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Dead batteries

Biographical note:

Sarah Giles (she/her) is a writer and PhD candidate at Swinburne University. She is researching the possibilities of the contemporary short story cycle as a means for exploring women's experiences of isolation, trauma, mental illness, and relational agency. Sarah's creative work is informed by the life and art of Joy Hester (1920–960). Her writing has been published in *The Writing Mind: Creative Writing Responses to the Living Brain*, *ACE IV*, *ACE III*, *TEXT Journal*, *The Victorian Writer* and *Lip Magazine*, among others.

Sarah lives, works, and studies in Naarm (Melbourne) on the stolen lands of the Kulin Nation. Sovereignty was never ceded. This is, and always was, Aboriginal land.

Dead Batteries

I am drunk. Someone's spilt beer down my back. I am kissing a girl by the toilets in the Albion, the stickier and seedier of the two nightspots in town. Back in school, the girl in question was one of the hot netballers who went out with one of the hot footballers. Her name is Abigail and she smells like Britney Spears' Midnight Fantasy perfume and tastes like peach Schnapps.

"Want to go into the toilets for a minute?" she says.

I haven't been with anyone since Clair. The corner of one of Abigail's fake eyelashes has started to lift. She stumbles a little against the wall.

"You go in," I say. "Gotta text my friend."

"Don't be too long," Abigail says as she totters into the toilets on platform boots that peel off the floor.

The crowd is dense. I push my way through to the beer garden, where I left Summer having a ciggy and talking to some guy about the social cruelty of Job Seeker. I scan the dark garden. No Summer. I text her before heading to the bar for a shot of vodka. A man slides up next to me, asks if I'm having a good night.

"Don't know yet," I say.

He reaches over and takes up a lock of my unwashed hair. It's such a tender action – creepy, obviously, but I love having hands in my hair.

"This natural?" he says.

I nod.

"Nice." He twists the ends of my hair between his fingers. "S' on my bucket list. Always wanted to get with a ranga."

My shot finally arrives, and I clink it against my new friend's schooner.

"Cheers to that," I say.

The alcohol is cheap and rough, burning a hot trail down my throat. The last time I'd taken a shot of vodka, I'd been working on a series of still life watercolours of our bedroom. Different times of the day. Different weather. Different moods impacting the work. The changing light. Afternoon sun always throws spots of rainbow across our bed, light refracting through the windowpane. White morning sun falling like mist over the space. Waking up alone under that fog, Clair already at work, a few of her dark strands clinging to her pillow, I decided to get drunk and paint the room again. I swallowed smooth vodka straight from the bottle, drinking quickly. The dizziness led my brush. I cast the midday light in long waves of pink and purple, foggy like we'd just had sex or got in a fight. Clair found me passed out on the floor when she got home from work. She cleaned the vomit from my chin with a warm rag and helped me into bed. The next morning I woke alone again. This time there was a note on Clair's pillow.

The bar's vodka stings and I take a long sip on my friend's schooner to sooth my throat.

"That was hot as piss," I say, wiping my mouth.

When I finally make it outside, I snag a menthol cigarette off a group of blonde girls comforting their crying friend. One of them taps at her phone. Her black, pointed manicure clicking as she types.

"What's wrong?" I say.

The girl closest to me leans over, whispering, “Her boyfriend dumped her so he could hook up in Albury.”

The Crying Girl cries harder and the Typing Blonde looks up from her phone, glares at me.

“Or maybe he just needs some *space*.”

I take shallow puffs. The heat of the smoke moves like steam from my chest to my neck. My armpits become sticky. I’m not sure why I took the cigarette in the first place. Because Clair never liked it when I smoked?

I pull out my phone and check my messages – nothing from Summer. I take a picture of my boots against the glow of the cigarette, making sure to capture the Typing Blonde’s pink runners as well, and post it to my Instagram story without comment. I’ve become obsessed with my stories, with the list of people looking at them and whether or not Clair sees them. I post random things. The shower. The front door. The aisles at the supermarket. Roads and signs and unfinished paintings, paper curling on the bench in the studio. Clair watches every single one and, after, I spend hours analysing my posts, wondering what she thought of it.

The Typing Blonde gasps, “Callum DM’d me.”

Crying Girl clutches at the strap of her crossbody bag. The Typing Blonde reads the message then swiftly slides the phone into her back pocket.

“You know what – let’s just go back inside, get fucked-up and have a good night.”

The blonde’s start yelling and I’m with them. Release the texts – the people deserve to know the truth!

Crying Girl screams the loudest. “Just tell me what he said.”

She looks at the Typing Blonde who looks at her pink runners.

“Callum saw him get in an Uber with another girl.”

There’s a sinister moment of stillness. The Typing Blonde looks at me. Her eyes are lined with silver glitter that clings to the tips of her eyelashes like drops of rain – she shines. I smile.

“What are you doing?” one of the other blondes says.

Crying Girl is on her phone.

“*Do not* call him,” Typing Blonde says, trying to wrestle the phone out of her hands.

