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TEXT prose

Amelia Walker

Another kind of flight

Every so often, I grow wings. Which probably sounds like a good thing, but they're not the kind that fly. I become an ostrich, an emu: a long-legged mess of floppy feathers and squawking. Coffee cups slide to the floor, shattering into fragments I try uselessly to scoop up and sweep away. Door handles are a nightmare, and my emails have more typos than words.

People keep asking, *What are you playing at? Do you think yourself too good for the ground?*

I keep pointing out, these wings do nothing to get me off it. This typically makes things worse:

Why keep growing wings that carry you nowhere?

As if I'm meant to know the answer. As if it's a choice as opposed to just something that happens. But I must on some level share their incredulity, for now and then, alone, I still try: *Flap, flap, flap...*

Nothing but feathers everywhere – then sneezing fits. Stupid wings. And yet, for all the hassles, when I stretch them under morning sun there *is* something enticing about how their useless filaments and plumes glow with light. And when it's cold I wrap them round me like a blanket, revel in their soft embrace.

My hypothesis is these wings must once have served some evolutionary purpose – one we've since evolved to forget. I'm a throwback, an anachronism, a marker of what

humanity wants not to remember. What is it I show others that's so hard to recognise, to know as self? Is it the possibility that once, long ago, we all had wings – and, under the right circumstances, would all grow them back once more?

Maybe it's not the wings themselves that people shy from. Maybe it's the questions my wings invite: when, how and why did we edge from thoughts of flight towards clutching fast at coffee cups, door handles and all those time-gobbling emails we mostly need neither to read nor write?

These days, I've learned, when my wings grow, it's soundest not to fight: I go to the doctor for a note, book sick leave then curl inside this special darkness only feathers can create. For a week or three I fly to all the farthest places, meanwhile never moving, stuck fast to the ground.

Eventually, and inevitably, I at some point look up and discover the wings gone again. In their absence, I rediscover my arms – featherless, though goose fleshed, and in need of strength reconditioning. All the same, I rediscover my arms. Which probably sounds like a good thing. Yes. Of course. It *is*.

So why does part of me always want to cry and cry?

Amelia Walker lives and works on Kaurua Yerta. She acknowledges the Kaurua people as the owners and custodians of this land, and pays respect to Kaurua Elders, past and present. She recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationship with the land, and the continuing importance of these things today. This always was, always will be Aboriginal land. Her new book Alogopoiesis is available from Gazebo Books. Her recent 3CR interview by Tina Giannoukos for 'Spoken Word' is downloadable as a free podcast: <https://www.3cr.org.au/spoken-word/episode/amelia-walker-spoken-word>



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Ian C Smith

On the road to Greenland?

Needing respite from factories, blast furnaces, I read Laurie Lee's *As I Walk Out One Midsummer Morning* yearning to walk out myself – any morning would do – also wanting some best years of my life to remember when older. With minimal skills, even less education, bank balance unbalanced, gripped in the gap between family obligations and imagination, I embark on study.

Before this, daydreaming, my ideal was a tough tattooed gum-chewing guy in a motorcycle jacket living at the heartbeat of what I suspected was an enchanted world utterly unlike my everyday tableaux of men hunched over monotonous machinery bolted in place. This was after searching for specimens of *On the Road*'s rare full stops. Now a woman has won an award for 1,000 pages almost bereft of them.

I remembered joining a small library as a boy, reading Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*. Too callow to reel from horror, that Pacific theatre's saga of bloody loss, I yearned for action, the thick of life, alongside those G.I.s, death's real threat way over my head like printed bullets over marines' helmets.

T.S. Eliot is my challenging introduction to literary texts. Desperate emptiness smites my heart, those claws scuttling across ancient ocean beds underlining that I must thwart time's mundane thievery. Graduation after feeling as old as those clawed ocean beds on campus with mostly younger undergraduates boosts my confidence to locate places connected to reading, the closest to time travel I can manage.

On New York's subway's train dubbed *The Beast* I count five languages being read in

my graffitied carriage, recall V.S. Naipaul's first stop here after leaving Trinidad as a teenager, too poor to tip a cabby in *The Enigma of Arrival*. I hitchhike to, and tarry in, Vermont near Solzhenitsyn's hideaway in exile after triumphing over gulag cruelty. When my ferry reaches fog-shrouded Newfoundland I meet characters who have stepped straight from Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*.

Paul Theroux nudges my wanderlust, place ever more important in books, my antidote to loneliness, squashed into outside pockets of my backpack smugly treasured during delays. On the Kentish coast I rent accommodation with a miniature train line Theroux rode behind it. I arrive at Dover from France greeted by those trademark white cliffs, thinking of Matthew Arnold, read a poem by Tennyson whose monument I shall reach high above scudding drift on the Isle of Wight.

At Newstead Abbey I see a duck frozen in a large pond, but not the skull *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know* used as an ashtray. I imagine wielding a quill. Dip, dip, blot, blot. Thomas Hardy's writing desk, D.H. Lawrence's narrow house, visited, I cross the Irish Sea seeking Yeats' tower but become lost on winding lanes in the Celtic twilight. Buck Mulligan's Martello tower interests me despite initial puzzlement over meagre punctuation and obscure references with Joyce, a la Kerouac.

Walking to Papeete from the airport jutting over the ocean, sweating under my heavy pack, the heat takes me back to Mailer's marines toiling in the tropics, also to Gauguin's colourisation in art biographies now in vivid display, locals chacking me, their backdrop volcanic, voluptuous. Movie magic, albeit skewed, TV programs, plus everything I read when fixated about the *Bounty* mutiny, stimulate me.

Here I shall write about my mental mispronunciation – *sonn-offer-bitch* for *sonofabitch* – favoured by those marines, not understanding until naivete's stab, realisation, well into that book when a boy. Airport security, crazy now, is a put-off, but I need to be close to where literature breathed, have read books set in Iceland, and Greenland.

Ian C Smith writes in the Gippsland Lakes region of Victoria, and on Flinders Island. His work has appeared in Antipodes, Authora Australis, be-longing, cordite, Griffith Review, Journal of Working Class Studies, Meniscus and So Fi Zine. His seventh book is wonder sadness madness joy, Ginninderra Press.



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Maureen Alsop

Darling River, Death Ceremonies

I cross pasture-grasses littered with orange rinds and sun shattered glass. I cross dummy airfields. I cross into a silent country – a country where the river loops stubbed vegetation. Waters coil past the old meatworks factory. Merchant ships loom the harbour. I cross and seek my desire.

Nights I have no answer.

My mouth, her mouth, drowns and drowns again. Fast waters burn her throat and fill her lungs. When death came there was a song in her head and the river moving in all direction. There exists a melody now of north and east, a strange patterning, her mouth: an open echo.

The blessing, if I but turn aside, is to go after gods I've never known – to go into the land that she enters – she, among the dead. And I enter her earth, a conscious landscape beyond the west of the basin.

Her body arrives as the river-water scene dissipates.

She comes as witness. She comes home, a deep light.

“I would die with you” – I say. She says to me – *“cast a net off the right side of the boat and you’ll find me”*. So I cast a net. The river moves as if it is a sea of swords shimmering, and the net shifts over my reflection like a hovering osprey. A narrator

rests between us. The estuary gleams.

I hear her:

Here in the hereafter, what role is my mouth against the body of this river. And what of the water – hell's splintered shine, the armour, or an angel's fin; and what of this river as home only – I am a reed's capture, an unfurling sway in back-and-forth. It is a certain sound, an internal wakefulness deepening, a flood shedding soundless the water's depth. Certain channels are proof, and certain proofs are myth. Waters filled me and I filled the waters, unaccountable firsts no one can decipher. Into the slipstream: sands wash beneath my breathless dark, gold dash-marks stream in eddies, submerged metals in graveyard runnel, cattails and tyres steep the mind. The mind stretches out, a pale nightshore. A meditation transcribes my passage. Rays and waves surge. I am carried whole. The dirt, my body, a selfless stream, slayed. I am deathlessness, a wound.

The experience, the aftermath, a dream in aftermath.

The forms came, the geometries of the natural world, triangular planes drafted between landmarks, buoys, drumlines, granite hilltops.

Her skin glows in my sleep and shrubbery grows over doorway's blue-winter rooms. Words, accurate to time and homesickness, are darkened walls.

"Towards the going down of the sun in the land beside the she-oak – You are to cross over the floodplain, the sandhills, and under every redgum along the river. There you will go. Bring your offerings and I will show you what takes place. You will do whatever is right, for you have come among my dust, my ashes," she tells me.

I part the stars and smooth the cellophane sky at dawn. I clean the earth, split it apart far out of orbit from the blue moon until it is a silver coin settled in the tiny windowpane.

Ghost, a little square adds balance, I say. And continued to half-say-half-think, to myself and to think-speak through her, in a dream speaking to me, opening us like this into another –

Come ghost, you will not find the Spiny Daisy, the shinily red hex over my door, the furred crumple of night upon your shoulders.

