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TEXT creative

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TEXT prose**Jeremy Fisher*****When 'I' is me: an author in search of his character***

As a writer, I have no qualms about drawing from my life to fuel my creative practice, though I adhere to some rules: like Brien (2002), I am guided by 'a sincere desire to tell the truth'. It is in this manner that I have sometimes used myself as a character in works of fiction, as in 'Letter to my children' (in Fisher 2013a) and 'Into the light' (Fisher 2008). In these works, I refer to the sexual assault and subsequent suicide attempt I experienced in 1973 when I was 18. Some readers have objected to my classification of these works as fiction, arguing that I was writing non-fiction, memoir or biography. My counterpoint, however, is that these stories are not recounts of what actually happened but my imagined narratives using actual events for their framework; they are my sincere attempts to tell a story I still find difficult to comprehend nearly fifty years later. Undoubtedly, some of my unconscious motivation was therapeutic. Like Gandolfo (2014), 'there were certainly benefits at a personal level from going through the difficult process of turning that experience into fiction'. Nevertheless, consciously I was attempting to write narratives with content and themes relatively uncommon in literature when I was that 18 year old; that is, I was exploring my deviance from the norm, as my sexuality was described to 18 year old me by a well-meaning psychiatrist.

The exegesis accompanying my doctoral dissertation (Fisher 2003) detailed my reasons for following that path. I wrote there: 'While my history of acceptance of this label [of gay] is hardly remarkable, my experience of it has defined my ways of seeing. I interpret through the prism of this experience. My subjectivity will always be apparent. For me a lack of "authorial intrusion" is impossible, though technique might disguise that. I cannot separate myself from my past, though I can reinterpret that past, and accept or reject it according to mood or need' (14). This, then, is also how I found myself approaching another writer's depiction of me as a fictional character undergoing those same events I still find difficult to recount, though not in my familiar medium of text on a page but audio-visually, in a movie.

My practice as a writer has never involved the writing of screenplays, although I once had a play, *Dreams for the working week* (Fisher 1982), read by actors at Sydney's Belvoir Theatre downstairs space. The audience roared with laughter at what I considered an earnest drama, so I left the theatre with head bowed in shame and never approached theatrical writing again. It was years later before it dawned on me that, had I swallowed my ego, as a writer should, I could have been a comic playwright.

Instead, professionally I progressed from publisher, to authors' advocate, then to teaching writing at the University of New England, all the while writing

and having my work published. I might have dreamed occasionally of some of that work being adapted for the screen; the reality was I received little or no return from my published work, thus ensuring my need to make a living elsewhere. Throughout this process of living a life, in terms of my writing practice one of the constants was that I continued an involvement with gay content and themes. I involved myself in Pride History Group in Sydney, with the Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives in Melbourne and presented papers at Homosexual Histories conferences (Fisher 2010, 2012a, 2013b).

These networks led to me being approached by Carrie Anderson around 2012. In a phone call, she explained she was researching a storyline for a movie about the origins of the first Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in Sydney in 1978. This rather chaotic event was organised to coincide with commemoration of the Stonewall riots in New York of 28 June, 1969, which marked the beginning of an international gay rights movement. June in New York is of course summer, but in Sydney it is winter so 24 June 1978, when the celebration and march was planned, was cold but about 500 people, including myself, attended. The celebration, harassed by police, degenerated into a riot and 53 people were arrested. Forty years later, the Mardi Gras has moved to March and is one of the largest festivals in the world, a celebration of gay pride far in excess of what any of us shabby hippies of 1978 ever imagined.

Carrie's initial research had made her aware that I knew Lance Gowland, the man who drove the lone truck in that first event; could she talk to me about him and other events? I agreed to talk so we met in a park in Five Dock first, then, over coffee in a cafe, she asked me questions about Lance and events in my past. I have written about some of this elsewhere (Fisher 2008; 2012b, 2013a); they concerned my engagement with Gay Liberation through meeting and having a brief relationship with Lance, expulsion from Robert Menzies College at Macquarie University in Sydney in May 1973 for being gay, and my peripheral involvement in that first Gay Mardi Gras. After interviewing me in 2017, Angus Dalton has also written about these episodes from the perspective of a contemporary LGBTQI+ Macquarie University student (Dalton 2017, 2018) and, while the pedestal he puts me on is flattering, in reality I was just a bullied kid standing up for myself.

Carrie explained that she would pitch her storyline to movie producers but the probability that production would ever commence was highly unlikely as most ideas for movies remained just that and, if anything did eventuate, any project would be years in the making. Therefore, it was not until Friday 5 May 2017 that I received a voice message on my landline phone from Gavin Harris of the Pride History Group asking me to contact him in connection with a movie being made. I called him the next day and he asked if I would give permission for him to pass on my contact details to the film's producers. I agreed and a few days later, on Thursday 11 May 2017 I received a call from Louise Smith from Werner Film Productions.

Thus began my peripheral involvement in the production of the telemovie *Riot* (Walker 2018). As a consequence, I was led to consider the complexities of writing for the screen and to wrestle once again with my sincere desire to tell the truth and what makes a work fiction. Further, from a research perspective, my involvement in this movie serendipitously brought me to compare my practice of using myself as a fictional construct in my writing with the practice of another writer, Greg Waters, and his use of me as a fictional construct in the screenplay for

Riot (2018), and how the screenplay became a film in the hands of the producers, director and actors.

In her first of many phone calls, on 11 May 2017, Louise explained a little more about the film; it would be a telemovie on the ABC in 2018 and it was to be a dramatised (fictional) account of the first Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras with some other storylines, such as mine, included to illuminate the gay history of the time. She wanted to meet and interview me. She hoped that she would come with scriptwriter Greg Waters, but he was hell-bent on finishing the script so might not be able to come. I agreed to see her and at 2 pm on 22 May 2017 she arrived at our home (I live with my partner Lloyd Christison) on her own. Greg was chained to his computer, the script deadline looming. Louise, Lloyd and I chatted for a few hours over cake and coffee at the dining table in our sun room. Louise recorded the conversation on her iPad. At one point, Louise playfully asked which actor I would like to portray me. Chris Hemsworth, I answered. She said she wished she had the budget for that casting choice. Who else? Matthew Mitcham (the Olympic diver), I said. Mitcham has forged a post-diving career as a cabaret performer with droll, self-deprecating delivery. At the end of the interview, Louise asked Lloyd and me to sign release documents. Basically, these gave Werner through Bent Productions, a company that had been set up specifically to make the film which was originally titled 'Bent', all rights to use the material from Louise's interview with us in the production and promotion of the film. I had no right with regard to the telling of my story, but throughout the production process Louise was consultative and caring, as was Joanne Werner who was executive producer for Werner.

As she left our house we joked about Lloyd and me coming on set to observe filming. I said something stupid like I looked forward to seeing Matthew in his swimmers and telling him how to act like me. In a serious tone, Louise replied that I would not be permitted to offer the actors any direction; I could only watch. There was nothing threatening in this; she was simply emphasising the rules for outsiders on set. I now knew my place.

Louise called me on 27 July to go through some details of the story again. As we finished the conversation, Louise asked me, given my experience as a writer and teacher of writing, whether I would be prepared to read the script to look for major errors and omissions. I agreed to do this and a copy of the script was sent via email within minutes of our phone conversation ending. Louise sent a follow-up email to advise that Greg Waters would be changing scenes 62, 63 and 64 which covered the Builders' Labourers' Federation (BLF) imposition of a 'pink ban' on Robert Menzies Collee in response to my expulsion. This event is the most historically significant in my story. It was the first time that a trade union took industrial action to support gay rights. Credit for this is due the union's officials Joe Owen, Bob Pringle and, especially, Jack Munday.

I read the script immediately and offered my feedback; I could see why Greg proposed scene changes as what had been written stretched history perhaps a little too far. I had some suggestions for minor changes and I wrote: 'Scene 60 [where my parents find me in hospital after my attempted suicide] has been nicely written. If I had any concerns they were about the portrayal of my parents, but the scene does justice to both of them. Thank you to the writers' (Fisher 2017).

Louise responded by email to arrange a phone hook-up with her and Greg on 28 July. This time, they wanted to know more about how the BLF were brought into the dispute and how I felt during Macquarie University's investigation into

charges that Robert Menzies College had imposed religious rules in disallowing me re-entry to the College. The University found the College had broken no rules. We spoke for some time about these matters. The movie shows Jack Munday, played by Rob Carlton, speaking with Damon Herriman's Lance Gowland and implies that Lance was closely involved in initiating the pink ban. In reality, this was done through the Students' Council, particularly by its President the late Jeff Hayler, but I could see that, for the movie to be coherent, narrative threads needed to be created to link my story into the larger one of the origins of the Mardi Gras, so scenes showing Lance and Jack talking together continue to stretch history a mite too far, but they work dramatically.

A few weeks later, Louise called to ask whether I would agree to meet the actor who would be playing me; it was not to be Matthew Mitcham, who, like Chris Hemsworth, was too old for the role. I agreed and a few days later on Friday 11 August I opened my front door to a young man with straggly hair (which I later discovered was composed of hair extensions). This was Will McDonald, whose main claim to fame at that point was his portrayal of the troubled youth Jett in the popular soap opera *Home and away*. Regrettably, I was not a viewer of this program so I had no knowledge of Will's acting experience. My first impression was how young he appeared. Lloyd asked him how old he was. I'll be 19 in September, he replied. He was the same age I was in 1973.