“Stop – I’m reactivating my Hinge,” she says. “If he’s fucking someone then so am I.”

At work the next day I swallow two paracetamol and two ibuprofen and guzzle water and red Powerade. I scan food and make-up and nappies and loyalty cards. Summer texted at 11 am from a taxi heading home after spending the night with the guy from the beer garden.

On my lunch break, I hide in a toilet cubicle and check my post from last night – the photo is a lot worse than I thought, grainy and out of focus. I pull up the list of people who watched it. Her mosaic profile picture like a wide-open eye stares up at me. Clair is top of the list, like always. There’s a DM from Abigail. *Fuck*. I left her in the bathrooms.

Omg last night was so wild!! I lost you in the crowd lol how you feeling today? xx

I try to reply but everything I come up with sounds so forced, so false. I lock my phone. My break is up any way.

When I get home from work, Birdy is at my door. I park and get out to meet her.

“Hi,” I say.

I’m hungover, confused. Birdy’s never once “popped by” for a visit.

“In the neighbourhood?” I say.

Birdy frowns. “I came to see you.”

Now I’m really confused.

We head inside and I put the kettle on. We take our cups of Australian Afternoon out to the studio. Birdy examines my paintings pinned up on lines of string. She gets close enough to breathe on them, looking at my brushwork, searching for my mistakes. I sit on the couch and text Summer.

What do I do?

She replies: *Just be yourself doll.*

What does that even mean?

Stay calm. Be normal. She’s your fucking mum.

Birdy looks at photographs hanging on the wall of Clair and me, Clair and her dad, just me, just Clair, and a photo of Birdy from before I was born, smiling.

“Where’d you get this?” She grazes the picture with a fingertip.

“Nan,” I say.

I stand by her. In the photo, Birdy is sitting on a backyard swing. Her hair’s the same dark red but longer, thick with waves, not yet threaded with greys. Static electricity lifts strands into the air. She wears a floaty, floral dress and dark red boots. She smiles with her mouth closed.

“I don’t have many pictures from back then,” Birdy says.

She points to a Polaroid Clair took of me in bed one morning. She’d opened the curtains and snapped a picture of me in the golden light and I’m smiling with my mouth closed and my hair is long and light and wavy.

“We look alike,” she says.

“Funny that,” I say. “There’s more inside.”

In my bedroom, I slide the box of memorabilia out from under the bed. Nan gave me the box when she and Pop were packing up the house to move up North. We sorted things into categories of keep, donate and throw away. The box of photos is in the keep pile and when I open it Nan comes over to look inside.

“Oh, good girl. Would you take these?”

She picks up a stack, the picture of Birdy on the swing on top of the pile. “Beautiful girl,” she says, handing me the photo.

“When was this?”

Though I know the woman in the photo is my mum, I don’t recognise this version of her. Maybe it’s just the light of that particular day.

“Gosh,” Nan says. “Just finished school, I reckon. Not long before she fell pregnant with you, love.” Nan pulls me into her side. “Might be pregnant already, now that I think. This was at your Poppy’s fiftieth so you’re surely that twinkle in her eye.”

She kisses my temple before putting the lid back on the box. “Go on then. You take these.”

I pull the box towards me. “Did you ever meet him?”

Nan dumped decades of birthday cards and letters into a box destined for recycling.

“Meet who, love?”

I reach into the box of discarded memories and grab a collection of letters and cards all bundled together with a green ribbon, frayed at both ends.

“My dad.”

She keeps sorting things into piles of landfill and recycling.

“Batteries are such a pain, aren’t they?” Nan says. “Do you know where the nearest drop-off location is?”

“Nan...”

She sighs, before yelling down the hallway to Pop. “Stuart, where’s the nearest battery drop-off?”

The chair creaks as she leans forward, toward the door, listening for his answer.

“No idea,” Pop calls.

Muttering, she dumps handfuls of dead batteries into a plastic container. She looks from the box of photos to me, pinching her eyes closed.

“We knew she was spending time with some bloke, of course. We never did meet him though.” Nan pauses, wiping sweat from her forehead with the cream-coloured underside of her wrist. “He buggered off. Bohemian mongrel. Not before upending your mum’s life, of course.” Nan resumes sorting. “He’s not worth thinking about.”

I put the box in the back seat of the car and drove home without saying goodbye.

I drop the box of family photos on the kitchen table in front of Birdy. She picks through them silently. Birdy’s never known how to speak to me. Instructions were easy. *Brush your teeth. Wash the dishes. Do your homework. Leave me be.* Otherwise, she was silent – except for the poems. They were rare, those times when she would reach out to me with borrowed words. She spoke them so smoothly that they felt right, carried on the cool, carved stone of her voice. Birdy didn’t hug me or hold my hand or kiss my forehead. Instead, she salted glistening rings of tomato and buttered homemade bread and sliced up chunks of plain label cheese – all while reciting ‘Wild Geese’ by Mary Oliver. *You do not have to be good.* And when the cheese had melted under the grill she’d slice the serves in half and we would sit on the front step and eat. This was how my mother loved me. I couldn’t appreciate her kind of love at the time. I didn’t want to do the hard yards of interpretation. I just wanted my mum to say the obvious thing, the simple thing, that every other mum said to their kid.