Remember, kindness in nature is a balm which heals its own wounds. Kindness, a room within a room. Did you pull away from my thirst when icicles and stars dangled as bracelets from your wrists? Come ghost. Sit with me awhile. Who was it you hurt, ghost?

Houses, the nights, drift past as she drifts. Lights in the distance. A country where twilight closes over my sluice of bread and honey, over charred woolly bush's tips. An orphan's passage I recognize. I recognize the sea as reliable as the old snows that once

covered the vale. The landscape's lines, our intersection, where grief's geometries fall all around her – I stand measuring the waves. The waves, a weapon I carry. Old injuries, indiscriminate, radiant wounds that surge with my pulse. The tides, a carriage of all my beliefs once bought and sold, my past: synchronous with cool weather. My body's limits are an *other*. Satellites flower, signal a blooming horizon, generativity. A new language, scripted, unscripted, lingers, until there is no death...

"the thing one becomes..." ...she says no such thing. There was nothing she could want from me. All my duties have been lived out. I've come to understand that the critical voice has a baseline that's above average. So I know better than to listen beyond my own mind.

Like a refugee, the sun rose as if from a space of exodus. Trinity wavelengths glisten. The sea's rheumy eye stirs. What work there is, I am thick with, and make the most of. I am thick with her ghost, as I re-count the petty change spent on a Violet Crumble. With a washed-up-purple-Dairy Milk-wrapper and two bits of rock in her hand, she bathes in a mauve 1980s-room. Between satisfied stacks of glass plates stamped 'France' and 'Arcopal' she sips Lyons and Tetley and Bushells and Twinings raw as gold wattle unstrained. Lost in steam. An octagon black cup, a burnished feast, September's kitchenette is an easy contribution to this temperate vision.

As if I am too stiff and too listless to wonder, to wander this stream, the afternoon's torrents – yet awake enough to incite October whole. I am bound. *"What happens will happen"* – I tell myself –

Sounded a softness in every direction – I listen. I listen for, and do not recognise, the clouds in my head, a hiss of lantern lights, banjo frogs, Mopokes, a million sounds encased in gravel. What narrative these ashes, scent of streaky bacon, smoked brisket. Caught in shifting scenes, her meteorite gaze once open in Santa Terese, now closes into a powdery constellation – Star Chemist tablets swallowed drowsy from Dolls Point.

I am beset by this idea of survival into old age as a single human nourishment, and my austere mind merits this aim. Nature masks her hard smile.

Time, her holy spoken name, I say without naming. I wade thigh-deep through this dream. We swim opposite horizons, until my body speaks its own language. Smooth voices easing the unrecognizable, the heavy shape, a dim paddock.

We were symbols, rivulets. A river's thin heat. The hush of what I pass through. Molecule by molecule a summoning into one another, intimate our distance. What my hand brushes – beneath water: a tree's breath, a blood orange blossom and sheen, unemployed by the noon sun. In the mirror's flood, heat hardened waves made reckless. It's daft to think what the body might say in its crossing. How strong one might feel traveling toward. Nothing human is felt in words. Whereof my fingers slip the water's

quick horizon. Dawn's red constellations settles the river's edge and flatten Cassiopeia, Draco, and Cygnus' wing into a thin silver scale. Time is a tunnel. What I've said is that there is no separation. That winter I was capable, and slowness loosened from me. The sweet waters taste of iron. We swam the body's hemispheres. She was dressed in white. Our consciousness drifting in and out. "*I am barely someone*," she said as she spoke "*You have made these arrangements...*" I wanted the cities beneath the snow to be realised.

The ghost in the house was my future self. We stood in the mirror. I and my ghost selves, my consciousness which is human and thus filters experiences in this human form. Unique, dislocated, continuous. It is 'us' outside the dream looking inward at 'us' in that direction. To describe what happened we began with the worst experience. An entry point where the blank earth lays in paragraphs. I write through occlusions, acidic spills, a bottlefly's pulse on my tongue. I am caught in the grass where agapanthus coppers in the sun. Arrested in parallel hues. There is a self darker than this earth and longer than this life. There is an hour, and a boundary, but no city in which to be buried.

Occasionally the view switches to another person in a different room, or a slideshow series of images with abstract artworks, landscapes, shiftless moods. I feel the hills lift from the earth, and the glass thud of the sky upon. Specimen, I am. I am still a thing to be learned from, a softening voice in subtitles. From this view I create splatters of ink, sketching, a series of colourful drawings. I offer up from the table a postcard-sized painting of a green mountain. This was my first discovery. A form to renunciate. What I might shape, cross hatch, cultivate if I find the right page to explicate creation, as if it could be found in a manual. Illumination, compassion scaled into a glyph. I seek the intuitive channels, physical, three-dimensional, and inexplicable. I hold surrender's geometry to my lip, a crack in the cup the shape of Brewarrina Bridge. I brush scales of silverfish and firebrats, from the bookshelf, a sweep of ghost sepals fell between hemispheres like fetish objects on the other side of a medicine mirror.

I am inhabited by ghosts; they swoon in me as silvery reflections. They descend in sudden tides as I change direction. Upon my small sails, they go seeking. I'd taken the wing of the Ulysses butterfly into the paint. I take water's deluge as denial, the wing flank like a torn map. I take a galaxy, distant waypoints. Sand filtered the paintbrush. The wings were not water-soluble though I tried to mix them into the ultramarine pigments.

Moths lift from the hill and the canvas fills with light.

As if through a dull tunnel slowly, a harbor tunnel enters a turnpike, as if affected by an exterior pull, upward into the light beyond the bridge. I follow the line. Upward into the light beyond the bridge, you, among the dead, are called forth into a new terrain.

I was to follow. And I was to understand or balance my hunger. Immaterial to me, a seed, the whole of my life sweeping forward as a new energy. I felt a ship's keel lift up out the sea, as if flipping upward, skyward and all spring's lilacs recoiled.

I remembered an opposite hue. I remember the hospital room and my father's gaunt face, yellowed and shrunk. The nurse, while leaving the room, caught my burning eye. We held a separate glance over our shame when the hospital orderly asked to take the body away. The orderly, who came to order, but not in the order of my grief.

It is an anatomical pain this flammable transom. It is mine and it is not mine.

I transform, she transcends.

Now I am the dreamer within the dreamed.

How do we note what's left at the end. And I and each unknowable dream, the enchantment. We are to endure what we remember. I didn't follow her death. I followed the dreams in which she spoke. The ghost into ghost – it was air, it was ghost dream and water. Her ghost met me at the gateway and it was she as the dream speaking ghost in a ghost dream.

Voices, they run.

Purpled smokewood and frost begin to curl the pages of the ice story.

In early winter that year the sun lowered to dust. Soldiers entered the house.

A man in his ways, as some men are, cannot parse a response onto the territory of this fragmented possession. He, who was left behind, fell behind, faced the attack, or retreated. Deflated by protections, he protects his own vigilance. Walks with vigilance toward the dedication of each command.

In the blue night, the men basked beneath the bloodwood, the blood light, the village trees. The men drank beer. They stared upon the river. The river, a seam upon a white powdered road, muddied and swiftly wooden. The night, her gaze. The night shed and muzzled a glow I couldn't stop. Out into the ordinary passage, words I found. And these words were a second pattern of her slippage, her second drowning. Her life entered a farewell in earnest. The dry invisible slope, I too slip. My steps, whatever wordless world I might approach. I suffered another mouth within my mouth. I suffered the language, the speech of my version of the world. I suffered a dream or a depletion. Omit or swallow or spit out panics, a collection of uniforms hung in the shade. Architectural, the storm and so on. The men finished but no one thought to move. It was the opposite language among these currents. It was less than something to move through. It was the past against the grain of a story. A story with one unending. A faithfulness I wanted to live up to. A permeable ceaseless, hidden half suggestion. O, I carried a certain sequence, a complexity. I spent many centuries in the same location, unable to reconcile the truth.

A disconnected spirit. I remember her talking. Prior to her wound in the second battle, her voice lowed, elaborate with repetitions. The air burned our lungs. A shine encircled her body. An iteration, gentle, a face the mob might speak to as their own. The mar, her vision became heaven, a marsh.

Lily waters rush through my lungs. Ice hang from the pine. Shadow lines along the sidewalk like steeples topped with pale hibiscus. Pale cracks and the sun, a syrup she sips as she strains the wreckage in the dark.

The dark, a bister tea, a memory I mend. I mend the sun, and all the other stars folded in sapphire. I mend the lake, shaken and hung on the line like a tarp. She went on drowning. She stared at me and stared at nothing.