We chatted for a couple of hours. Will also showed me a clip from the ABC current affairs program *This Day Tonight* in 1973 when I was interviewed by Stuart Littlemore. I had long straggly hair, which obviously inspired Will's hair extensions. I had never seen this clip before as I did not have television at the time. I wore a cardigan knitted by my mother, a corduroy shirt and a Gay Liberation badge. I was surprised by how articulate I appeared. While this archived interview provided the basis for the appearance of my character, it meant that appearance was sustained over the six-year narrative span of the movie. The fact that in 1978 I was employed as a sub-editor at the conservative *Medical Journal of Australia*, necessitating a hair-cut and change in clothing style, was ignored by the moviemakers as it was immaterial to their storyline. This made me appreciate the decision-making required in the production of a movie. Six years were being compressed to one hour and forty-five minutes, and a national audience expected a comprehensible story of those six years. History and the truth are not always convenient in constructing such a story.

On 28 August, Lloyd and I, along with other 78ers portrayed in the movie (Peter de Waal, Peter Murphy, Robyn Plaister) and Lance's children, were invited on set at a shoot in Taylor Square. The scene being shot was the beginning of the Mardi Gras, with the truck being driven off after an altercation with police officers. I realised that it would be too onerous for me to perform as an extra as this required much standing which a neuromuscular condition I have prevents. Lloyd however appears in the movie briefly behind actor Damon Herriman as do some of the original 78ers and Lance's children. This shoot was joyous, a complete contrast to the original night. The crew, of whom a large proportion identified as LGBTIQI welcomed us oldies. Time and again we were thanked. People asked us to pose in 'selfies' with them. Will and I posed for the shot that features at the end of the movie, as David Bowie's 'Heroes' plays. That vision of the 78ers as heroes was already clear to the production team that night at Taylor Square but it would not become clear to me until after I had viewed the finished movie.

On the evening of Tuesday 5 September, we drove over to watch filming at Fox Studios in Moore Park. It was a bitterly cold night, which was unfortunate for the actors. Will was there and explained he had been given heat packs to put in his pockets to keep warm. The scenes that were being filmed that night were a recreation of the violent events in Darlinghurst Road, Kings Cross, when the New South Wales police attacked the Mardi Gras and made 53 arrests. I had left the real Mardi Gras at that point, but in the screenplay I was in the Mardi Gras right up to the bitter end, so Will ran between the paddy wagons over and over as Jeffrey sought his perfect shot. I sat behind Jeffrey watching his screen and the repeated visions of violence and brutality; it looked frighteningly real, even when Will as me evaded a policeman and got away, something that never happened. The historian in me gave way to my innate storyteller. For the sake of the credibility of the screenplay's narrative, the ragged bunch of pilgrims led by Lance had to reach the end of their journey, bittersweet though that end might be.

Lloyd and I, along with other 78ers involved in the shoot, were invited to the wrap party for the movie, held at a trendy Surry Hills hotel. Some rushes were shown. The young crew sat on the floor; the oldies settled into comfortable chairs. Joanne Werner, Louise and Jeffrey Walker gave speeches, Louise acknowledging the 78ers present. We were given a massive cheer. The rushes gave an indication of the music planned for the movie and some of the action, but my character did not appear.

Louise had promised to show me the finished movie before it was broadcast on the ABC on 25 February 2018. She brought over a DVD in the late morning of Friday 19 February. Louise explained that she was showing it to me and Peter Murphy (who is shown being savagely bashed by police, and whom I met at Macquarie University where he was a member of the Gay Club) because we were 'vulnerable' characters and she wanted us to know how our characters were portrayed in advance of public screenings. She was visiting Peter later that day to show him the movie. She, Lloyd and I sat down to watch it in the sun room. Friday is a busy day in our home. It is sheet washing and ironing day and also the day the groceries, ordered online, are delivered. The delivery was late and the arrival of the groceries allowed for the movie to be paused just before the crucial scenes involving my character. It also provided an opportunity to open a bottle of prosecco, so I watched the scenes of my attempted suicide, subsequent hospitalisation and my parents caring for me (and learning for the first time of my homosexuality) with a glass of bubbles in my hand and a plate of cheese, crackers and fruit nearby. It only strikes me as surreal as I write these words.

Louise was watching me closely throughout, but it was Lloyd who appeared most affected by the movie; he was in tears. I found myself thinking of the technique Christopher Bowman described he used when he was writing fiction that was close to home. His method was 'to leave that place, to go somewhere else so that I can turn the focus back on that setting from the outside. If I'm not there, I can take a bird's eye view and see where the story lies. Seeing the land from the outside – from a distance – changes the perspective and actually changes the view. It changes the reality *into a different reality*, and changes the *I* standing in the middle to an I with room to move and create' (Bowman 2009).

But something else also happened to me as I watched the movie. The first scene where my character appears is set in Lance's room in the Gay Liberation house; watching this scene I saw Will stating he was leaving to go to Robert Menzies College. The next significant scene featuring me is set in a gay bar;

Lance taunts me regarding my sincerity in wearing an anti-war tee-shirt. I rip it off, dance and get drunk and this leads to me being sexually assaulted. In a later scene, Lance is shown wearing a tee-shirt with the same slogan as the one I was wearing. At this point I yelled out at the television: 'You bastard! You criticised me for the same tee-shirt!' I now fully identified with Will playing me, even though every one of these scenes was completely dramatised, all figments of Greg Waters' remarkable imagination. I had changed the perspective and the view and the *I* on the screen was someone else's creation, and yet it was *me*.

Louise had alerted me to the fact that there had been changes to the scenes which featured me, particularly Scene 60. In the original screenplay, the Master of the College appears in my hospital room and tells my parents I had been possessed by a Chinese mask given to me by my father after a trip to Singapore. The Master, Dr Alan Cole, did actually say this, though at the College, not the hospital. In all of my versions of this story I have made this a key point since to me it epitomises Cole's zealotry and intolerance. I was pleased the Greg had been able to incorporate it into the screenplay. It is removed from the filmed version, replaced with a briefer scene where an unidentified priest talks of possession. As I watched the movie I understood why the changes had been made; this part of my story was irrelevant to the overall narrative. It was important to me, but not to the *Riot* storyline. Yet the priest still appears intolerant and zealous and my father still tells him to 'get out'. The absence of what I consider key facts have not made the scene any less sincere. The scene still respects my parents.

The emotion in the scene is powerful. If I attempt to write about how much I wanted to die at the moment in 1973, my words are banal and trite. However, the memory of my misery still comes back to me in the banal and trite words of Christ on the Cross in Webber and Rice's *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970): 'My God My God Why have you forgotten me?' The album, recorded in October 1970, had been a constant on my record player through my final years of school and in my room at Robert Menzies College. *Riot* is fiction, and the character named after me depicted in it is not me, yet what Jeffrey Walker brings forth from Greg Waters' script rings emotionally true to me, even while I recognise it as artifice. And that is the way we tell our stories.

It was confronting to read about myself through another's writer's eyes; more so to see that writer's words interpreted by a director and actor. Then there was my family. My parents are dead, but I had refrained from telling my two sisters and two bothers about the movie until the same-sex referendum of 2017 had been completed because there were divided views on the matter. However, I wanted all to know that our parents would be characters in a movie. All of my siblings have seen the movie and their comments indicate that it had a profound impact on them. I have watched it three times now. It is just a dramatisation, but it is beginning to seem real.

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General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Julianne van Loon & Ross Watkins

Creative works editor: Anthony Lawrence

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TEXT poetry**Ian Smith*****2 prose poems*****Yourself at Nineteen**

Your brother mails photos. Staring hard, the present deliquescing into the past, you inhabit your old self, thin again, with hair like that, your girl-wife, pregnant, looking bored, bemused, her puppy-love, your troubled days together, a notch in time. There is your brother, his boy's cheeky expression long before it cracked into the careworn lined parchment face of a junkie's father. Your father smokes, dragooned into joining in, captured by the camera's recording viewfinder. You deduce he was younger then than you are now. The photo of your mother is out of focus. Of course, you think, he must have taken it. A map of your life now, tracing artistic interests, would bewilder him, rooted in his belief you were trash. We lean against the car he bought new. You remember its plastic seat covers kept on for a year, how hot and sticky they became, your scorn. Outraged when you drove it needing a licence, he demanded you slow down, his tone as poisonous as whenever his fumbling fingers failed to light the kerosene lamp with night falling fast, even though you drove like a boy scout to appease him. You smoke, too, looking like Joe Cool, your projected image, wearing a white shirt, cuffs turned back, revealing a wrist support you can't recall, below teenage tattoos. You can feel that sun's heat stretching to infinity, feel your boyish emotional vow to kill your father one distant day when grown up, fleeing his cruelty at fourteen, the danger, blood spilled, during trouble faced on your own, how you couldn't be bothered hurting him for revenge on your return before that calmer day of the camera. You wonder which of your father's adults he echoed, muse how photos, like easily broken vows, can blur, how loss haunts survival.

1973

Self-taught, he found a way to a better job; foreman at a soundproofing firm, the irony of this lost until now, his application composed from the largely untested belief his intelligence should fructify. Leaving home that first morning enjoying his shift in fortune, he drove a truck borrowed from a panelbeater, his small car's minor repairs held up, this truck racetrack loud, unlike his car, with a radio, even louder, window down, singing along with Creedence.

On the phone, pseudo-puissant, his office high above wage-hound terrain, bullshitting clients about overdue shipments on management's insistence, he chafed despite a large pay hike. One company's receptionist flirted in a sex-kitten voice, a highlight of increasingly vexed days, so when his delivery driver went home ill he seized his chance.