Now, sitting together in a different kitchenette in the same town 15 years later, both of us spotted with sun damage and unsure of what to say, I think of Mary Oliver’s wild geese. I want to call out to her. I want her to tell me about her despair. I want to tell her mine.

“Oh, and this is Tilly.”

Birdy hands me a picture of a border collie running toward the photographer across a paddock. Behind the dog is a blur of child.

“That’s me,” Birdy says. “I swear she spoke to me sometimes. It felt like we shared secrets.”

“Like what?”

The pebbles of Birdy’s cheeks shine.

“Kid stuff. Felt so real at the time. Suppose I was talking to myself but when I remember.” Birdy closes her eyes and tilts her head back. “I hear a voice that’s not mine speaking Tilly’s words.”

I reach back into the box for the bundle of cards and letters I’d rescued from Nan’s recycling box. Birdy flips through more photos. I loosen the knot in the ribbon and read the first envelope. It’s addressed to someone called Tom Harris. I slip the stiff sheet from inside and read my mother’s neat and determined handwriting.

Dear Tom,

I’ve been out with the cows this morning. The Jersey cow I wrote about in my last letter has taken to walking with me through the paddock. She’s a nuzzler and loves a good scratch of her neck and cheeks. Sweet beast. The baby is so active when I am with her. It rolls and kicks. I don’t know how it can tell the cow is there. She hardly ever moos. It must be the walking that wakes her up.

The baby has grown quite a lot since my last letter. My belly is a bulb now. I’ve been rubbing olive oil into my skin. Aunt Tina says it will stop me from getting stretch marks. I hope she’s right! I feel so heavy, never feel comfortable. The baby’s feet and elbows dig into me, pushing against my ribs, leaving me short of breath as she crushes my lungs. The muscles in my legs ache and cramp. Worst of all Tina is constantly watching reruns of Prisoner and I can’t STAND Doreen’s voice.

So, I walk with the Jersey cow. She lets me lean on her when I need a rest, stretching my arms over her back and resting my head against her. Sometimes I press my ear to her and listen to her grumbling belly. Grass and grain being digested, rolling from stomach to stomach. Her big heart thumping.

The girls were in a foul mood at milking time today. Kicking and pissing into the corridor. I had to shovel more than one pile of shit. I was thinking of you and how you would talk about the trees—

“Where did you get that?” Birdy says, snatching up the letters in front of me.

Birdy’s eyes are wide and her hands shake as she sorts through the pile.

“How did you find him?” she says.

“I didn’t—”

She unfolds a letter and stares at the words.

“They were in Nan and Pop’s things,” I say.

A magpie squalls from a favoured branch of the lemon tree in the back garden. Birdy lowers the letter, taking stock of what’s in front of her.

“Mum had them?”

“She was throwing them away,” I say.

I watch Birdy shift, recede. She won’t look at me. Her excitement muddled by confusion.

“If you want to find him, I can help. There’s all kinds of websites. He’s probably on Facebook, for starters.”

“No,” Birdy says, standing. The chair tips over with the sudden momentum. She stuffs the letters into her handbag. “I have to go.”

The magpie trills and the sun dips low into twilight. I listen as the front door slams behind her. I'm still holding the first letter I opened.

Trees talk, you said. They whisper to each other and grow in the same directions. Trees are the great transformers who take something toxic and turn it into life, into oxygen. Trees are homes. Habitats for lizards and possums and rosellas. You spend the most time painting your trees, giving detail to their leaves and bark patterns. Adding highlights to the sap that should glisten in your false light. Trying to capture their community on your canvas. You have more empathy for the trees you paint than for me. You expected me to grow in your direction. I don't think you understand the trees at all. Trees talk, they share, they communicate and grow together.

Bird.

I read the last line of Birdy's letter a couple of times over before folding the paper and sliding it back into the envelope. I go to the sink and let my cupped hands fill with water, allowing it to overflow and spill over my wrists and fingers before splashing my face to cool my hot cheeks.

Wiping my eyes, I open Instagram and navigate to Clair's profile. She hasn't posted anything new. Nothing since she left me. Her last post is from three months before and it's a carousel of artful photos of me. Never my whole face, only parts of my body. My hands, the ends of my hair across my shoulders, my lips, my back. She could only love me in parts. I hit the menu and hover over the "block" button for a few moments. The warning frightens me. *They won't be able to message you or find your profile.* How would I feel not seeing her profile picture lingering under all my stories? Would I even post them anymore? Holding my breath, I hit block then open my DMs. I click on Abigail's message from this morning.

Omg last night was so wild! I lost you in the crowd lol how you feeling today? xx

I swipe a quick response: *Busy tonight?*