Maureen Alsop, PhD is the author of Arbor Vitae, Tender To Empress (Visual Poetry); Pyre; Later, Knives & Trees; Mirror Inside Coffin; Mantic; Apparition Wren (also a Spanish Edition, Reyezuelo Aparición, translated by Mario Domínguez Parra); and several chapbooks. She is a recent finalist for the Montreal Poetry Prize, the winner of the Tony Quagliano International Poetry Award through the Hawaii Council for the Humanities, Harpur Palate's Milton Kessler Memorial Prize for Poetry and The Bitter Oleander's Frances Locke Memorial Poetry Award. Her poems have appeared in various journals including AGNI, Blackbird, Tampa Review, DIAGRAM, Memorious, The Kenyon Review, and featured on Verse Daily. Her translations of the poetry of Juana de Ibarbourou (Uruguay, 1892-1979) and Mario Domínguez Parra are available through Poetry Salzburg Review. She teaches online with the Poetry Barn. She is a board member for the organisation AIM Higher which promotes mentorship for women in the arts. Her visual poetry and art have appeared at the Riverside Arts Museum in Riverside, California, The Umbrella Studio in Townsville, The Louver Gallery, Drunken Boat, Superstition Review, filling Station Magazine and others. She is a Book Review Editor and Associate Poetry Editor at Poemeleon. She holds a MFA from Vermont College.



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TEXT prose

Tom Gurn

Crackheads

So, a couple years ago, during peak covid, I got a call from a bloke in the state government about some work. I'd been trying to dedicate more time to writing, so casual work suited me. I read on Google that eavesdropping is a valuable way to develop your craft. That listening in to real conversations can teach you how to get better at writing dialogue. So I was looking out for a job that could help me in that regard.

The guy on the phone said they'd been having some issues with the locals at the Centrelink down in the Port. They needed someone to keep an eye on the riff-raff. I asked if I had to interact with them, cos if there's one thing I can't stand, it's bludgers. The bloke said fine as long as I intervened before anything escalated. I decided to bring a weapon, my old man's .22. I probably wouldn't need it but it's good to have just in case.

On one of my first days, I was stood by the electric sliding doors. In the queue next to me there was some of the locals, chatting shit, I couldn't help but tune in. Eavesdropping makes me feel powerful. There was a filthy old man, a kinda-hot-but-kind-of-scary young woman, and a middle-aged one, fuck knows what they were, who was telling some story. That one said –

When I was living in London, a work friend, Jelena, asked me to dogsit for three weeks

at her flat on Brick Lane while she went holidaying with her boyfriend. I would've said no, but it was an old dog and she promised me there would be no need for walkies, just food and belly scratches.

This woman, or whatever, was tall, skint, and gesticulating methodically with arms aggressive and outstretched as she spoke. She wore baggy trackies and hypercoloured Nikes, with thin orange hair and leathered skin making her look a decade older than she probably was. From time to time she would jerk her head to one side as if someone was sneaking up on her. She continued –

Anyways, I got home from my shift at the pub late on the second night to find poor old sweet Carrie legs-up and cold right there on Jelena's Persian rug. The way her tongue lolled out of her mouth made it look like she was playing. I remember crying quietly as I tried pointless compressions on her ribcage. Then I thought I'd somehow poisoned her, and then that I'd somehow caused a monoxide leak and killed the dog, silently, like drifting off to sleep, like Sylvia Plath.

I rung Jelena to confess, and she picked up raspy, hungover from raging in Berlin. She wasn't even mad, just comforted *me*. She said she'd been expecting it for years and then asked if I could take the body to the vet for cremation. Rather than letting Carrie's carcass bloat, I said yes without thinking. Turned out the nearest vet was only three stops away and I definitely didn't have the money for a cab.

So, I did what, at the time, seemed reasonable. I wrapped Carrie in a binbag and stuffed her in my green leather suitcase. It was sailing smoothly until I got off the train and realised the stupid station didn't have an escalator. Not even a lift.

So, there I am, all forty-five kilos of me, bung-kneed, struggling horribly up three flights of stairs with an obese chocolate Lab in my suitcase.

At that moment a young man walking down the stairs saw me and generously offered his hand. My chest swelled. He was kind of cute.

I said sure, thanks, followed him up the stairs watching his butt, desperately concealing my panting breaths.

Then, when we finally got up on the street, he glanced at me with piercing green eyes and sprinted off into the bright London morning with my suitcase in tow.

I giggled to myself. The old man choked and chortled and rested his hands on his pot belly like a mall Santa. He slapped his knee then started rolling a cigarette with one hand while giving himself a neck massage with the other. The younger woman gasped, and placed her fist against her teeth, eyes wide.

Then what happened?

To be honest, I called Jelena and said the dog was gone and she said sweet and that was that.

A balding man in a black leather vest with faded-green tattoos walked out of the door and down the steps, and the guy sitting next-in-line butted his dart and hurried in before the door had shut. Then the old man, with wrinkled skin sagging on his face to display a crescent rim of pink flesh beneath his eyeballs, started up –

You know what? that reminds me of my penultimate day in Tokyo. It had been a truly rotten fortnight, around the winter solstice, if I remember right. It was really cold. I'd had an earache, and my nose was running constantly, like a hose from the Reject Shop, plus there was an incessant pounding in the back of my skull that hadn't laxed the whole damned snowy trip.

You can't source a thing in Japan, not gear, not methadone not anything.

To try and shirk illness before the long flight to Sydney I decided against the indecipherable labels of the pharmacy section and instead spent the evening soaking in a traditional public bath, which the Japanese call an *onsen*.

The only one within walking distance of my hotel was, if I remember right, nestled amongst sleazy skyscrapers and Western-style restaurants in Shinjuku. I paid the fee then locked up my shoes and clothes in the bamboo locker. As I straightened, I was reminded, as always, of my cursed sciatica.

The main room was crowded with naked Japanese men of all ages. Ancients like me, all the way down to shameless little kids. Pale green tiles lined the floors and walls, except for the last metre before the ceiling, where ornate mosaics of blue-tiled cranes perched on delicate branches were hunting the shrivelled and saggy worms bobbing in the water beneath.

The room was sombre, people bowed to one another and avoided eye contact. A rich humidity filled the air. I saw three different baths: labelled *warm*, *hot*, and *cold*. I rinsed in the shower and clambered into the warm water, careful to hide my shame with the handtowel they'd given upon entry.

The water was just the right temp, it was soothing, comforting, I immediately knew this could cure me. I soaked for an eternity. My fingers pruned. My ping-pong thoughts at last ceased. I inhaled the steam. I exhaled. I avoided eye-contact with the men around me. I felt relieved. I felt better. I decided to risk the bath labelled *hot*. And let me tell you – it was *molten*. The water was so hot it was no longer clear but a sinister grey. Just a few clicks from boiling, I'd wager. My skin tingled and stung, I felt like the bones in

a broth, and I surprised myself with how long I managed to steep. Feeling cocky, I thought I'd go straight from the *hot* and plunge into the *cold*.

I climbed in and at once, pain. Scorched needles. For a moment I thought this was somehow the hottest bath of all. I was ready to escape as quickly as I entered but then something changed. I began to feel numb. After that, euphoric. My anxiety dissipated. My mind quietened once more. I couldn't feel the water. I couldn't feel my headache. I couldn't feel a thing. I escaped sciatica. I sat perfectly still, happy, submerged up to my nostrils. This was it. This is what I've been looking for my entire life. My heart bounced upon my diaphragm like a trampoline. Time slowed. I considered missing my flight home the next morning. I decided that I didn't need dope anymore, I won't be sick forever, this ice bath was it. I swore to sobriety. I was unshackled. All I could focus on was my breath. Slow and deliberate. I could feel my heart's thudding widen further and further apart. It's never felt like that, not before and not since. It was magical, let me tell you. I sat for hours, or minutes, it's really impossible to say. I lost myself. It was psychedelic. Transformative. I was reborn, a shivering bloodied infant in a composting skinsuit.

Eventually, I emerged, teeth-chattering, feeling energized and at long last, well. But it wasn't enough. I decided to repeat the exercise. Always chasing. I moved back toward the medium bath, and that's when things took a turn.

The warm bath was crowded now, only one space remained, in a little alcove between two scrawny young fellas. I sidled in awkwardly and noticed an older gentleman with a huge black dragon tattoo splayed across his chest. Yakuza, perhaps? Then I checked his arms for tracks, wondering if he could maybe score me something *real*.

As I gently pressed my spine against the tiles I was greeted with a shocking, soul-shattering pain between my vertebrae. Like a defibrillator, or a cattle prod. A hot iron poker rammed between my kidneys. I yelped and thrust forward onto my knees in the centre of the bath. I sat perfectly still. Panic set in. I've fucked it, I've finally fucking fucked it. My sciatica couldn't take the changing temperatures, I guessed. My spinal ganglion had carked it. Too much hot. Too much cold. Why did I go for the second round? I was like the blue cranes overhead, only I flew too close to the sun.

I didn't have travel insurance. I didn't know a soul in the entire country. I pictured these naked men carrying my stiffened mass out onto the street and into a Japanese ambulance. My feet were numb, my nose had begun to leak once more.

