat.

He didn't see me, so I tapped his shoulder and he fell into the busy street, almost hit by an oncoming taxi.

"What are you doing?" he said. "Don't you have work?"

"It's Saturday," I said. "Where are you going?"

"Out," he said and hurried past me. "Dictator." I walked behind him, but he picked up his pace and soon, I couldn't see him anymore.

A couple of days later, I rode my bike to Dad's house. It was past nine o'clock and he wasn't home. I still had a key, so I let myself inside. The living room looked the same as the day I left. The kitchen seemed fine too. Dad's study was different. Dad retired from dentistry when I was eighteen, but he still read about it during his free time. All of his books were torn and scattered on the floor. A set of plastic teeth he used to practice on when I was younger had been crushed. I heard the front door unlocking and ran to the living room. Dad wobbled inside, sweaty.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming?" he said, breathing heavily.

"I didn't want you to worry."

"About what?" he asked and flung himself into his recliner.

"I didn't want you cooking for me or anything like that. "I know you get tired more often because of your diabetes."

"There's leftover soup in the refrigerator," Dad said. "Help yourself." I shook my head and told him I wasn't hungry, but he still got up to get me a bowl of soup. He placed the steamy bowl on the table and whistled at me.

"Sit, sit," he said as he pulled out a chair for me. "Eat, this stuff is healthy for you."

"Shouldn't you be eating this?"

"Me? I'm sixty-seven years old," he said. "I got to sixty-seven years old by eating that soup." He sat next to me and took off his hat. As I ate, I could feel his stare upon me.

"You look just like your mother," he said. "I wish she could have seen you grow up."

"I'm sure she did," I said to make feel him better. She was kidnapped and murdered when I was two years old. Gang members mistook Mom for a rival's wife. They apologised to Dad for the misunderstanding, but he never forgave them. Dad rarely talked about Mom, but every time he did, his face changed. His eyes shut halfway and his mouth tightened, like she was a darkly held secret only the two of us knew about.

"Your mother loved soup," Dad said as I continued eating. "She swore it was the cure for all ailments. For any kind of sickness I came down with, she had a soup recipe for it. She loved cooking so much she wanted to open a restaurant at the beach when you were older. Well, then you know what happened." Dad got up from the table and walked outside to the balcony. He spit off the side of the railing multiple times to cover up his soft sobbing.

On Dad's sixty-eighth birthday, we took a bus ride to the cemetery to visit Grandma. She was buried in a small grave with my grandfather next to her. Dad placed flowers upon both of them, even though he had never met his father in real life.

"How about some cake?" Dad asked as we walked back to the bus stop.

"But you're a diabetic," I reminded him.

He shook his head. “I’ve lived. And what better way to die than by eating cake?”

We walked to a small bakery down the street. I looked over the display and asked for two slices of bread and two slices of chocolate cake, Dad’s favourite. We sat down at a rusted table near the front window, sipping on cold guava juice.

“Sixty-eight today,” I said. “How do you feel, Dad?”

“Hungry,” he said. “Where’s our cake and bread?”

“They’re cutting it up for us,” I said and took a drink of my juice. “I meant do you feel sixty-eight? Or do you feel younger?”

“I can’t feel my legs most of the time,” he said. “Doctor says he might have to cut part of them off. I feel old. Really old. I wish I would have had you when I was younger so you could’ve known me better. You’re blossoming and I’m wilting. I’m sorry.” The waiter brought the fresh bread and cake to our table. He took our glasses to bring us more guava juice.

“You don’t have to apologise for that, Dad,” I said. “Kids happen.”

“I know, but you should have happened sooner. The older you are, the better you can deal with problems. It’s just common sense.”

I wasn’t sure what Dad meant until a couple of weeks later. His circulation was getting worse and the doctor said amputation was necessary right away. Since I was working at the hospital that day, I managed to take a break during Dad’s procedure. Dad lost both of his feet, but he didn’t react the way most people would. He looked down at himself and said, “At least I don’t have to buy shoes anymore.” I offered to move back in with him to make sure he was taken care of. He told me he was fine.

“Feet, who needs them?” he said. “Things live without feet all the time. Look at fish.”

“You’re not a fish,” I told him.

“I am now,” he said and held his breath. I patted his back and reminded him to call me if he needed any help.

Dad finally called me after three weeks. He sounded distraught, so I hung up the phone and got to his house as soon as I could. When I arrived, I found him staring at the television, mumbling words I didn’t understand.

“Dad?” I said and placed my hands on his shoulders.

“Yes?”

“What’s wrong?”

He pointed down to where his feet used to be. “That,” he said. “That is what’s wrong.”

“You couldn’t help it, Dad,” I told him. “It’s not your fault.” Dad shook his head. He muttered again. Then he reached out to my arm, squeezed it, and looked into my face.