Crossing a foyer towards her he realised his mistake. Somehow, the plain, enormously overweight woman half-sensed his identity even before his introduction. Voice hollow with dismay, she, they, knew their phone fun was over. He drove fast back to his eyrie, delivery boy fiasco a near record of brevity even for his previous workplace history.

Hair longer, he bought a caravan, a muscle car with a big growly engine for towing, after sitting directly upright from sleep one midnight announcing to his wife he would experience tropical Queensland. House sold, she tagged along, kids out of school off on an adventure. The dog, too. Unaware of the pitfalls of change's collateral damage, they set off like Odysseus, but tracking north. Life on. Thus these pixilated memories of his mid-life crisis at thirty-one.

Ian C Smith writes in the Gippsland Lakes region of Victoria, and on Flinders Island, Tasmania. His work has appeared in Antipodes, cordite, Four W, Landscapes, Poetry New Zealand, Shaping the Fractured Self (UWAP) and Southerly. His seventh book is wonder sadness madness joy (Ginninderra 2014).

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TEXT prose**Tom Melick***Notes from a Residency*

1. I could be sitting on an upturned bucket in a former retail space in Shanghai. I could be staring at the ceiling: electrical wires, pipes, brownish-yellow stains from the air conditioning. I could be outside, on the street, face pressed against the window, squinting at a pile of miscellaneous clothing store leftovers: mannequin stands, hooks, coat hangers, metal shelving, empty cardboard boxes, unidentifiable shiny things. The floor is wet, reflecting the ceiling. In one corner: smashed brick, plaster and mirror. Empty plastic bottles of water and energy drinks. Geometrical outlines along the walls left by fixtures now removed. If I showed you a photograph of the space and said nothing you might ask, was there a flood? If you looked a little closer at the same photograph you would probably notice the patterns on the floor left by different boots and wonder, as I did, how long has it been since people walked through here? If you looked – really looked – at the far left edge of the photograph, you would see a sleeping bag hanging from a hook on the wall. Are these the marks, you might ask, left by those who dismantled the store – stripping it back, drinking energy drinks, piling the debris in the centre, and moving on? Did the people who left these boot prints also sleep here at night? Did they finish a long day and get into sleeping bags in the very place they had been laboring? Or, maybe you want to travel further back, before the photograph, before it was decided that this store would be converted into an exhibition space, and ask: when did people stop shopping here? What did people buy here?

2. About one month earlier, the artist who will host me sends his driver to pick me up from the Beijing Capital Airport. We drive for about an hour and a half along twenty-lane highways, past towering blocks of pastel colored housing, past rice, soybean and lotus fields, until the road becomes narrower, bumpier and, finally... dirt. The artist is building his house in an artist village in Huairou, in the northern suburbs of Beijing. When it's finished, it will double as a gallery for his work. At the moment (that is to say, when I arrive) it looks more like a ransacked museum or an institution that has had its funding cut mid-renovation. Half-built walls, exposed wires, mounds of sand, stacks of bricks and terrazzo tiles. Shovels, brooms and plastic sheeting. The noxious and compelling smell of glue, plaster, paint, cleaning products. Industrial quantities of dust.

3. Later (days have passed) a routine develops. Because my room is next to the kitchen the first sound I hear in the morning is the *click-click-click-click* of the gas stove being lit. Egg, spinach and noodles in broth in a large pot, always placed in the centre of the table. Tea. Conversations with the artist (translated by his cousin or assistant) about work, always logistical: how, when, what, and the cost. Outside, concrete is being mixed and poured. Before it sets black stones will be

thrown from a height, now embedded, to be polished later. Pan-fried onion pancakes or sometimes rice with dry-fried green beans with chili. The phone rings so often it begins to feel strange when it doesn't. Objects are being moved from a studio or a gallery to a different studio or a museum or another gallery. Shanghai, London, Basel, New York. Tea. Sawdust through the window, illuminated by sunlight. From the television – which is in the kitchen, always on and always loud – Japan-China relations are tense over the Senkaku/Diaoyuislands: eight uninhabited islands in the East China Sea, close to shipping lanes with potential oil and gas reserves. Taiwan, not mentioned by the news presenter, also claim ownership, but there the islands are called *Diaoyutai*. Many visitors come by the house: a poet named Jinglan who brings her new book of poetry titled [missing]; a student named Hao who had travelled a long way from [missing] to Huairou for advice; assistants coming and going; Molly, an old friend of the artist's, a translator and professor of Chinese modern literature; a curator named [missing] with pink hair who tells me what she thought of the Taipei Biennale.

4. The artist's driver drives us to a large complex where building materials are sold: high stacks of blue foam; rebar sorted into piles according to thickness; showroom displays of tiles, drains, fittings and doors. Every material hides another material. Timber, glass and granite are cut here. Faces and gestures become familiar. The artist always asks for discounts, and is usually successful. He's buying materials for both his house and his artworks. He's buying sinks for his bathrooms and metal sheeting for a sculpture. He's smoking a cigarette with a man covered in tile dust. He's buying plastic pipes next to a child playing with a goldfish in a bucket. Later, I learn that the artist has a son who lives with his mother.

5. In the early evening dumplings are made by rolling out dough, cutting it into circles with an upturned glass, filling the circles with a mixture made from cooked egg, spinach and onion, and with two hands – as shown, you must use two hands – fold the dough over the small mound of filling and press down with both thumbs, letting the shape of your hands do the work. Every dumpling should look like a fat half-moon. Sometimes music. Sometimes sorghum wine, also known as *baijiu*, also known as firewater.

6. In one studio: Two dead geese on a table. Featherless, eyeless, made of silica gel. The neck of one is splayed out snakelike; its legs extended outwards behind its body, as though it had suddenly collapsed. The other goose is curled into itself, its feet tucked under its rear and its beak buried into the crevice of its wing the way living waterfowl often rest or warm themselves. Both are very real, or realistic; the skin has all the bumps, creases and pallid translucence of a raw and plucked chicken. I say something like a wing without feathers is a peculiar thing and the artist nods coolly, but doesn't speak. Perhaps there's not much to say. These wings never had feathers to begin with.

7. This is his 'silicon studio'. Earlier, around midnight, the artist insisted that we see it. When we arrive, his assistant (a young man with long hair and a broad smile wearing a paint-stained tracksuit) greets us but quickly goes back to work. With tweezers and a needle the assistant is inserting fine white hairs into the scalp of a naked, withered old woman with sagging skin. It's an odd scene, and I tell myself to pay attention. The old woman's eyes are closed and she's sitting in a deck chair. It's not clear if the deck chair is part of the work or simply a convenient abutment. The old woman has to be finished, packaged, and sent to New York for an upcoming art fair. The artist reaches behind her and presses a

button and her chest starts moving up and down. I hear the faint sound of a motor working an air pump and I'm reminded of the aged care home where my grandmother lived with senility during the last years of her life. It was thought to be a good idea to place battery-powered 'sleeping pets' – kittens and puppies whose bodies rise and fall to simulate breathing – on coffee tables next to recliners in the common space. I never saw my grandmother (or any resident or visitor) interact with one of these breathing pets, which only now makes the animals seem oddly neglected, breathing as they did until the batteries ran out.

8. In addition to the geese and the old woman in a deck chair there are silicon dogs, cats, piglets and calves – all furless and asleep (or dead, depending) on different worktables. There are fiberglass casts and ceramic molds scattered about, labeled jars of pigments and small bowls filled with colored gels – pink, white, yellow and blue.

9. Towards the end of September, on television, the motley color of a crowd. A burning Japanese flag in front of the Japanese embassy in Beijing. A silver Japanese-made car, overturned and beaten. White text on a black banner that reads (Molly translating) 'never forget the humiliation'. A silver car, not the same one as before, in flames outside a hotel. A map of the *Diaoya* islands (also *Senkaku* or *Diaoyutai*, depending). A man holding an image of Mao and speaking to the camera (Molly doesn't translate). Now, in Xi'an, another crowd. Another Japanese-made car, this time white; its windscreen smashed but not broken. The driver? Male. Hospitalized. In a critical condition. A shaky, pixelated video gone viral. Captured by a bystander with a phone, replayed and slowed down on the news frame by frame: here-is-a-man-with-a-metal-object-suddenly-emerging-from-the-crowd-and-here-is-the-moment-when-he-swings-this-metal-object-and-it-hits-the-driver's-skull. A dense thud. The blood comes later.

10. When we sit down to eat a lunch of steaming *boazi*, the volume on the television is turned down but the news continues to hold our attention. 'Are there riots like this in Australia?' The artist's friend asks. We look back at the television as though it might offer an answer. *Like this*. Without sound, the riot looks less violent. Do riots share a language, or is that they spill out of language – spill over it – and in that way look similar? All riots are in the business of reclaiming something, real or imagined (and remind me of the difference?). I mention the 2005 Cronulla riots, when text messages circulated, such as: 'Every fucking aussie. Go to Cronulla beach Sunday for some Leb bashing Aussie Pride ok.' Convoys of cars carrying men driving up and down Sydney's beaches. Self-appointed 'patrols'. A man of 'middle eastern appearance' targeted and beaten by a crowd. Australian flags worn as capes.