Strangely, though, the pain in my spine ceased as quickly as it came. I perceived a faint glimmer of hope. I began to lean back, and delicately placed my hands behind me to guide the way. Then, *fuck me*, the same horrific pain radiated through my arms. My elbows and forearms were afire. What have I done? What is happening to me? I again

shifted from the wall and prepared to beg for the help of my anonymous companions. The old yakuza man was watching me with a bemused, almost knowing look. I turned to face the wall above where I had been trying to sit. There, a plastic laminated notice read: *Denki Buro – This compartment contains a minor electrical current, beware!*

The old man leant back and again rested his hands on his bloated belly, then scoped for the approval of his audience. The middle-aged woman giggled and clapped, then habitually jerked and glanced over her shoulder. The young girl looked up from her phone and tears seemed to be welling in her eyes.

Then what happened?

The yakuza man sat down right in the electrical section and squirmed periodically as the current ran through him. I told him I thought the bath was trying to kill me, and he just stared back, either not understanding English or finding me too stupid to waste breath on.

Then the young girl unzipped her Adidas bum-bag and swapped her phone for a vape. She inhaled deeply and a kiwi-scented cloud wisped up slowly.

Through vacant hollow eyes she started –

Not gonna lie, a few months ago I was in Guatemala with my *then* fiancée, right? We were staying at this gorgeous glamping hostel on lake Atitlan. There was three massive volcanoes around the lake, it was so cool. The hostel was having a party for Halloween, so my partner, Dana, wanted to make the most of it. We started drinking hard, early, with the other guests and volunteer staff. The night escalated. Dana copped some pills off a Mexican guy, who said they were M but they didn't look like anything we'd really seen before. Not gonna lie, they were the size of a Berocca, and coloured a deep ashy charcoal black.

We were all wasted, and a group of us caught a water taxi to the town over. It's called Panajachel. There's no road access between most of the towns on Lake Atitlan, only dangerous bandit-laden trails or these teensy water taxis which bounce over the waves like ten-year-olds in a jumping castle. The water is crystal blue, but when you look over the sides of the boat you can see dead fish floating and trash and shopping trolleys coating the lakebed.

We went to a club in the bigger town with a sandy dancefloor and moved our bodies aggressively to psytrance. I took two of the pills and felt wide awake. Dana took two, I reckon, and then soon re-dosed three more. She was always impulsive.

Her mood seemed to shift. She seemed hyper, and then suddenly half-asleep, over and over again. At one point I found her standing aside the DJ talking loudly and

incoherently. It seemed like she was trying to order a pizza but her eyes were half shut and her jaw was clenching and teeth were grinding between words. Her pupils were gaping, her shoulders stiff as raw pasta, like a corpse.

We made it back to the hostel and the guests and staff alike were all kicking on. Dana became fixated on somersaulting into the lake naked. She said she wanted to launch into the moon and sacrifice herself before the volcanic gods. She stripped and sprinted down the dock, blonde matted dreadlocks careening behind her like a cape, and then I heard this loud *thunk* right as she jumped, and she soon emerged screeching, through a mask of hair, clambering up onto the dock. There was blood. I hustled over to help and along the way I saw a plank had popped up, the rusted bolt restricting it was gone, and it now sat slightly higher than the rest. She'd stubbed the sole of her foot against the raised plank. The state she was in led to more bleeding than what was normal. Not gonna lie, the entire, like, pad-thing at her heel was hanging as loose as a doggie door.

Someone grabbed vodka from behind the bar and poured it on the wound while she stressed loudly about how the polluted water was surely infecting her foot, and the dickhead didn't realise the vodka was essence-of-lime. She was squealing, hyperventilating, her hands were shaking – more than usual – while we waited for the water-taxi back to Panajachel. It seemed like we were both about to pass out as we bobbed along with the boat's crashing again and again into the early morning greywater. There were local people riding with us into town, they had little shopping trolleys ready for the market, and straw hats pulled over their eyes chasing zees like cartoon characters. The sun was just starting to rise in the pinkening sky between the volcanos. As if everything was right in the world.

Our boat pulled up at the rickety wooden dock. Dana's skin had faded to a pallid green. There were fishermen setting off for their morning catch. Children were playing in the shallows with motley street-dogs. The roads surrounding the docks were too narrow for cars, so only little red rickshaws offered lifts for travellers. We hobbled up to the closest one, demanded the best *sanatorio* in town, and were advised to get a taxi. It didn't make sense. We would have had to walk too far. Dana didn't understand what the man was saying, neither did I, but the urgency of blood spouting from her hasty bandages eventually convinced the rickshaw driver to take us on. Once we made it up the alleyway to the main taxi rank, he advised us to switch over, but Dana refused, urged the driver to continue on, we didn't have time to faff.

Only later, when the pithy little rickshaw was climbing the side of the extinct-volcano towards the hospital at walking-speed, with taxis overtaking us on both sides, did we finally come to understand the driver's point.

Dana's face drooped; her hand had gone limp in mine. I tried to check her pulse, but couldn't locate a glint. I shook her and she didn't respond. Her eyes had closed, and her

head lolled back, and the rickshaw was struggling and groaning beneath our weight. The hill grew ever steeper. The hospital, a dream in the distance.

At last our journey was over. I paid the apologizing driver and carried Dana inside the pale pink hospital to a packed waiting room. Eventually Dana was wheeled through and nobody said a thing to me. I had no choice but to wait.

At that point the young girl's tears once welled were shed. I didn't understand why. She drew deeply on her vape and swiped manically at notifications on her phone.

Then what happened, love?

They stitched her up just great, wheeled her back out a couple of hours later. She was coming down like mad but said the painkillers helped. They didn't even take our details, didn't ask for a cent. It was bizarre.

Wow. And how did it heal?

I don't know. She overdosed on fent in Vancouver three weeks later. I jammed her with naloxone but it was a dodgy unit and didn't take.

The old man sighed, the middle-aged woman cringed, and I let out a little giggle. Couldn't help myself. The young girl was not crying anymore. She stepped out of queue; she stepped out of line.

Walked up to me and sprayed globby spit in my face, the foul feral cunt, I could see the gaps between her remaining yellowed teeth as it flew straight into my eyes, nose, my open fucking mouth. I called her a crackhead and considered what was lying in the boot of my car. She wouldn't behave like this if she knew, maybe I should show her? I raised my fist to give her one but she ducked swiftly, learnedly, then screeched an ultrasonic wiccan curse in my direction.

The old man said that the word crackhead is an inaccurate pejorative. He said that he hadn't seen a single person smoke crack in Australia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. He said Australians smoke meth because cocaine is too expensive. He told me to leave her alone.

I wiped my face on my high-vis vest and made a mental note of her face. I know I'll remember her. I'll write it all down. I'm sure I'll see her again. Or at least I hope so, off duty, then I'll get her back.

Tom Gurn is an emerging writer and journalist living on unceded Kurna land in South Australia. His prose was recently highly commended by the Katharine Susannah Pritchard award for short fiction, and published in Baby Teeth Journal. His science communication work will soon be published in Particle. In 2024 Tom will be on residency at the Arteles Creative Centre in Finland, polishing his first collection of short stories.



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TEXT prose

Tony Dignan

Two stories

Climbing mischief in the USA summer

I have memories I'm proud of, and others not so much. In a lifetime of climbing, I've had bad falls and big highs. But in turning to writing in mature age, I find I have a treasure trove of experiences to draw from.

In the summer of 1978, Denver was awash with outdoor music opportunities. Little Feat were playing at Red Rocks – an open-air amphitheatre set amongst cliffs and boulders ten miles west of Boulder City. With minimal blasting, they had created one of the most mind-blowing venues for fans to see and hear bands play. The huge sandstone cliffs, and rocks of different shapes and sizes, enhanced the acoustic experience – a veritable climbers' paradise.

Bill drove his VW Kombi bus to the top car park and parked. Before leaving the bus, Sally, Mark, Dave and I loaded the bong and handed around, and through this session all our recreational drugs were laid out on the table. Marijuana, Quaaludes, dried magic mushrooms and LSD were on display if someone had rolled the door open or peeped in the window.

Then we all jumped out. As climbers unconsciously tend to do, we gravitated to the top

of the largest and highest rock formation, despite the fact the area was plastered with signs warning of the dangers and specifically stating climbing was prohibited. Our high-peak party caught the attention of officers coming up the road in a patrol car.

We weren't too worried. We arrogantly thought the signs pertained only to normal people, not real climbers.

The police car pulled into a lower car park and two officers emerged, one with a megaphone in hand.

'Come down immediately. Climbing here is illegal.'

In a euphoric state now bordering paranoia, we hid behind rocks, thinking they might just go away. But with their repeated demands it was clear this wasn't going to be the case, so we nonchalantly climbed down and walked back to the Kombi. As we were nearing the bus the patrol car screamed into our car park. Mark had the presence of mind to beeline to our vehicle, sliding the door and casually throwing a jacket over what resembled a drug store counter. Simultaneously the patrol car doors flew open with these burly cops demanding to see ID. Dave and I crossed paths with Mark as we went to retrieve our passports from the van.