“Thank you for coming,” he said. “I appreciate all you do for me.”

Working at the hospital started getting tedious for me. My pay rate rose as did my holidays and benefits. They loved having me as their writer, so much that my supervisors often gave me gift baskets. But I couldn’t stand seeing Dad at the hospital every week. He needed more frequent checkups after his amputation to make sure he could keep his other limbs. Every time he came in, he would race by my office in his wheelchair. Sometimes he would toss a paper airplane at me which contained either money or one of his unfunny jokes.

What do you call a man without an ability to speak up? Married!

The staff at the hospital grew to love Dad, probably as much as I did. But I hated seeing him there. I wanted him healthy again. I wanted him to have his feet and be able to walk endlessly at night the way he used to.

On Christmas Eve, Dad invited me over for dinner. He made soup, chocolate cookies and a large tub of Caesar salad, even though he hated Caesar salad.

"Your teeth look dirty," Dad said. "Have you been flossing?"

"Dad, who cares?" I said. "It's Christmas."

"So because it's a holiday, your teeth can go to hell. That's good thinking. For New Year's Eve, I won't wipe my butt after using the bathroom."

"Okay, Dad, I'll floss," I said. "It's my New Year's resolution." Instead of dropping the topic, Dad wheeled over to his study and came back with his plastic teeth set, even though it was still breaking apart.

"What are you doing with that?" I asked. "Get that away from the food, it's full of dust."

"Those are your teeth without floss," he said. He laughed loudly, but then he clutched onto his heart. I dropped my fork on the floor and felt his chest with my hand. His heart was beating so fast I could hear it.

"It's nothing," he said. "Side effect from my medicine."

"Are you sure? I don't think hearts are supposed to go that fast, Dad."

"Hearts can take a pounding," he assured me. "They go through a lot. The only body part that deals with more crap than the heart is the rectum." I laughed lightly and he squeezed my arm, laughing much louder.

After dinner, I sat with Dad in the living room. We watched *It's a Wonderful Life* with the Spanish dubs. Dad's first language was Spanish, but he was also fluent in English, French and Portuguese. He stuck his tongue out at most of the scenes.

"Whoever translated this movie must have been drunk," he said. "Or maybe the translator couldn't speak well because he didn't floss his teeth."

"I'm sure," I said. "It's almost one in the morning, do you need help getting to bed?"

"No," he said. "I don't sleep in my bed anymore. I sleep in my chair."

"Do you want me to help you get in your bed?" Dad nodded and opened his arms out to me like a small child. I lifted him out of his chair and carried him to his bed. He threw himself on the mattress, smiling.

"This feels amazing," he said. "I forgot how great a bed was."

"Anything else you need from me?" I asked. "I'll be in my old bedroom."

"No, I'm fine," he said. I turned to walk away, but I felt his hand tug at my pants. I looked back at him and sat down on the bed.

"Have you had any nightmares lately?" he asked.

"Not any I remember," I said. "Have you?"

"I had one a couple weeks ago," he said and pulled a blanket over himself. "Ecuador banned guava juice." I smiled and told him something like that would never happen.

"Just like Ecuador winning the World Cup," he said and I laughed out loud.

"They might win next time, you never know." He stayed quiet and held my hands tightly. They were cold and clammy. Then he bowed his head and closed his eyes.

"May the angels be under your feet," he whispered. "And hold you up, away from all danger, away from temptation. May the angels lift your soul to the sky and never let you go." Dad unclasped my hands and sunk his head down into his pillow.

"I never knew there was more to it," I said.

"There always was, I just never felt like saying the whole thing," he said. "Your mother used to tell you that every night as you slept in your crib."

I nodded and straightened Dad's blanket. As I left his bedroom, he whistled, so I turned back.

"I figure the angels, if there are any, should be under your feet since they don't need to be under mine."

"You still have feet, Dad," I said as I leaned against the doorway. "You just can't see them. I still have a mother, don't I?"

"You're right," he said. "I still have a wife." He held up his hand and his wedding ring, now a shade duller, stood out from the rest of his fingers.

"Goodnight," he said. "Don't forget to floss. I refuse to have a child with bad teeth."

"Goodnight," I told him. "May the angels be under your feet."

"The angels probably smelled my foot odour. That's why they left me," he said.

I gave him a kiss on his forehead. After he finally fell asleep, I went to his study to put his plastic teeth set back together.

THE CONDUIT

By Chris Rowley

Only once Jake had escaped the pouring rain by boarding a half-filled tram did the black-grey clouds finally stop spitting at him. He brushed a hand across his jacket, spilling water onto his boots. Muddy footprints lined a trail towards an empty seat— sitting opposite a young couple cuddling. He despised riding backwards.