11. The television is turned off, which makes the room feel strangely empty. Molly mentions that in the early 90s her house in Sydney was a refuge for poets and artists who had recently arrived from China. This is where the artist and Molly met. She tells us about how her visitors would eat, drink and smoke her house empty, how conversations were always about where people were and who knew who, about how Australian citizenship could be obtained for family, about what it would mean to be an artist or a poet now, after Deng Xiaoping, after Tiananmen. (A year later, I'll meet up with Molly at a pub. I'll walk her home and see this house. It's down a laneway, hidden behind the bright purple of a jacaranda tree.)

12. It takes over twelve hours to drive from Beijing to Shanghai and it's after midnight when the truck arrives. The artist hasn't arrived. When he does, much later, he's wearing sunglasses and smoking. Two men jump out of the truck and

immediately begin unloading heavy, miscellaneous objects, passing them along to other men in a line, like a bucket brigade. This is the artist's artwork for the Shanghai Biennale, delivered in pieces, to be constructed on site.

13. Li, who is responsible for making most of the artist's works, is darting in and out of the truck; he's concerned that a thin, large glass panel the size of a billiard table will break. This glass is to be placed on top of an industrial freezer. Water will drip from a chandelier-like contraption onto the glass so that it freezes to form an ice sculpture. This is the artist's artwork: an evolving sculpture; a monument that makes itself.

14. And then it happens – the sound of breaking glass is always rude and unambiguous. Li jumps down from the truck holding his left forearm with his right hand. There's a moment when there is no blood but then there's a lot of blood, flowing out of his forearm and over the fingers of his other hand like water over rocks. For what seems like too long – but only and always in retrospect does it seem like too long – everyone stands motionless in stupid silence. 'It's a deep cut' – once that's been said people get moving. But Li doesn't want to call an ambulance. Impossibly, he seems unfazed as blood doesn't drip but flows. Another man who I haven't met and won't meet takes his t-shirt off, or had it off already, or either way his t-shirt is tied around Li's arm and the fabric quickly turns from white to red. A taxi is called. Li gets in with the shirtless man and they drive off at normal speed. Tomorrow, when the new glass arrives, Li is there with his arm bandaged and in a sling. But the water won't freeze and the artist's artwork is a wet mess.

15. Earlier, in Beijing, Li was working on a plan with us to make walls that would move when pushed. By pushing one of these walls, plastic and glass bottles that had been collected and found would be propelled through a chute and accumulate in a pit. By pushing another wall, water would flow through a pipe into a large tank, located near the bottles. There would be a pile of concrete, a shovel, and metal molds for making bricks in the space. If all the materials found their way – that is, if the walls in the space were pushed on a regular basis – objects that were somewhere between a brick and a vessel could be made by mixing the concrete with the water, pouring it into the molds, inserting a bottle into the mixture, and leaving it to set. Or not: the materials could simply amass in the space unused. But if these brick-vessels did get made, nearby pre-paid postage forms could be filled out and attached to these objects, and at the end of the exhibition, they would be delivered by China Post. This was our work that would share the space with the artist's frozen sculpture. (Now, as I write about it, it seems overly complicated and not that important, but we were immersed in the technical problems at the time.)

16. To make moving walls, large metal frames had to be welded and placed on tracks like awkward, windowless trains. Li, before he sliced his arm, spent hours working on getting these walls to move along metal tracks. A constantly breaking pulley system meant that one wall, which was meant to roll back into place once pushed, would either get stuck or hazardously rebound at great speed. The pipe that the water ran through had a hole, or many. The chute that the bottles moved through worked only occasionally. The water that leaked from the pipe found its way (as water usually does) to the concrete, creating solid clumps on the ground. Now, in photographs, these clumps look like accidental sculptures, which I suppose they were.

17. In Shanghai, we are on our way to the opening of the Shanghai Biennale at what is now called The Power Station of Art – the firststate-run museum for

contemporary art in Mainland China. The artist is somewhere else, possibly in Taipei. We drive through the city past buildings of green, yellow and pink glass, past a sign that reads ‘We deliver clean energy towards a harmonious world’. Before, in 1897, The Power Station of Art was known as the Nanshi Power Plant. Established as Shanghai’s first nationally-owned power company, it was built to counter foreign-run monopolies on urban lighting. Prior to the plant, only the colonial districts of the city glowed at night. By delivering gas and electric lighting to the ‘Chinese city’, Nanshi was a symbolic victory over colonial illumination. Now, we look up, without comment, at the old Nanshi chimney (165m tall, I read later) which has been converted into a giant working thermometer with flashing white and red lights. Inside, The Power Station of Art reminds me of the artist’s house. In the rush to convert the space for the opening, some of the aesthetic details that go into making museum spaces what they are – near perfect voids of white walls, polished concrete floors, politely designed barriers that stop you from getting too close to works – remain unfinished or missing. There are buckets of paint stashed in corners, cords not tethered to walls, projections of default blue or rainbow wheels that indicate something is loading. It’s a great place. Various artists have complained that their work has been damaged, badly installed or simply neglected. I take note of three works.

- Sui Jianguo’s *Wanderer*. Eight men, museum invigilators, are trying to stop a giant, motorized, stainless steel ball from moving. You would be forgiven for thinking that it’s a performance, but the text on the wall says that it’s designed to roll 25cm per minute, and stop when touched. Instead, it’s moving spasmodically, crashing into other artworks and threatening to crush visitors. The men who are trying to hold it in place are also looking for—but can’t seem to find – the switch to turn it off.
- Adrian Villar Rojas’ *Una guerra en la tierra*. The artist arrived a month before the biennale had opened and after his initial idea was rejected by the organizers, he decided to make two versions of the same sculpture: recreations, in clay, of Brancusi’s *Seal* (also called *The Miracle*). The first version was installed in the main exhibition space, in the museum that was under construction. The second version was placed outside of the museum, in a space where masons were living as they worked on the museum. The artist used this second sculpture to make another work, a film about those employed to construct the museum.
- Dan Voh’s *We the People*. 1:1 segments of the Statue of Liberty recreated in raw copper, installed on the museum floor like unused props from a sci-fi film. An eye, a chin, the edge of a crown. The width of these pieces is the same as the 1886 original – a little over two millimeters thick (or the width of two-pennies). Later, I learn that each piece, now spread across the world in different museums, was constructed in a factory in Shanghai.

18. The last work that the artist shows me before I leave for Shanghai is *Bonsai*, and the title isn’t a metaphor. I’m looking at a bonsai tree in a typical blue-and-white (*qīng hua*) Chinese porcelain pot. The image on the pot is also typical: mountains partially covered in mist. What isn’t typical is that the bonsai tree has been imprisoned in an elaborate steel contraption. The trunk is being pulled up by some wires and pulled down by others, and it’s clear that this isn’t to educate the tree for its future growth; it’s not your typical arboriculture. This contraption is permanent. The wires will remain. The work is finished.

19. A few days earlier, on a trip to buy more materials, I take a photograph of a small plant in a modest clay pot perched on a stack of grey tiles. I keep returning

to the image. There's nothing particularly special about it. If anything, you might describe it as quiet. But for this reason, in my mind, it seems to counterbalance all the struggle, labor and time that had gone into making things meaningful – the exertion to shape materials so that they speak, to make stuff into art. It's not at all radical to say that some things are meaningful and some things speak precisely because they haven't been subjected to rigorous analysis or artistic intervention. These things might carry a confusion that's generative or a feeling that's difficult to place. A thing that reveals itself but doesn't, like the shape of furniture covered by a blanket or a friend that never sits still. This feeling works on us, or in us, or both. It can be frustrating not to see what's right in front you, but also compelling. Is this one reason why we keep returning to some objects but instantly forget about others? Somehow, the artist's *Bonsai* is contained within this photograph of a plant; unrelated and connected.

20. On the train home tonight I started thinking about all the meals, tea, cigarettes, translated conversations and materials, all the collective time, labor and lack of sleep, all the dumplings and television, all the water, concrete and emails, all the phone calls home, all those who, because of poorly paid work, weren't sleeping at home, all the dust and the blood – all of that flowing into artworks that no longer exist. I started thinking about the way objects have a knack for unraveling the plans we have for them, or shrugging off our beloved theories, or leading to other objects, or getting in the way, or vanishing the first chance they get.

21. Revisiting this residency in writing makes me wonder what George Kubler, the Pre-Columbian art historian concerned with the temporality of materials, would say about the relatively recent proliferation of residencies and blockbuster art exhibitions. 'Let us suppose', he wrote in *The Shape of Time*, 'that the idea of art can be expanded to embrace the whole range of [hu]man-made things, including all the tools and writing in addition to the useless, beautiful, and poetic things of the world'. 'We are discovering little by little all over again what a thing means is not more important than what it is', he wrote in hope of a new approach, 'that expression and form are equivalent challenges to the historian; and that to neglect either meaning or being, either essence or existence, deforms our comprehension of both.'

22. It must be late in my stay when I discover that the artist is building a moon. It's a side project, he says, an addition to his garden. In his garden, bamboo scaffolding extends well beyond a large dry-stone wall. An old concrete mixer and a pile of gravel in the middle of a half-finished amphitheatre. A little stream incorporated into the landscape design. But it looks as though goldfish were added too soon or too late because a few of them are floating belly-up. There are frogs, too. I can hear them calling to each other, or to themselves, but can't see them.

23. For weeks I don't see anyone working on the moon, but one day I notice a large, flat circle at the top of the scaffolding – a wooden circle covered with LED lights. Did Li make this overnight? One evening, days later, the artist turns on the circle and we sit there eating pieces of apple and drinking beer, more or less in silence, staring directly into its brightness. Above and to the left of the artist's moon is *the* moon, though it's not full and, next to the artist's moon, not that bright. In this moment, in the silence, looking at his finished moon, in the garden that's more or less complete and now brightly lit, I think I detect a sort of backstage moment of extending sadness; the kind of loneliness that waits for a quiet place to unfurl.