By the time I got back to the police they had all but finished writing out fines for our American mates Bill, Sally and Mark. I handed over my passport upside down, adding to the officers' aggravation. I politely explained how I was a foreign visitor and showed them the stapled document in my passport clearly stating my reason for visiting the USA was rock climbing. Exasperated, the officer forcefully handed it back.

'This area is strictly off-limits for rock climbing. Do you understand?'

'Yes, sir,' I replied in my broadest Aussie accent. The cop put away his fines book. Dave and I were waved away, as if we didn't exist.

During all the hoopla, an electrical storm had been brewing and we were informed that the concert had been cancelled. We all needed to vacate the vicinity. The show was going to be moved to an indoor venue in Boulder. By the time we got down there it was pouring and for some unknown reason everyone was locked out. A throng of people were pushing on the front entrance, causing the bank of glass windows and doors to flex way beyond what I thought would be its breaking point. Eventually, common sense prevailed and we were ushered in to be seated. I barely remember the opening set as a cocktail of chemicals and booze caught up with me. The next thing I remember was waking up in the Kombi, and we were all back in Fort Collins.

↗

My next visit to Red Rocks was with Jed and some of his mates to see the Grateful Dead. As was always the case, chaos and confusion ruled. LSD and coke were on the menu for this adventure. Something that remains a mystery to this day is how my ticket ended up with Jed; he was inside seated, and I was this hyped, dosed Aussie trying to explain my situation to security and getting nowhere. No one was listening to this potential scam artist. The entry security guys put arms out to stop me pushing through.

Time to regroup, and figure out the best way to handle the situation. In my drugged-up opinion, the moral high ground belonged to me. I just couldn't put my hands on my ticket until I got inside. How hard could that be?

For many concert-goers, it was impossible to get past security, but I slipped into the network of people dashing between the rocks, some getting through, others busted and arrested and taken away. It all had a Cowboys and Indians 'hide and seek' crazy feel about it: waiting for a signal to move from the concealed safety of one rock and moving as fast as one could to hide behind another. One minute sending signals and then sprinting across the open spaces. After what seemed like an eternity I was milling around in the crowd as if I belonged, eventually finding Jed who nonchalantly handed over my ticket.

'Where have you been hiding?'

Ha hah – if only you knew the half of it, was my silent thinking.

Not the time or place for explanations – I was soaking up the atmosphere and marvelling at acoustics that were something out of this world. Heightened emotions and experiences were exaggerated by my rather slippery entrance and the chemicals buzzing in my system. My enhanced sensory perceptions were bordering a hyper-driven state.

Minimal clever jackhammering had created a flat stage encircled by one dominant cliff face, with boulders ranging in size from small cars to large houses scattered around the landscape.

It was no wonder that Red Rocks was a favourite amongst fans and bands. And it was even less a surprise that the place excited my climbing imagination. I needed to come back and test myself.



The next performance I went to that summer was the Rolling Stones concert at the Folsom Field football stadium in Denver, on the grounds of the university. The venue was packed out – wall to wall people. The Boulder City population was approximately 70,000 residents, but the concert crowd boiled with 60,000 eager fans. My chemical

cocktail included magic mushrooms and LSD and, as it was a stinking hot summer day, who knows how many beers I'd also consumed. The outside wall was an incredible structure; offset concrete/stone-looking blocks, man-made holds forming perfect foot and hand placements. It was an ideal ladder for any good climber. In the queue, as we inched toward the entrance, I couldn't resist making an announcement.

'I'll be coming back here later in the summer to climb this wall!'

I returned eleven days later when the Eagles and Joe Walsh were playing a gig. I had contacted Dave and sold him on the idea, so he agreed to meet up and drive us to Denver from Fort Collins. It took us over an hour. I supplied Mescal tequila and Dave scored some coke. I used all my persuasive powers to gee Dave up and convince him how incredibly easy this stunt of going up the wall would be to pull off.

The plan was to carry no ID just in case things went awry... scope out a secluded place to set off... and have my t-shirt tucked into the back of my pants. I planned to pull myself over the top of the wall and put my shirt back on, melting effortlessly into the crowd. It all sounded quite straightforward.

When we got there, what first struck me was the amount of security milling around the place, forcing us to the section of wall behind the stadium where I found a concrete awning over a doorway with diagonal steel support. I figured with a couple of quick moves I could grab the steel bar, bound up onto flat concrete and then be unstoppable.

I sent Dave up the other side with a quick pep talk. 'Move fast – as if your life depends on it.' Dave made a fumble in his attempt and got busted – physically hauled off the wall. For me that was a handy distraction, but not needed. After a couple of dynamic moves, in a flash, I had my hand firmly wrapped around the diagonal steel rod supporting the roof above the doorway facilitating an easy mantle-shelf onto the concrete slab where I composed myself.

Burly security guards with megaphones ordered me to stop climbing and come down off the wall. I chose to ignore this advice, instead moving fluidly from hold to hold, gingerly testing each placement with hands and feet.

The crowd lazily lounging in the nearby grassy fields had gravitated to form an odd security blanket directly below – cheering me on, nearly drowning out the police demands.

'Go for it man, higher! Higher! Yeah, you go, son!'

They were fuelling my adrenaline with every shout of encouragement.

'Come down immediately! Climbing this wall is illegal and punishable with fines...'

and other such nonsense came from security and police, but fell on deaf ears.

I was in the moment – I'd come here to climb the wall and right now my life depended on it!

Inching my way closer to the wall summit, I ignored advice from my fan base to use the metal-earth bar attached to the very top of the wall. This earth bar didn't instil in me the same confidence as the steel that supported the doorway overhang below. Grabbing this one with too much bodyweight could be the straw to break the camel's back. My mind conjured visions of me peeling away from the wall with a detached metal bar in hand as gravity sent me to the ground.

Slow and steady, carefully moving from one rock hold to the next, was the order for the day. Falling from this height would mean absolute failure, with me taking a ride in at best an ambulance and more likely a hearse.

Pulling over the top was somewhat of a shock; I was disappointed to see no people to blend in amongst at this end of the stadium. What did catch my attention was a police officer charging up the bleachers faster than most people can run up a flight of stairs. I successfully sidestepped his attempt to grab me, only to be tackled to the ground from behind and quickly handcuffed.

I was frogmarched back outside the stadium to the cheers of my former audience. I was placed in a secure room behind the stadium, with handcuffs on my right wrist and attached to the leg of a table.

My captor cop was seriously pissed off with me, lecturing about how dangerous it was blah blah. After he realised I was a foreigner he demanded ID. With my broadest Aussie accent I explained I didn't have it with me. As for climbing the wall, I also explained it was no problem for me as a climber so therefore not dangerous at all.

He looked me in the eye, silently.

I felt this was going nowhere so I decided to be ever so polite addressing him as 'Sir' and easily leaking water from my eyes to convince him of my sincerity and contrition. Boulder City, being the epicentre of climbing in the Midwest, worked in my favour. After what seemed like forever, he eventually changed his tone.

'If I let ya'all outa here, you gonna pull another stunt like that?'

'No sir, I did what I came here to do, and I would be very grateful if I could wait outside for my friends who will give me a ride back to Fort Collins.'

The officer rubbed his chin, studying me, clearly contemplating my story and

speculating on its sincerity. Leaving the room briefly, he returned with a final warning.

‘I don’t know what to make of you, I surely do not. But I can’t waste any more time on it. You can get on outa here and find your friends if you promise not to repeat that stunt.’ He waved a hand wearily and removed the cuffs. I was free to leave.

So the upshot was: his job had been to convince me how dangerous my behaviour was and the legal/insurance implications involved; mine had been to politely convince him I was never in danger of falling or getting injured. A classic stalemate?

I at last had an opportunity to put my shirt on and mingle with the people sitting back in the shade of trees in the grassy field outside the stadium. I saw a group of teenagers laughing, singing along and chatting while passing around a joint. I gravitated towards them, feeling a common thread. *These are my kinda people*, I thought.

Like Dave and I, some of these guys had travelled long distances to see the Eagles and Joe Walsh, mostly hitchhiking – some from Oregon and others from the Eastern states. The success of my chameleon-like change of appearance was confirmed when they started telling me about these crazy shirtless cats who had tried to climb the wall and how one succeeded and was arrested. I saw no reason to lay claim to being the person they described. Eventually, I spied Dave with a group of mutual friends from Fort Collins heading out. I was now guaranteed a ride home, so all was good with my world.

I didn’t know, back then when I was climbing, that I was creating a database in my head – a fund of story, a precious resource. With this memory-material I could be regaling old mates in the pub, like most of the mature-age climbing fraternity. Instead I’m putting it to a different use. It’s like finding another climbing route up a cliff face – one I can claim as my own.