Outside the badly scratched window, the neon lights of shopfronts glowed, indicating all manner of bargained goods. The scent of baked products filled the air, seeping through the opened windows.

Jake fumbled at the jacket zipper resting at his throat. His fingers ached with the slightest of movement, twitching rapidly. Even when he was able to grasp the small zip he struggled to shift it; his wrist seizing and locking into place. Agony shot through his nerves, travelling to his collarbone like someone was rubbing a scolding frying pan against his flesh.

He looked, he moved, and he breathed like an old man nearing the end of a long life-time. Though, he was, in fact, quite a young man: barely twenty-five years of age.

It took him four times longer to get home. A Labrador greeted him at the door. She was lying on her belly, head resting on the beige carpet. She rose and watched Jake as he slowly walked through the narrow entry towards the living room. “Hey Myer.” He gave her head a gentle rub. Even that caused pain.

The closer he edged to the living room, the louder the mechanical hissing of escaping air became. The tall oxygenator vibrated steadily. Beeping—every five seconds—from the IV drip resonated against his ears. After all this time, he still couldn’t ignore the repetitive sounds of the grim reaper slowly coming for another soul.

His father and namesake, Jacob, was slouched in a suede lounge chair. His head was down, limbs limp, body shuddering. Nasal prongs hung from his nostrils, a plastic IV tube was attached to one arm and a blue blood pressure cuff wrapped around his other.

The old man tilted he head toward Jake. “Son.” Often, his speech slurred so much it was almost unrecognisable.

Jake slowly took a seat on the edge of the coffee table opposite. He reached to check the IV, only for the old man to feebly block him. His frail, wrinkled hand trembled in unison with his leg. His skin was grey, his eyes hollow, staring beyond the boy.

“You are not well.” The old man would win gold medals if the Olympics hosted competitions for most obvious statements.

Jake lifted a hand up, fingers twitching. “Arthritis is acting up.” He cracked a smirk. “There was a man. Broke his arm at work. His family is struggling.”

The old man began to cough, his bony chest heaving. Jake clumsily reached for the plastic mask hanging off the side of the chair and handed it to his father.

“Hurry Jacob.” His father reached a hand out. “A young man with arthritis is hardly a young man.”

Jake rolled his sleeves and clutched the old man’s hand, firm enough for a solid grip—though, he did hesitate at the thought of harming the man who raised him.

“This’ll hurt when you move.”

“I don’t move all that often, mate.”

They closed their eyes. Their arms began to tremble. Jake’s grip tightened. Every vein in his body bulged and pumped—the blood rushing quicker. And then, the blue faded into a shade of violet.

Energy faded from both. They lost their grip. Jake slumped onto the floor as his father slouched back in his seat, ensuring the nasal prongs were still properly attached.

The aching in Jake’s bones subsided. Pins and needles circled his joints, as though he were getting used to brand new limbs.

His father, however, tried moving his hands. “Arthritis runs in the family. Might as well have it now.” He tried to laugh, but it was masked by wheezing coughs.

A burst of energy surged through Jake. And though he had only suffered from the crippling disease for mere hours, he felt like a new man. He grabbed Myer’s lead and rushed outside. He aimed to sprint a marathon.

The first time the veins in his forearm turned a shade of purple, he was seven-years-old and was at the playground with a neighbour. He climbed up the slide and turned back to help her—she was struggling; weakened by deep coughs and constant sniffs. Once his fingers were wrapped around her wrist, the purple appeared, flowing like blood. He tried releasing his grip, but his fingers curled against his will.

The world around him twirled. He slumped onto his back, snot trickling into his mouth. His friend stood above him, with a smile; better than new. He was ill for days.

His father had told him that was how children got colds: “they transfer the ailment to another. It may look like she was passing the disease by touch, but it’s a lot more complicated.”

Over the following year, while he initially forgot about the transfer of the cold virus, the image of his veins turning purple had burned into his memory.

Playing football during lunchtime, a young boy was violently flung to the ground. As the boy’s chest heaved—a scratching and wheezing sound coming from behind his teeth—Jake stormed over like a nurse. It was only when he slid to his knees beside the boy that he realised his natural instincts alone were not enough to save him. He placed his hands on the boy’s chest, like they did in the movies, and pressed. Then, his veins turned violet and tightness formed in Jake’s chest. The boy’s fast and shallow breaths were instantly replaced by deep and drawn out breathing.

Jake woke the next day in terrible pain, like barbed wire had been wrapped around his lungs. A doctor told his father that Jake had asthma. Yet the boy from the playground, who had suffered from the disease since birth, had been cured.

While he felt the energy of ten men surging through his body, Jake actually barely made it to the corner of the street before his sprint faded to a casual jog. The Labrador, however, was tugging at the lead—enlightened by this new sense of freedom. He tried catching his breath, hoping to keep up with Myer, but it was feeble. He had never been a fit man in the best of circumstances.