24. Recently, I came across Ma Lin's *Waiting for Guests by Candlelight*, a fan painting on album leaf from around 1230, which shows a member of the imperial family, possibly the emperor himself, sitting insignificantly but confidently within impressive architecture, surrounded by mountains and trees. Ma Lin's figure, whether he's the emperor or not, is present and postured, surrounded by his property and secure in his authority. He's not wandering off anywhere; people are coming to him. Attendants in white robes, in preparation for the guests' arrival, have lit candles to mark a path, and the moon is a small yellow spot, more of a stain, barely perceptible in the sky. But then I think, until his guests arrive the emperor will have to wait (he's still waiting). And then I realise, from where he's sitting he can't see the moon.

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TEXT

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TEXT poetry

Gershon Maller

2 sonnets about poetry

In the belly of the physicist

Quale: what a thing looks or feels like to each person.
— C.S. Peirce *Mind and the World Order* (1929)

To quale is too tense a verb to parse
nor does quale name nor qualify quark
distant twins who never in the quantum
belly of the physicist in the same orbit
of invisible worlds were made to spin
as disappearing into radiant flux, its tail
flicks through flickering waves of blue
white points of red light, bitter sweet
as desire's first fleeting kiss; as from
the heart the quale is drawn to blood
a thought by sense, flowering a rose
of gorgeous nonsense, passions we must
fail to quail from beyond reason or like
this punnet of strawberries quite resist.

Poem with its throat cut

Descartes has cut poetry's throat.
— Boileau (1636–1711)

I think, therefore, I am curious
to trace to pith a trace of myself
along the clear line of live nerve
waiting for synapse to flare its arc
briefly into figure of first thought ...
I am sensual but of the senses none
nor sensibility, nowhere to be found
in body nor mind, an object without
subject even in speech donated to science

fully awake eye for eye beneath scalpel
but René, as you cut the lyric chord
trying not to choke the pain, in this paeon
for pronoun shot through with fiction
know never in my own voice do I speak.

Melbourne based poet and editor Gershon Maller is author of the collection Nights in The Gardens of Spain (2002). His poetry has appeared Overland, Poetry Australia, Going Down Swinging (AU) and The Wallace Stevens Journal (US), among others. He holds a PhD in Literary Studies from the University of Queensland.

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TEXT prose

Oliver Wakelin

North

I went north trying to get a little time away from Sydney: trying to relax. Whenever I finish writing a longer creative piece I feel the urge to go. To sever the cord. I was also excited to find out if having access to the deep water off the ledge at Pearl Beach would mean hooking a real big fish.

I'd always known the water at Pearl Beach got deep fast. I'd first noticed it on a family holiday when I was a kid. Had the knowledge thrust on me really. I'd been body surfing and got dumped face first into the sand. I'd heard my back cracking. My legs came the wrong way over the top. I looked up and saw my heels, if you can imagine it. Then I couldn't breath.

'You can still walk?'

'You'll be fine mate.'

The sort of breathless feeling I get when a character I'm describing is suffering in some inferno. I've been thinking about that deep water. Fishing from the beach is my favourite but the problem is always that you have to cast a long way to get into the deep.

There are usually gutters and banks where the water gets shallow again about twenty meters from the shore. It's difficult to get a cast past the shallow part. But the water doesn't get shallow again at Pearl Beach. It just gets deep, right away, like a story beginning in medias res.

There are usually only small waves because the beach is a good way in from the headlands. When the big waves do come they break right onto the sand, like obstacles crashing into a hero.

I walked out to the rocky ledge at the south end of Pearl Beach. The weather was calm. The ledge ran along the north side of the headland and it faced back towards the beach so where I was standing was also sheltered from the bigger waves.

I looked to the beach on my left and saw there wasn't much water surging onto the sand. Hardly any white water. It was almost totally flat in front of me, just lapping gently at the rocks by my feet, making the slurp, slap sound. It was all sparkling greens and blues until you got to the golden sand, or the rocky headland opposite.

The ledge I was standing on was white, almost golden too, and crumbly underfoot. I wasn't wearing any shoes. I'd taken off my thongs, happy to cop a bit of searing pain from the heat on the soles of my feet.

Behind me, the cliff side rose up about twenty meters. I didn't know what was up there, whether there were any houses.

I saw the rock at the base of the cliff had been eaten away by the water, making little caves: useful cocoons of shade. Protection from the midday sun that was hot overhead and bearing down hard. Almost like it had a weight of its own. It was nearly too hot to fish from the beach but those caves would make fishing from the rocks a good prospect.

I tied on my hooks and swivel using a backwards double loop knot. It was the simplest and quickest knot I knew and the envy of other fishers once they got over their skepticism. Other knots were stronger but took longer and cut up my fingers. I always shuddered when I saw the calloused fingers of older fishermen: that white, hard skin.

I was keen to get a line in the water. I fed a medium sized hook through the top of the hood of a squid, then I attached a second hook to the bottom of the hood and ran it through the flesh between the squid's eyes to keep its head attached to the body.

I pulled the bail arm back and caught the line with my pointer finger against the rod. I moved the rod tip and the squid behind me and bounced it up and down, testing its weight. I pulled down hard, wrenching the butt leftwards across my body, trying to create a whip or flick in the tip.

I cast that squid out as far as I could into the blue, green water. I flicked the bail back into position, then I stood looking at the concentric circles flowing out from where the squid had landed.

I walked backward towards the alcove and saw there was a circular hole in one of the rocks. It might have been man-made, I wasn't sure. I put the end of my rod into the hole and saw it fit nicely. The rod even sat forward a little like it was meant to, which would stop the line getting tied up around the tip. If the line got all tangled up there it would snap if something big pulled, or I tried to cast.

I walked to the shelter of the cave and laid out my towel. I lay down on my side and looked at the tip of the rod. Then I sat up and dug into my pocket and found the little clip with the bells attached. I walked back and took the rod out of the hole. It was a beach rod, a twelve footer. I had to walk along to the far end to attach the bells with the clip.

When that was done I went to the shade and lay down on my back with my hands behind my head. I had a quick recce for snakes and spiders then I checked the rest of my squid wasn't lying out in the sun.

I half glimpsed people walking past on their way to the eastern most point of the headland. There was a large rocky ledge out that way which curved away round to the south. I'd sat out there looking across the water to the heads and the open ocean. Big waves rolled in between the heads and broke on that rock ledge.

From there I'd seen Lion Island where I knew the escaped convicts James Martin and Mary Bryant had stopped and found food on their way to Timor.

I would have been fishing out there, but I'd been told all about how rock fishing was the most dangerous sport in the country. People died all the time. Lots of blokes were proud to fish the dangerous spots, boasted about it if you asked them.

I remembered the time I'd asked a fisho where he wet his line and all he'd said was, 'Eighty six dead mate. Eighty six dead.'

I knew the problem was that the sea looked tame and predictable. It wasn't the ordinary waves that came up and grabbed people. It was the unusual ones. The one in ten thousand.

Lots of folks had staked their lives on their knowledge of the sea, but it just turned on you too fast. You were tempting fate if you didn't wear a life jacket while fishing the rocks.

A tall woman with deeply tanned skin and long wavy brown hair walked by my alcove. She looked lost in her thoughts. She gazed up at my fishing rod and then followed a line of thinking and found me lying in the shade.

She smiled and I smiled. She stopped at the alcove next to mine and laid out her towel. A man wearing a blue button-up shirt and leather boat shoes walked by holding his towel and a picnic basket.

He nodded to me, then he sat down next to the woman and they started chatting about the spot and the weather, and then they started kissing. I could hear them after I looked away.

I glanced up at my rod tip but really I was listening out for the bells. I could relax when I had the bells. It was different without them. Fishing was almost completely passive with them. Like some lazy river figure out of Tom Sawyer or Huck Finn's world tying the end of a line around their toe. All I had to do was doze in the warmth and keep an ear out.

I heard the sound of scuffing heels. I saw a kid who was wearing a red T-shirt come barreling into my field of view from the beach. As he got closer I noticed his blood shot eyes. He looked up at my rod and then trotted over to me. He was holding a simple fishing rod with a reel that looked like it would break with only a little pressure.

He said, 'Hi.'

I said, 'Hello.'

'Lovely day.'

'Sure,' I said.

'Beautiful spot here.'

'It is.'

'Can I have some line?' he asked.

‘Where’s your line?’

‘I don’t have any. Can I have some?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t have any to spare.’

‘What about all that line?’ he asked, pointing at my spare line.

‘But that’s my line. I’m going to need it.’

He narrowed his beestung eyes at me and clenched his pudgy fists, like a dissatisfied co-writer. He drew in a couple of breaths while he was clenching then he stomped onward in the direction of the headland.

I watched him go and saw there were other fishermen out that way now who must have come back from the ledge that faced the Pacific. They were using lures on the surface, fishing for tailor. I saw they were having a good time, pulling in fish. Every thirty seconds or minute one of them would hook on to something and their rod tip would bend right down.

They were casting out hard, then reeling in quick, keeping the lure near the surface, sometimes breaking the surface. I knew that splash could attract the fish and whip them into a kind of feeding frenzy.

The boy had started talking to one of those men. The kid put out his hand and the fisherman shook it. They talked some more and then walked back to the man’s tackle bag and the man handed the boy a spool of line. The kid sat down and attached the line to his reel and started winding it on.