Doppelgänger

I order my third Long Island iced tea, stretching back into the rainbow-coloured sari hammock and taking in yet another perfect sunset on Morjim beach, Goa, India. This has become my regular evening routine; relaxing to the rhythm of waves gently caressing the shores, engaging in frivolous banter with Bajim, my faithful enabler who caters to my current whimsey. In a strange way, it seems my life will always be inextricably tied to the relationship with a little black book. But I get ahead of a story that begins in the mountains...



Climbing out of the blue and into the black, observing an exaggerated perspective of the earth's curvature. This is by far my best description of what a mountain climber sees when entering the 'death zone' – above 8,000 metres elevation. I'm talking about the early 1980s when the *big* mountains of the Himalayan range attracted only real climbers, 'old-school' alpinists who put in the hard yards. No supplementary O₂ or Sherpa support.

I plied my craft for a few years in Europe, determined to become an all-round seasoned and competent mountaineer. My version of the grand tour involved extensive skiing and climbing trips to Chamonix, France, after working rope access with a company based in Sheffield, UK. One job turned into a veritable money tree due to a contract that imposed crippling completion penalties. The offer was extended: work over Easter and finish this job on time for double the hourly rate. A lotto win. With that kind of money, I could fly over the North Pole and climb Mount McKinley (Denali), a mountain long considered appropriate training for acclimatisation to high-altitude climbing before taking on the *big* hills of the Himalaya.

Mission accomplished: an ascent via the West Rib and descent of Denali, from landing strip and return, without using a rope. Here's my ticket to join a Himalayan expedition. I hear a whisper that my old mate Reginald Grey has a permit to climb Cho-Oyu (8,188m). I organise a lunch meeting in Brisbane at the Brekkie Creek Hotel and after devouring steak, seafood and copious libations he accepts my pitch for being the most likely to succeed – and survive.

My time has arrived. I'm ready for the rigours of oxygen-deprived, unroped climbing on the ranges of the Himalayas. My rock-climbing mentor – the one who speaks to me in my mind – morphs into a spiritual guide to the *big* hills. *Can I square up with the devil, and survive?*

My summit day is marred by anxiety and doubt as I embark solo on the slow trudge to

high camp, 6,300m elevation. Stepping off the rocky moraine and wriggling through an icy tunnel onto the lower reaches of the mountain, I force myself up to the only camp lugging a near-crippling heavy load. After a few hours' sleep I awake to a clear night sky shimmering with countless stars, blinking and gleaming, suspended like frozen snowflakes in the obsidian canopy. Off I march. Crampons scrape across the hardened polished ice like chalk scratching a blackboard.

Instead of an easy traverse further left I take a more direct line, and lo and behold I'm post-holing knee-deep in soft snow. I curse myself for this deviation.

Then, back onto boilerplate hard ice, footslogging along, gaining as many steps as possible and then deep breathing. For now, the weather holds; if only I could move a little faster. My imaginary partner has turned this into a 'tortoise and hare' race leaving me hopelessly behind.

No choice but to fend for myself, just as I have been taught. Alarm bells ring in my oxygen-starved brain as I start abandoning equipment, jettisoning camera and oversized mittens possibly required on the summit and absolutely needed if the weather turns ugly. Cumulous cloud envelops me, blurring my ties to terra firma, a painful reminder of my fragile connection to mother earth. I realise trusting my tenuous connection with Cho-Oyu is imperative. *Who knows where I might end up?*

Ever so close to the summit and struggling through the last rocky section, weather conditions shift dangerously; one minute clear visibility and the next I find myself blinded in a 'pea soup' atmosphere, cloud clinging onto the mountain peak in ever-increasing intervals. This unpredictable weather pattern does my head in, pitting logical and paranoid brain against each other, fogging my decisions. Summit success burdened with the likelihood of entering a complete whiteout is a recipe for disaster and could escalate the chances of becoming disorientated and lost on the descent.

I turn around less than fifty metres from the summit. Where the devil's grip is too tight.



It's late in the day. I am completely alone on the icy flanks of Cho-Oyu. One minute clear, the next lost in the misty roil, goggles fogging with visibility down to a few metres. I begin to realise my situation; any mistake, I won't be going home. Recurring in a loop like a chemical/drug-induced flash-back: a fall any time before getting off the ice is sure to be lethal, as the body is now running on close to empty. It's been eighteen hours since I drank tea and filled my stomach with sweet sticky rice. Hallucinations associated with oxygen deprivation begin to play out in technicolour clarity. Similar to putting your eye into a kaleidoscope.

The altered vision takes me back to my misspent youth, experimenting with magic mushrooms, acid and peyote. These past experiences now offer a comfortable feeling of lucidity. *Surreal!*

Assessing my position, suddenly I spot a different camp to the one I left in the dark of night. I'm inextricably drawn toward a single tent perched precariously on this massive expanse of ice – a frozen, rolling wave building behind the breakers before crashing onto a sand bar. So much crazy shit is going through my head, yet I'm sucked into its vortex.

Creeping closer to the nylon space capsule with trepidation, I sense it will be a portal to the dark side of life. Bending over I brush away soft clumps of snow, unzipping the outer vestibule. Instantly a powerful energy force envelopes me. With frightening intensity, it triggers an out of body experience; I'm hovering over the tent looking down at my own form curled into the foetal position. How long I stay floating and watching, I don't know.

The, crawling on my knees, now looking more like a snowman than a mountaineer, my mind begins to clear and I peer inside the tent outer.

I dare not open the main compartment for fear of seeing a corpse.

Kneeling at the tent's entrance, I'm blinded by a reflective glare radiating from the surrounding ocean of ice. My blurred vision finally focuses on a small black diary, poised atop a purple daypack. All my cognitive ability struggles to decipher the difference between reality and hallucination—what to do next?

Mystery tent's location seems secure, free from avalanches, and I'm too high on this mountain to be bothered by bandits. Yet the deathly silence, broken only by the distant whoosh of sluffs sliding off ice slabs high above me, gives me a sense of dread. Superstitiously I'm convincing myself this small, ice-covered tent is possessed and dark, sinister forces are at play. Curiosity overrules and I poke my head just inside the outer door. I'm resolved to check this book for clues to its owner's identity, putting aside thoughts of ghosts; or worse, frozen bodies within. The book lies open, stitched spine allowing it to splay across the bulging daypack face down, frayed ribbon bookmark dangling uselessly to one side. Nervous, heart hammering, I carefully retrieve it:

Whoever finds this message, please read in detail before opening the bag.

Battle of the brains resumes, and I struggle to focus before reading on.

Some of the money in this bag MUST be used to settle a thirty-thousand-dollar drug-related debt. If you take on this obligation and follow the directions to the

letter the remaining twenty-thousand dollars is yours. In the back of this book is a passport you MUST use from now on.

I fish out the passport from an expandable pocket inside the cover, and stare at a photo of a gaunt, haggard-looking mountaineer. Me.

The note further explains I need to disappear through the veil of cloud and darkness to surreptitiously get off the mountain, instead of returning to base camp. My mission is to take my bag of booty over the Nangpa La using the new identity, traversing an old trading and pilgrimage route used for hundreds of years between Nepal and Tibet. My disappearance would lead everyone to think I died on the climb.

Essentially, I'm faking my own death.



This is an easy task; I am familiar with the Nepalese side of this pass, and have no problems navigating my way under a shadowed cloak of secrecy and subterfuge. Once safely and secretly over the Nangpa La, a great weight lifts off my shoulders. I'm now back on familiar ground as I head down to the Nepalese village of Thame.

How much bad juju can emanate from this mad-cap enterprise?

I rest up for a few days in a secluded guesthouse in Thame before moving on to execute my plan. Venturing out on excursions down to Namche Bazar, I convert my image from mountaineer to trekker. When ready to press on, I avoid walking through the village where I would be required to pass checkpoints, taking the high trail instead over the top to Kongde and straight down to Phakding village. I'm confident my plan is as close to 'foolproof' as I can muster.

Cradling the small diary recovered from the mystery high camp, re-reading the meticulous instructions – names, places, dates, times, amounts – I attempt to commit everything to memory. This innocuous black journal, worn and faded, is my rule book to riches. Provided I follow every detail precisely.

Do the consequences of getting it wrong, mean I die twice?

After rest and nourishment in a remote lodge in Phakding, the next step is to Giri. I bypass Lukla for fear of being recognized. Hanging around the world's most dangerous airport with a fake passport and fifty grand in a knapsack is pushing the envelope – even for me. Instead, I hire a car and driver to transport me back to Kathmandu. My brain swims in a veritable sea of oxygen, ready to memorise the intricacies of this drug debt, detailed precisely in the marked pages within the diary carefully tucked away atop a stash of unlaundered cash.

In Kathmandu now, but I will not stay in the Thamel district for the same reason I avoided Lukla. I didn't come this far to risk the dangers of the street, nor the possibility of having my new identity blown. Under a cloak of darkness, I'm tracking down these nefarious characters and fulfilling my commitment to this insanely profitable quest. For now, no more life and death dangers on mountainsides; I need to re-establish myself within the nasty underbelly of Nepal's drug barons.