The best part about having Myer was that she was a near constant companion. Once, she was a Guide Dog, and Jake often put her work vest on, which allowed her access anywhere. He remarked that she was in training.

Most people knew so little about these companions that the simplest of lies succeeded.

Jake had met Myer's owner a year back. The man suffered from a rare birth defect that meant even at a young age he knew he was going to lose his eyesight. But he never allowed that to hamper him and he sought to help other young children with vision impairments. So Jake cured him. The man squealed and jumped about, exclaiming how miraculous it was to see the world again. He gave her to Jake.

At first, after Jake had passed the blindness on, he thought of giving Myer to someone else. But in the end, he simply couldn't bear to pass her off like a toy. He gave her an early retirement in exchange for a friend who wouldn't judge him for his choices, wouldn't beg him to save her life.

As soon as Jake returned to his father's home, he let her off the lead and she hurriedly ran the living room. She might have been his friend, but aiding the sick and disabled was her job.

On the kitchen table were piles and piles of envelopes. Jake slumped onto a chair and grabbed the nearest with little effort.

The Healer of Melbourne: it did not take long for word to reach the public.

Even as a teenager, Jake saw this extraordinary gift as a horrific curse. He knew he couldn't cure every disease in the world. He could not return a lost limb. And any ailment he took—no matter how deadly—was stuck within him.

The media and the people he'd cured didn't care. Sick people were willing to pay any price; sacrifice anything in return for a cure.

For years Jake was stalked and harassed by those simply willing to take a chance. Terminally-ill billionaires offered islands and gold and jewels and the most devout would beg for his divine services.

His father sat him down and explained, carefully and slowly, that it was always his choice. They didn't know how or why he could do what he could. So they changed their identities and disappeared from the public—for the most part.

But irony has a fast yet strange way of creeping up on anyone. Jacob Senior learnt that their family curse had reached him. He was in kidney failure from cancer that had already spread through multiple organs.

Jake sat in front of his father, fighting back tears, and held out his hand. "I'll take it. I'll save you."

"And then what, boy?" His father coughed into a tight fist. "Cure me and condemn yourself? Do you think I could live with that?" The old man's words, his disappointment, still haunted him.

"Perhaps we can find someone…" His father had a look of horror in his eyes, but still Jake finished. "What if we find a criminal—?"

"We don't have that right."

A part of him had already known what his father's answer would be, but he had to make the offer anyway. They waited a few years, allowed the disease to progress further, before they set about finding those deemed truly deserving of a second chance. Jake would find individuals, such as the blind man, or the young man with arthritis, or the young girl with a terminal blood disease, and cure them, before transferring those ailments to his father.

*

Myer lifted her head when Jake came into the room, but returned to her comfortable position: head resting on Jacob's lap. The noises and beeps and beats from the multiple machines keeping his father alive resonated over the three's faint breaths.

Jake watched over him like a father would watch a child. He couldn't remember how many ailments were consuming the old man. One of them, one lucky disease, would claim him. Each time Jake made a transfer he could feel his father's natural resistance waning.

Drugs of all sorts, shapes, sizes and colours lay on the coffee table beside the radio. Jacob had made his son promise to keep him alive as long as possible, to ensure more people could be saved.

The old man was asleep. The dog was trying too. She spent so much more time with him in the past few days. Jake reached out to grab his father's hand, hold it until the end. But he froze in mid-air. They had agreed, together, that they would save the lives of those most deserving. Who deserved life more than one who risked his, repeatedly, to save dozens of others he would never meet?

Jake clutched his father's hand.

MUSCULOSKELETAL

By Atheer Al-Khalfa

He's been buying the same toothpaste for years now,
still reads the back of the packet with a magnifying glass
He empties a plastic bag, takes a good look inside and asks:
'Take a look inside, is it empty?'
He puts on plastic disposable gloves when tying his shoes,
like the pair he uses to floss his teeth
He waits for you to say 'YES' three consecutive times,
sometimes more, just in case it was a 'NO'
He makes trays out of tissue paper and twists the corners
for these fish oil tablets.
His shirts never crease,
He inspects the cuffs for any threads out of line,
looking like a blind man reading braille
His handwriting's perfection dehumanises him
His wardrobe is a perfect urban city
He eats apple and cucumber salad with walnuts,
no dressing
He drinks hot coffee after it has gone cold
He buys $200 jars of pure natural honey
He never fully opens sardine tins
He brushes the air around his hair, not his hair
He smells like a white powdery paste
And he asks me what I think of this,

I think it is as disappointing as the third quarter of cigarettes,
and as agonising as the last
Instead of stings at the back of my mouth,
I get stings in the left side of my chest.

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