When he had finished he walked over to the man again at the water’s edge and they got chatting. The bloke walked back to his gear then found a lure which he gave to the boy. The kid began casting out beside the man.

I dropped my eyes to the couple next to me who had started eating their picnic. Nice looking bread, cheeses and grapes. Butter and chutney. They had their legs stretched out in the sun, with their bodies in the shade of their little cave.

They looked back at me and grinned and then both raised their eyebrows and tilted their heads towards the boy, indicating they were watching this narrative unfold. I raised my eyebrows at them and grinned: one subplot was aware of the another playing out.

The rod of the man standing next to the boy bent in half, the tip almost touching the water. The bloke pulled back hard and walked back too. The other people on the ledge began to congregate, eager to check out what he’d got.

He fought hard, pulling up and back to draw the fish a little closer and then bringing the rod tip down and winding in to take up the slack. He was using light line and I heard the drag singing when the fish turned and put on a run. Finally the flash of silver came struggling through the green and the bloke got it up on the rocks. It was a large tailor with a long thrashing tail, snapping mouth, and powerful sharp teeth.

The bloke knelt down and took some pliers out of the top pocket of his jacket. He sunk a knee into the fish to steady it and removed the hook with a flick of his wrist, like a practiced editor slicing away text. He put the fish head-down in this bucket about five meters from the water's edge and put a tea towel over it. I saw water splashing out of the bucket.

The boy's rod twitched and he started reeling in too. His fish looked smaller. His rod tip wasn't bending down much. He fought it and brought up a tailor the size of an adult hand or so. I walked over to take a look. The older fisherman caught my eye with a snap of his head and I pointed to the bucket and he nodded. I pulled back the tea towel and looked at the big mouth of the tailor with its thick, wrap-around lips. That was how I knew it was a tailor, and the way he'd caught it.

I saw the boy was about to throw his fish back into the sea. He wound his arm like a baseball player, his knee came up.

I said, 'Whoa.'

He turned around to look at me.

I said, 'I could use that for bait. Can I have it?'

He looked at the fish in his hand. Its tail was thrashing back and forward. He looked up at me. He walked to the water's edge and knelt down and dipped the fish's head into the sea. He looked back and made eye contact with me as he let it slip away.

I walked to the shade. I looked at my fishing rod and thought about changing the bait over. It'd been twenty minutes. That was how long I usually let the bait soak. I could leave it longer with squid because squid was tough and usually stayed on the line. Prawns and pilchards tended to come off my hooks a lot easier. It was impossible to know whether the bait had slipped off or been taken by the little fish, octopus, squid, or even crabs.

I saw coming towards me, with the beach behind him, a man who was not tall but had a barrel chest and carried himself in a puffed up way that made me think of Mussolini. Like a silverback gorilla. He had a deep tan and a purposeful stride.

I stood back to make way for him and smiled as he went by. I wondered where he was going with all that purpose. He pulled up beside the boy and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. They talked for a moment and then they both turned around and the boy pointed at me. I looked away. Then I looked back. The man was still looking at me long and deep with narrowed eyes. I returned to the shade, trying to break the line of sight.

When I put my head around the corner of the cave the pair were focused on the boy's fishing. I heard the bells tinkling. I walked over, I didn't run. I waited by the base of the rod, watching the tip. I was using circle hooks, which set themselves in the fish's lip. Didn't need to strike, or pull up hard to embed the hook. Set and forget was better. These hooks were made to catch the fish's lip and not the inside of their guts. It meant more survived. Most of them, I hoped.

My worst fear was that a fish would swim around in pain for twenty years because I'd hooked it and my line snapped. It wasn't good to think about it. Most

good things have a part you can't think about.

My rod tip pulsed. The bells jangled and then went quiet. Jerked again. It wasn't dead certain but I grabbed the rod and started reeling in.

There was something on the line that had weight but wasn't fighting. As it got closer I saw that it was black: it was a Port Jackson shark, with a little mouth. I pulled it up the rocks and walked to my bag and got my pliers. I pulled the circle hook out of the corner of its mouth. I was on my knees.

I looked up and saw the boy standing over me. The father was walking over too. I stood and pushed the shark carefully into the water with my foot. I'd seen footage of sharks twisting around suddenly to take off a hand or a foot.

The man and the boy watched it go, then turned and looked at me. I looked back at them. They remained expressionless. Standing too close to me. They both turned and walked back to the men who were fishing with lures.

I got another squid and put a couple of hooks through it. I didn't cast as far. I walked back to the shade and when I sat down I heard the couple next to me laughing and kissing. I looked over to the boy and his father who seemed to be lost in their own world again. I looked out at the green water and smelt the brine on the air. Travelling north wasn't giving me a break from narrative.

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TEXT

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Dark Arts: Keeping Company with Witch's Eggs and Devil's Fingers

attractive oddities are crucial disruptors within a deeper ecology on which all species are dependent.

It is confusing.
 She tries to trace but keeps adding to her map.
 She does find “kin” within the strange compartments they are situated in.
 She laughs to find they all share the same aversion to tracing.

If we spend time to get to know *Aseroë rubra* we might consider it in a different light. Its common name, the *anemone stinkhorn*, alludes to the radiating tendrils that are its feature. Rather than a denizen from the depths it resembles a stranded sea creature. For some nonhumans it is a most enticing crimson lollypop, the central sticky mass sweet and delicious. However our anemone is a trickster and its carrion perfume a foil for the beguiled fly. Intoxicated, the dipterous ones enter a deceptive pop-up candy shop trading a sugar high over the promise of a larval brooding site. The syrupy brown glob at the centre of the anemone’s structure is called the gleba. Unlike some fungi whose habit is to propel their spores, the gleba is the stinkhorn’s sticky magic. After gorging, the fly departs naïve to the fact their belly is full of ecstatic spores anticipating new territories.

Her travelling companion is a stinkhorn fungi.
 Her journey, like any good map, has multiple lines on which to travel.
 It has no standpoint because the vision maps of feminists require too many dimensions. [2]

Stinkhorns disturb our habitual view. Simultaneously intrigued and repulsed, the encounter affectively disrupts our sense of self. There is an oft-cited anecdote about stinkhorns and Charles Darwin’s daughter Henrietta. Arising early, she would remove all trace of the rude and distracting fungi from the environs and secretly burn them on the fire. The alleged effort was in order to avoid over exciting the senses of young ladies. The offending fungi were most probably *Phallus impudicus* or shameless phallus, described by Carl Linnaeus in 1753. Similar family members are variously associated with a colourful array of suggestive names such as dog’s penis, devil’s dipstick and deadman’s cock. Add devil’s fingers, stinky squid, veiled lady, and witch’s eggs to this list and you have a most lurid chthonic inventory. The Western imaginary has a long history of naming unseemly things after the imagined denizens of a dark other world. Anything living amidst the earthy detritus, squirmy and multi-legged, is doomed to be associated with devilry and its cohorts. Included in this infernal classification is the artful stinkhorn. Misunderstood and much maligned it takes its place alongside the women who practiced mushroom medicine. Concurrently the stinkhorn was secretly consumed as an aphrodisiac.

It is a humorous world and a humus world.
 “What is to be composed may, at any point, be *decomposed*.” [3]
 Fungi abound here with their saprotrophic ways.
 A world of a “coding trickster with whom we must learn to converse.” [4]
 Some evoke the Coyote.
A coyote laughed in the dark. [5]
 She evokes the stinky squid.
 She listens to the ones speaking from the edges, “the unruly edges.” [6]
 The ones surprising in both context and encounter.
 The ones offering options and potential deviations.

Fungi are “world builders shaping environments for themselves and others.”[7]
 The Stinkhorn is sapromyophilic, it is a decomposer, and you will find it amidst
 plant matter and mulch quietly going about its business in the loamy darkness. As
 decomposers and recyclers fungi produce and release highly specialised enzymes
 and organic acids. Similar to the predigestive qualities of yeasts, these break down
 tough organic materials and lignin found in wood and bark. They make accessible
 compounds for absorption by the fungi and the plants. A returning within the
 mycobiome.

These returnings, are what she finds compelling.
 Shifting away from progression as forward motion.
 Looping back, and through, and inbetween.
 Returning to remember.
 Returning and diverging anew.
 Prying open alert to something missed.
 Hijacking the habit of making sense to elude death. [8]

Like most fungi, stinkhorns send out tendril-like hyphae to form interconnected
 networks. From this underground web a whitish “witch’s egg” forms at the end of
 a mycelial cord when it is time to find new ground. The process is generally quick
 with the lurid sporebody emerging from the egg during the ‘witching hours’ of the
 night. By morning the acrid odour has already summoned its consorts and by
 evening the stinkhorn starts to droop and fall back into the ground.

They tell her their secret words.
 Functional concepts on pulsating plateaus. [9]
 Her words: Dark. Mutual. Queer. Mutation.
 Her words as a sentence. Mutually mutating queerly in the dark.
 “Like the body, language is a desiring machine.
 The possibilities of pollution is its only life.
 Having invented an infinitely recombinant language,
 we can’t prevent it from forming improper alliances.”[8]
 The flagrant association of queer fungi with internal fleshy passages.

Fungi are “mycomagicians.” [10] Through their processes they can return basic
 carbon compounds back to the soil and remove traces of heavy metals. Not only
 are fungi sustainers, they are remediators. It begs the question – which is the more
 diabolical, fungi’s extravagant sporebodies or human’s toxic waste?