It's a deadly world I was once comfortable navigating. It's like riding a bike – you never forget.

↗

Now with a new identity and plenty of money my travel is entirely seasonal: heli-skiing remote regions of Northern India in winter, floating around the lakes of Manali in spring, lazing on the beaches of Goa for the summer months – little black notebook stowed safely in a treasured leather case. My lucky talisman. I still write in my journal daily, addressing each entry to its former owner; I want this person to know I faithfully performed all duties to the letter, and the reward has been well-spent.

Seven-year sentence of third world luxury life style completed, I will officially become a climbing statistic, and my life insurance money will be paid in Australia. I guess my beneficiary – my mother – will be very happy when the payout arrives.

And sometimes I wonder if I'm living a life of fact or fiction.

After a life of mountain climbing, Tony Dignan is now completing his PhD at Griffith University.



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TEXT prose

Emma Derainne

Mum, Manager, Mate, Master

‘You don’t belong here,’ whispers the fragile seventy-plus-year-old woman with all too dry straw-coloured hair, hunched close to me due to a double hip replacement. She retreats, hobbling like a witch with a cane, a relentless haunting creature, stalking the halls of decrepit university buildings, locking up the fresh blood that dares to enter.

In that one whisper she uses her power to remind me of the toxic hierarchies, cutthroat competition, and soul-crushing expectations devouring my creativity, innovation, and genuine scholarship. That one whisper leaves me disillusioned, hollow, and trapped. I had entered the gingerbread house and was now in a cage and starving, waiting for each Progress Review, waiting until I would be let out then made to stand by the bubbling water in the cauldron over the fire wondering: ‘Would I now be eaten or spared?’

In the complex tapestry of modern society, I find myself embroiled in an entanglement of conflicting roles. I am a Mum, Manager, Mate, and Master, struggling through relentless demands and expectations; balancing the responsibilities of being a ‘good’ mother, leading a team, maintaining a healthy marriage, while pursuing academic excellence.

Each role pulls me in a different direction, and the breadcrumbs of my identity are left on the path, testing the resilience of my spirit. Despite the hurdles and hardships, there are unexpected heroines; I strive to invent a new ‘self’ and carve out a space where I can embody all my aspects genuinely and whole heartedly – challenging societal norms

and shaping the narrative of women in academia in the process.

The beginning

‘You don’t belong here’ echoes.

And I didn’t, to begin with. We hadn’t planned to return to Australia. My journey into my thesis started against a backdrop of uncertainty and upheaval. My mother’s laboursome cough pounded through the webcam, serving as a reminder of mortality in an uncertain world. It was 2021, we were in the midst of a global pandemic. My role as a mother had been amplified, our routine upended. Thrust into a multifaceted role, I transformed my kitchen table into a classroom and office, sacrificing my personal self to fortify the resilience of my family. We experienced a twist of fate, we repatriated hastily. We secured the last four seats on a repatriation flight on a Saturday morning. Our children didn’t even get to say goodbye to their friends at school. We sold our possessions in less than 48 hours – giving most away. As we stood on the precipice of uncertainty, a call from the embassy at 2am epitomized the fragility of our situation. My partner had permanent residency but not a resident return visa. They asked what we were going to do if we couldn’t get the visa before the 6am departure time the next morning. I emailed them this photo of my children sleeping on the kitchen floor with the caption: We have no Plan B.



Mum

‘You don’t belong here,’ she made me feel.

I was acutely aware of the version of myself I presented as I observed the carefully curated conversations between other mothers, many of whom did not work or worked part-time, mindful that I needed to find some common ground to have any hope of making friends here. I watched them as I waited for parade to start. I hadn’t been a mother in Australia before – and being flung into this reality felt like a swirling chaos of awards assemblies and school events, all while I tried to hold down a newly-appointed promotion as a full-time manager and maintain a semblance of sanity.

splash

The sound of splashing water cuts through the whispers of self-doubt whirling inside my head. Dryland activities? Forget it. Arthur and Oliver cannonballed in head first. It’s too fast and equally not fast enough; in the wrong direction, at the right time; with high expectations of success and enthusiasm but misguided and unruly. A metaphor for my thesis – excitement and disarray.

A ‘platform diving mum’ hands me a can of prosecco.

‘You look like you could use this,’ she says before quickly handing me an opaque metal cup to hide the contents of the can beside the public pool where our children are diving...

At 38 years old, I was over the tipping point for the age of new higher degree enrolments. Despite the warmth of the ‘Dive Mums’, I was isolated. Almost all my higher degree research took place off-campus despite strong support networks that understood and made accommodations for women attempting to merge motherhood and mastery being critical to success. However, being able to work from home and close to my children’s school and activities was necessary to navigate the multiple identities that defined my sense of self.

I was also scared. In academia, parenthood has had a gendered impact on researchers. I was fearful that people would think that I, as a woman, caregiver, and primary breadwinner, was going to be too busy to dedicate time to my studies. I often reflected on what job I would get on the other side of my Master of Philosophy/Doctor of Philosophy journey, completely conscious of the ‘motherhood penalty’ that has demonstrated real-life implications for job offers, starting salaries, and promotional opportunities – despite the fact that my husband was also a primary caregiver and shared responsibility for our household. I was worried that my role as a mother would be seen as ‘incompatible’. I already had a well-paid and respected job and often caught myself wondering why I was doing further study. After all, mothers in higher degree research programs have higher attrition rates and slower career progression. I wasn’t going to be paid more post-PhD, so why continue the mastery?

As one famous doll said: ‘What am I made for?’

Manager

‘Enjoy your Summer break,’ my Academic Director says in a sing-song voice.

I exhale heavily. I am releasing the weight of four gruelling teaching periods as it finally lifts from my shoulders. Each period has blurred into the next, a relentless onslaught of deadlines and demands. In my job as a manager, it’s a whirlwind of activity – pre-launches, live sessions, discussion boards, assessments, results, and enquiries flood my inbox. I manage a team of ten people and growing.

My mailbox pings.

It’s our weekly, all-staff email in pops of reds and oranges. There is a photo of a company celebration for the acquisition of a new partner – complete with Moët et Chandon. It feels like a strange juxtaposition between who I was and who I am now.

The orange reminds me of the dust of the farm. I grew up in a low socio-economic family, plagued by addiction and domestic violence, on a small mango farm in Central Queensland. Working in universities as an adult, I felt that people often took the access to higher education for granted, not recognising that these intellectual spaces are gated, and that for many prospective students, access is unrealistic.

I ventured into the world solo at 17. Travelling eight hours to attend university in a bustling capital city, I faced immediate challenges. I failed the first year as I had to work to pay for rent and food – which negatively impacted my studies. Lost and unsupervised, I dropped out, took out a bank loan, and made the pilgrimage to London.

Almost immediately upon arrival in London, Anthony was catapulted into my life amidst the pungent smell of ripe camembert and chai tea. The next 20 years would be a see-saw of visa restrictions that mandated our every move. While many admired our seemingly glamorous lifestyle split between France and Australia, few saw the sacrifices and struggles. Few witnessed the heartache of separation, the financial strain, the endless paperwork, or the emotional toll of being torn between two places. Yet, despite our challenges, we persevered, driven by our unwavering commitment to each other and our shared dreams of one day being more – more than the poor kids at school with the hand-me-down uniforms.

I worked full-time while completing my Bachelor’s degree, my Masters degree, the Grad Cert, Associate Fellowship – all online, tanned by the moonlight and the light of my computer monitor.

So, when she says: ‘You don’t belong here’, I believe her.

At almost 40, the burden of work seemed relentless. Coming from nothing, I had never known anything other than a need to earn; and with two children and aging parents – mine in a rental property and his in public housing – the responsibility of being a ‘breadwinner’ was an oppressive weight.

I don’t belong here, I agree. The pressure of being a Mum, Manager, Mate, Master is too overwhelming at times. But if I’m not these roles, what was I made for?

I tried to find refuge in a woman I thought would support me as another mother embarking on a Masters/PhD thesis.

‘I’m going to fail,’ I said to her, seeking comfort and empathy. ‘How’s your PhD thesis going?’ I asked.

‘Yeah, good. I’m just concentrating on the networking opportunities, and the HDR student professional development lunch and learn sessions – I think I’m going to work only on Fridays so that I can really enjoy the experience.’ She said this with excitement.

I felt a mix of emotions – genuine happiness for her success, but also a twinge of sadness for my own situation.

I would have loved to focus just on the meet and greets of HDR life. I wondered how she could do this with three children, a partner, and a job?

‘Aren’t you worried about how you’ll pay the mortgage?’ I inquired – the question laced with my apprehensions rather than mere curiosity. As the main ‘breadwinner’ in my own family and having grown up in a low socio-economic family where the fear of homelessness loomed, I was determined to avoid this precarious state as a mother myself.

‘Oh, we only have a small mortgage and we have enough to get by if we choose to live simply.’ She said this in a light and carefree tone.

Perplexed, I wondered what that meant – to ‘live one’s life simply’. Was it to be constantly clawing at the breadcrumbs of life? I don’t think I ever experienced that, I mused.

I later discovered that she had inherited the land for her home as a gift from her father-in-law. The realisation hit me like a sledgehammer, driving home the harsh truth that some had been given a head start in the race of life. Perhaps my failure wasn’t because I wasn’t as intelligent or determined, but also because my competing responsibilities were non-negotiable necessities. Quitting my job was never an option.

Mate

phone rings

Coastal State School appears on the user ID.

I feel an instant pang of dread. As I wait for it to ring out, staring intently at the screen, I wonder if anyone else feels that same pang. It's not an <Oh I hope Arthur hasn't hit his head> type of pang. It's more a frantic <I have a 5pm Monday deadline and really can't afford to have Arthur at home with me while I work on this thesis right now> pang.

I am equally motivated and restricted by motherhood in academia. While my partner and I share a household that has a relatively equal distribution of labour, I am constantly reminded by society about the assumption that I, as the mother, am the best person to care for my children.

phone ringing continues

I pick up. 'Could you come and collect Arthur please?' It's a female voice.

'Um... Well, we only have one car and my partner is up the coast for work,' I respond, hoping she'll pop him in the sick bay.

Emotionless, she retorts: 'Do you have someone else that could come and get him?'

'Yes, his dad,' I respond, probably a little more vehemently than I had wanted to sound.

I am boiling with frustration. Despite our mutual decision that my partner should be listed as the primary caregiver for our children, I have received yet another call. He is the one with the car and more flexibility in his schedule to handle these interruptions, and yet they have consistently bypassed him and dialled my number instead. What was the point of filling out the form if they are just going to ignore it?

'I'll see what I can do.' I hang up.

After this incident, I tell my children that if they need to cough, they must go and do it in the bathrooms, because a) they aren't really sick enough to stay home and b) I need the time to provide for our family through either work or study.

When I share this with another mum at yet another school awards ceremony, she reacts as if my children are orphans, simply stating that I 'can't have it all'.

I let out an internal scream – they have a dad too, I seethe. Despite our concerted efforts to equally distribute the responsibilities within the household, the moment we venture outside, societal norms seem to dictate our roles relentlessly.

Mothers experience more guilt due to the impact of their work on their family than fathers. I cannot comprehend the assumption that I, as a mother, should prioritise my

caregiver role over my worker role. And I have been exhaustingly reminded by other mothers that I am doing it all wrong and what I do is never enough – even though our situations are completely different. Why aren't we empowering each other?

Fortunately, I have been enough to him. To them.

Towards the end of my thesis, I was exhausted, stressed, and disillusioned by the whole process. I didn't know who I was anymore, or which part of the Mum, Manager, Mate, or Master was most important. I often tried to mask my feelings at the breakfast table.

One particular morning, I retreated to my computer, tapping away – ashamed that I was failing in all my roles so disastrously and simultaneously. In that moment, my partner came up behind me, placed his hand on my back and whispered:

'You belong here.'

It was reassuring, but equally fleeting.

Master

'You don't belong here – you've failed.'

These were the very real utterings of my Panel Chair. In the pursuit of mastery, I had encountered a detour. I had hoped for a seamless transition from a Master of Philosophy to a Doctorate at the 12-month mark. I thought I would be a confident and competent Mum, Manager, Mate, Master. But I was not – I had failed. I stumbled at the hurdle of articulation, a convoluted conceptual framework mirroring the complexities of my own existence.

What was I made for?

On the Final Progress Review form is the question: *What have you learned from your HDR studies?*

It's a good question. I reflected.

Navigating academia as a mother is unforgiving. It demands resilience, determination, and sacrifice. As a working-mother in an HDR program, I faced immense challenges – I was torn between the pressing deadlines of academia and the needs of my children, grappling with both guilt and inadequacy as I strove to fulfil all the roles and responsibilities in my life.

But, being a mother in academia can also be motivating. That is a quality I feel was too often overlooked. Being a mother in academia gave me drive. I persevered, propelled by a deep-seated determination to create a better future for myself and my family. My HDR journey could have been more positive had I received sufficient support.

The lack of adequate support systems in academia exacerbates the challenges faced by mothers pursuing higher degree research. The traditional structures of academia often fail to accommodate the unique needs of student mothers, leaving them to navigate the academic journey largely unsupported. Balancing childcare responsibilities, a household, and academic commitments becomes an impossible task at times. And yet, we fight. We survive the chaos of our daily lives.

I am defying the odds. I am proving that motherhood is not a barrier to academic success but rather a source of strength and inspiration. The end may not have manifested in the way that I first intended, and I still may not graduate with a paper confirming my thesis. And while I'll be disappointed if it doesn't happen, the real lesson here is that finishing the thesis as a working-mother was a true testament to the human spirit and the tenacity of women who refuse to be defined by societal expectations and academic traditions. It is a celebration of the courage of women, their resilience, and the unwavering commitment to their families, their professional success, and their academic dreams.

In the end, maybe I don't belong. Perhaps my greatest project isn't the thesis topic, but the ongoing journey of challenging norms and reshaping the narrative of women's roles in academia and beyond.

That's what I am made for.

Emma Derainne recently completed her third postgraduate degree, a Masters of Philosophy from the University of Queensland, focusing on the meaning teachers attribute to school gardens. Emma also has a book entitled How good are school gardens? set for release in 2024. Currently, Emma is embarking on a cross-disciplinary PhD project that emphasises the intersection of education, health, and sciences to strengthen children's overall vitality and wellbeing through connection, community, and sensory fulfilment. Emma is a First Generation graduate from a rural community which enhances the empathy and compassion she has for her students in her professional role as a Program Coordinator for a regional university. Emma is also a mother to two boys – 10 and 8 – which is where both the idea for the school gardens project and the 4M's (Mum, Manager, Mate, Master) were ignited and will continue into the future as she continues to explore who she is and where she belongs.



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TEXT poetry

Tara Propper

Acrylics

She's prettiest against the green,
covered in rose water

Her portraits are in soft pastel
like ephemera

We take her out of time
like church bells in the dark

To capture love into a single
memory is to lose.

And all of the buildings
are melting – it makes my bones weep.

But she is prettiest against
the green, covered in rose water.

Tara Propper has earned her MFA in poetry and PhD in English. Her poetry has appeared in the Southampton Review, Moveable Type, Ekstasis Magazine, Vagabond City Press, P – Queue, Long Island Sounds (edited collection), Literature Today, Taj Mahal International Literary Journal and is forthcoming in Impost: A Journal of Creative and Critical Work. Her chapbook, This body was never made, is under contract with Finishing Line Press. Her scholarly work has been published in Composition Forum, Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy, Feminist Connections and is forthcoming in Resources for American Literary Study. She is currently an Assistant Professor of English in the Department of Literature and Languages at the University of Texas at Tyler.



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TEXT poetry

David Thomas Henry Wright

Xi Jinping's 2020[†]

The 5G province retracted
its amnesty network;
every youth was seen.

A 2020 inquiry expanded
China's sacrificed steel
stability, while the garbage

concrete revolution showcased
a police brutality pageant.
Beijing's alleged opening-up

remained safeguarded from Shanghai,
while a rural million salute
endorsed development over feeling.

A commission replied
ahead of formation,
resolutely sailing

the Xue Long 2 icebreaker
through decisive water.

† *This poem is composed solely of vocabulary from Chinese President Xi Jinping's 2020 New Year speech and the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement protestors' 'five demands'.*

David Thomas Henry Wright won the 2018 Queensland Literary Awards' Digital Literature Prize. He has been shortlisted for multiple national and international literary prizes, and published in various academic and creative journals. He has a PhD (English and Comparative Literature) from Murdoch University and a Masters (Creative Writing) from the University of Edinburgh, and taught Creative Writing at China's top university, Tsinghua. He is currently co-editor of The Digital Review and Associate Professor (Comparative Literature) at Nagoya University.



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TEXT poetry

Md Mujib Ullah

A Thought of One's Own

Sometimes I can't stop thinking about a bird. A possible hint of nostalgia. The branches of a tree near my room catalyze my feelings. No matter what the weather is, I am simple. Like your nickname, my breathing is symbolic. Too aesthetic. Every minute is a request. I am typing a letter. Each word is a method. I will not limit my imagination. I will not stop writing.

Md Mujib Ullah is a PhD candidate in Foreign Languages and Literatures at Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU). His English poems have appeared in Journal of Poetry Therapy, Text, Capitalism Nature Socialism, Asiatic, Postcolonial Text, The Goose, Borderless, Tuck Magazine, FreeXpresSion, Dhaka Tribune and The Daily Star.