So here we are. The tentacled stinkhorn and its insect companions invite me to
 think beyond the familiar. Feeding on detritus; emerging from dark underground
 networks; exploding from egg like nodes; disrupting the landscape; disseminating
 spores through insect messengers; starting up new networks in new domains.
 Reliant on the vagaries of bodies in flight and air currents arising from larger
 atmospheric effects, *Aseroë rubra* encourages the non linear, the experimental and
 the tricky intervention. Through its lens my habitual landscape erupts. My
 nonhuman companion, with over a millennia of experience, helps me to consider
 how unexpected encounters interrupt the “charged rhythms of the ordinary.” [11]

She stitched together “relationships, juxtapositions, apparitions and
 interpolations.” [8]
 She is imperfectly stitched.
 Languorously extending to the limits required, not the limits prescribed by some
 thing else. [8] No longer just one story to tell. [7]
 So many good stories yet to tell, so many netbags yet to string. [4]

She locates the interstices.
She listens for a momentary hush.
She gathers spores and inserts them in data crevices.
Tumbles them into word streams.
Disperses them in lively detritus.
“Spores are hard to pin down; that is their grace.” [7]

There is nothing inert about an atmosphere.
There is nothing idle about idle chatter (11).
The tentacles are creeping out, and around her.

Walking to the station, I stumble over a page torn from a book (page 17 and 18 to be exact).

I nearly pass it over but K.S. [11] encourages me to return and pick it up from its urban verge.

The running head is titled RUBATO. Short hand for the musical term *tempo rubato*, it translates from 19th-century Italian as “time stolen”. The action of *rubato* is expressive. It allows for a temporary deviation from the strict underlying rhythm.

Web weaving. Entanglements. Multiplicities.
These words remain words without practices and methodologies.
These words remain words without a critical position;
without materials to bring them to life and make them vibrant;
without a stitched temporary body.

I have travelled beside *Aseroë rubra* as a nonhuman companion to consider how unconventional spaces might offer surprising interconnections; how stories may resist a utopian future and forbid “the god trick” [2]; how creating for futures now is lively; how transecting what we have seen with what we have missed might offer recombinant things we never imagined.

The stitched body steps over the road and crosses into a field.
In the subfield the stinkhorns are stirring.
Most folk are in bed.
It is warm and the stitched body can smell a heady molasses hanging in the sticky
night air.
The stitched body arrives at a swamp.
It is sludgy. Some would say toxic, others disgusting.
Others still, would wish it from the map.
It is a riot of calls and clicks and splashes.
The stitched body looks up to the sky and imagines the cold dry inhospitable rocks
in orbit.
It imagines the stark metal containers orbiting these grandiose boulders.
The stitched body looks back to the swamp. It laughs.

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TEXT prose

Peter Nash

And the process perplexed them

It was an ongoing nightmare. The writers could not agree. One considered character, plot, and outline, paramount. The other could not have cared less: to hell with constraint; the only thing convention appeared to achieve was discombobulate creativity even as it emerged. At this point the writer allegiant to protocol proffered a solution. He suggested putting their words on the line. To wit, write a story illustrating nuance. That is to say, a tale contrived accordant to their preferred methodology...



All The Things You Wish For

Cole was driving home from a friend's house having gone there to ask if she would re-consider. That evening Cole took Lucy to the *Habana de Cuba*. On their second *Mojito* the conversation took an awkward turn.

'If this is about asking me to move back in,' Lucy said. 'Forget it.'

Cole said, 'Please try and understand.'

'I tried to accept that the person I loved...' Lucy said.

'Loved?'

'It isn't normal to keep an eyeball in a jar full of whiskey.'

Cole said, 'Was it the eye? Or that I lied about throwing it out?'

'The lie,' Lucy said. 'I've been through this shit before and once it starts it doesn't stop. Keeps going until there's nothing left.'

'If I told you I dumped it once and for all. Would you re-consider?'

'No way.'

'What if I could prove it?'

‘How?’ Lucy said.

Cole put a receipt from the city sanitation facility on the table in front of Lucy.

‘I might think about it,’ Lucy said.

Cole was nearly at the dump. When blue and red lights flashed behind him. The cop looked in, wanted to know what the hell was in the jar.

‘Eyeball,’ Cole said.

The cop looked more. ‘Eyeball!’

Cole shoved his license and registration out through the window.

‘Yeah,’ Cole said. ‘People eat all kinds. Pickled tongue, liver, brains. Why not eyeballs?’

The cop handed Cole his documentation back. Along with a piece of blue-coloured paper.

‘Fix-it ticket for the tail light and your licence plate light’s cracked,’ the cop said.

At 2:15 am Cole drove down the side access road at the rear of the city dump. A guard emerged from the security hut. Cole held a folded fifty dollar bill out through the window.

‘Gate opens at seven. But Rufino gets here at six,’ the guard said.

At precisely ten minutes to six Cole approached the gate.

‘What time were you here?’ Rufino said.

‘Last night. Right before close,’ Cole said.

The bulldozer driver motioned at Rufino. Cole indicated the bin next to the chain link fence.

Rufino said, ‘I go on break in ten. You ain’t got it by then, you are shit out of luck.’

Cole pulled a box from the dumpster. Hand-made and brass embellished. He took it home and placed it between a Remington bronze and a silver-framed photo. Poured whiskey and stared at the words chased into the plate.

‘What’s up with *Exodus* 21:24?’ the engraver said.

Cole said, ‘An eye for an eye.’

The engraver wanted to know if Cole professed religion.

‘Some days I do. Some I don’t,’ Cole said.

Cole was almost home. When a dog ran in front of his truck. The house where it escaped from, once witnessed a bizarre event.

It seems that the father-in-law paid a visit. And became concerned about the lack of respect his son-in-law showed towards his daughter. One spring morning the old man asked for another piece of toast. The son-in-law yelled at the old man to fix his own damn toast.

The elderly gentleman excused himself and walked outside. He went into the woodshed and removed an axe from the chopping block. He covered it with his coat. And went inside to warm his hands beside the stove. The son-in-law became enraged at the sight of the old man next to the stove. And straight away ordered him to sit down and stop disturbing breakfast.

The father-in-law loosened three green buttons and a brown one with a chipped-off corner. Then walked behind the son-in-law and lowered the blade squarely on top of his daughter’s husband’s head. The old man put a portmanteau onto the rear seat of a jet-black Oldsmobile 88 with a busted windshield. And slowly drove away.

Two months into Cole’s prison term a colleague from the *First Mercantile* bank where Cole used to work paid him a visit.

‘He got it,’ the friend said. ‘Once he had your desk. No one else stood a chance. And the weekend after you go inside. Everyone gets an invite to some damn party he’s throwin.’

Cole looked at the visitor. ‘Was she there?’ Cole said.

‘Who?’

‘Mary fuckin’ Poppin’s. Joan of fuckin’ Arc. Who the hell do ya think I mean?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Motherfucker,’ Cole said.

One time, Cole was walking back to his cell when he was attacked. He had switched off temporarily thinking about his up-coming transfer to maximum-security. Without warning an arm wrapped his throat. The attack ended as fast as it commenced. Cole looked up and saw a face he recognised pulling a sharpened toothbrush from the back of his assailant. Two days later Cole and the guy who saved his ass were walking around the exercise yard.

Spike said, ‘Why you didn’t fix that cocksucker before the heat showed up?’

‘Trusted the son of a bitch,’ Cole said.

Cole and Spike had circled the yard twice and were back level again with the weight stack.

Spike said, 'Read a book one time about a cop being stalked by a hit man. This motherfucker works it out, see. He works it to where what he does is, start a ruckus on the yard. Then he fuckin' stabs himself to where they take him out on a medical.'

Spike drew a breath.

'Except. He's got it figured to where his home-boys on the outside can hijack the fuckin' van. The kicker is he's got a nurse held hostage to keep him alive.'

Spike and Cole moved out of the thin shadow lining the wall and into the last strip of sun.

Spike said, 'Way I see it is, someone sets it up to stab himself to where he gets out to go after a cop. Why can't we get a motherfucker in?'

Cole read the note Lucy taped to his front door. It said she would visit tomorrow. And if she knew in her heart Cole made good on his promise, she would change her mind. Cole pulled the jar out of the box and realised he had run out of whiskey. He placed the jar back into the box and removed the ignition key from off the hook next to the kitchen door.

On his way home from the liquor store Cole stopped at the *Green Frog* market. Usually he purchased his groceries from a discount store. Tonight, however, he felt inclined towards a steak dinner. Arriving home, Cole put the steak into the refrigerator. Poured enough whiskey in the jar to float the eyeball. Took a long hit and set the jar back in the box. Then settled into his cane-backed rocking chair and studied the words chased into the brass plate.

The next morning Cole took the box down from the shelf and walked outside to his truck. Realising he had left the ignition key hanging on the hook, Cole placed the box down on the rear bumper and went back inside.

Lucy arrived early, planning to cook Cole a surprise breakfast. She began walking up the driveway when the neighbour's dog ran past pushing her against the side of Cole's truck. At that point the box fell off the bumper, dislodging the jar and causing it to smash against the driveway. The dog came down the driveway towards Lucy. Then stopped and began licking the cement.

Cole walked back down with the key and saw Lucy staring at the dog.

'You're early?' Cole said.

Lucy pointed at the dog. Cole grabbed the leash and locked the dog in the basement. When Cole returned a neighbour was enquiring about the dog.

'Ain't seen it,' Cole said. 'An' if I do, it's on a one-way-ticket-ride the hell out of here.'

Lucy stared at Cole and walked towards the street. Cole walked back towards his house. He removed the steak from the refrigerator and cut it into

pieces. Then fed the steak to the dog.



The writer who cared not one whit for convention, did not sleep well at all. It was one of those nights that appear never to end. You awake and consult the clock. It reads 1:45. And you realise there is yet night enough to embrace sweet sleep. And dream of halcyon days spent beneath summer suns or sheltered in a shack with a rushing rain drubbing on a rusty roof. Alas, summer suns and rusty rains did not seduce the one who set sail sans compass and map. That worthy dreamt of eyeballs in whiskey jars. Sweet revenge. And promises broken.

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TEXT prose

Conor Ross

The Imp in Imperfection

Ulises watched the wick burn low. He refused to give up and his hand refused to write, so there he sat and watched the wick burn low. On his desk lay a copy of the *Beowulf* manuscript, blank paper, and a family picture from his last birthday. In it, he stands next to his wife and children.

‘Old with a capital O,’ Ulises must have said a thousand times that night.

And it was true, he was an Old English scholar. But the joke was running thin. As thin as his frail body, which was lowercase old. His wife joked back at him that one day they’d shelve *him* away with all those old manuscripts. But even in old age, Ulises was content in committing himself to the translation of ancient texts. At least he had been until his last birthday when a boyish face, that looked somewhat like his own, shouted that the birthday cake looked like a fiery dragon – but Ulises only saw the Library of Alexandria and the inevitability of an hourglass. He blew out the candles. His children and grandchildren cheered in slow motion, all flawed, all fragments of himself. Imperfect copies like, as he knew in his heart, his translations were.

Later he confessed his doubts to his wife and she - whose gentle soul was the closest thing to perfection he knew, though her blond hair had faded to grey and her pale eyes darkened into a deep ocean blue – was of great comfort. But as she has been, Ulises couldn’t help but think, so too had all human endeavour been torn apart by time. Yes, our words are swept away by the tide and, if they manage to return, are thrown up by the waves as deformed creatures we no longer recognise – *wyrd* becomes *fate*, *skald* becomes *scop*. Likewise, our own bodies are replaced cell by cell until strangers stare at us from our mirrors. For Ulises it had come, like the words and pages of *Beowulf* had endured, in tiny changes – a wrinkle, a ripple, a curl in the corner.

He felt his mind crack, and then like a drop of ink into water an idea took hold.

‘If you can’t bring the text to the translator...’ He muttered and began writing a list. One monk’s robe, one crucifix, one piece of vellum, a quill and a pot of ink – which Ulises set off to pillage from the archaeological wing and returned to set the scene. With his props he meditated into the medieval mindset of an Anglo-Saxon, which was simple: Fear the Dane, love God and forget all European history from now until 999 AD, the year the poem of *Beowulf* was transcribed by two English monks. To us the poem is enigmatic, but to these monks it would come

naturally to understand why the poet infused an ancient pagan ethos into their present-day Christendom.

And now Ulises, as a monk, struck his quill against the vellum without the luxuries of a modern system of linguistics, without cultural relativity, and without fear. It was working, every stroke he committed to the page seemed predestined, carving fjords and glaciers and the creatures that slept under them. As he worked, he imagined his table take on the appearance of gnarled oak, the carpet sprout into a pelt and his office, piece by piece, become an abbey workshop. But something was off. Two monks had transcribed the original manuscript yet Ulises lacked company. He took off his monk's robe, hung it on a chair, and propped up the hood with the crucifix. 'There,' Ulises greeted his fellow monk. But the monk answered him not. Ulises felt annoyed and then foolish for the monk had clearly taken a vow of silence. He was impressed by his ability to have created such a genuine monk but couldn't help wondering what the monk would say had he not taken his vow, like, 'Why are you in your underwear, brother?'

'Why?... I don't want to get ink on my garb,' replied Ulises.

'You'll catch your death from a draft and I would be disappointed to spend the start of the new year with a corpse.'

'The new year?'

'Yes – by tonight we'll be men of the new millennium,' answered the brother monk.

'Will there be fireworks?'

'No, no. The king's decree, apparently it doesn't fit with the whole dark ages thing.'

'For the best, I suppose. I am far too busy with this poem.'

'Quite absorbed with it, aren't you?'

'I can't seem to get it right, though. The pagan parts are too bloody and Christ seems out of place.'

The brother monk approached, 'I wouldn't make mention of Christ.'

'No?'

'Anachronisms are almost never in good taste. I mean, what has Ingeld to do with Christ? These pagans knew not our Saviour like the Jews of old knew Him not.'

'So, what should I do instead?'

'I think you'll find your answer by putting yourself in the mind of a pagan.'

'That sounds adventurous but look at me, I am an old man.'

'Middle-aged at most, brother.'

At that moment, Ulises noticed the presence of something on his head and to his surprise clasped a full head of hair. ‘The mind of a pagan, you were saying?’

‘Yes. If you want to do this old tale justice and have proper compassion for your ancestor’s poor soul to whom the Lord God, Head of Heavens and High King of the World was unknown – ’

‘...was unknown. Sorry, just jotting that down.’

‘Use it, brother. But first, let’s make a heathen out of you.’

They walked out of the abbey. Outside the monks were running back and forth through the snow, with parchments and codices in hand.

‘What’s all this?’ asked Ulises.

‘Oh, we’re in a bit of a rush to back everything up, there’s been talk in ecclesiastical courts about this Y1K virus. Don’t worry it’s just hysteria, the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away and that’s how it goes.’

It was a cold winter morning and Ulises began to shiver, so the brother monk shook the ice off some pelts that lay nearby and threw them over Ulises.

‘There. You look like Erik the Red now.’

Ulises laughed, ‘And *this* is going to help me write the poem?’

‘Well, they were inspired to write this tale while in various taverns I recall, from the tales of drunk scops, tales they had heard from their grandfathers, who had heard it from their grandfathers and so on, right?’

‘Yes, but – ’

‘Do you think those grandfathers, our grandfathers, had any of your luxuries, a single quill or a pot of ink? No. They had a voice, a pair of lungs, and a tankard of mead to wet the tongue.’

Ulises looked out into the snow-capped forest. The brother monk put a stick in Ulises’ hand. ‘Off you go, take a ramble. Oh, and make sure to forget you believe in the Lord.’

‘Brother!’

‘You have confidence in God, don’t you? Then have the confidence that God isn’t going anywhere soon – you’ll find your way back.’

So Ulises embarked, and long he walked through brush and brittle ice. These woods were strange, the trees somehow more alive – especially when the cold wind whispered through them. But merry in mood, Ulises carried on. The cold increased as the sun descended and the firmament rose, revealing the stars which appeared foreign. The signs, which he studied as a boy, formed strange beasts and heroes he had no recollection of. I have stayed too long in this place, he thought. But then the familiar smell of roasting meat wafted past his nose. Ulises followed the scent in a hungry trance, and then, from out of nowhere, emerged a great hall of dark wood walls that rose up to carved dragons sitting high upon the ridged roofs. He approached the door, which was many times his height, and entered.

Bearded men sat at long tables, shouting and gesturing with legs of meat or tankards of mead but paying no notice to their unexpected guest. And beyond them, a blonde maiden sat upon a throne. Ulises felt blood rush to his face as she locked her pale blue eyes onto his.

A hand landed on his shoulder, and a man with a smiling face and a pair of honest eyes greeted him. 'You look weary, friend. Have you travelled far?'

'I have.'

'You have a long beard but it doesn't fool me, your eyes have the gleam of a young man on an adventure. Come, sit, you must tell me of it. What do you pursue or run from?'

Ulises sat and stroked his beard to confirm it was there. 'I don't believe it would make much sense if I told you.'

'Ah, but I am a skald and that's exactly the kind of tale I enjoy.'

Ulises took a swig of ale. 'Death. It is death that I run from and truth that I pursue.'

'It is the same for me, but you don't see me looking so glum,' said the skald who poured another tankard for Ulises. 'Nothing is certain in this world, a dragon could smash through this roof and land right on my head, and even something like that wouldn't be certain. Perhaps you are part of someone else's dream or just a man in a story, maybe not even the hero. I've often thought this, or at least I think I have. I don't know. But here's what I do know; that I am with good friends, that two halves make a whole...' He sloshed another man's tankard into his own. 'And that we are in the presence of a beautiful woman.' The skald jumped onto the mead-bench. 'Now watch me woo her.' A cheer arose and he sang:

So! As the Norns have sung
and will sing again,
as a warrior knows
he is but a word under wyrd.

As –

And then, a dragon smashed through the roof and landed right on his head. Chaos ensued – a blur of spears and shouts, flames and fury consumed the hall which was soon ablaze and, in the madness, Ulises was knocked over by charging thanes. Now under a maze of upturned tables and benches he crawled away but by chance found the blue-eyed maiden trapped under a heavy beam. Ulises tried to free her with all his might but his arms had become thin and weak.

'You cannot save me but do not mourn, we will meet again brave stranger,' she said.

'Save your words,' Ulises replied, 'at least until we're away from this fire-breathing death machine.'

She smiled. 'But, child – we would have no need for words if death weren't always so close.'

Ulises felt a warmth behind him and knew, at last, it had found him. He turned to face the dragon's mouth. A wick burnt at the back of its tongue, which grew and grew, until everything was aflame: Ulises, the maiden, the skald, the hall, the forest, the monks, the abbey, the manuscript of *Beowulf* – the flames died and all was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.

A light turned on. Ulises awoke. His wife stood by his side, looking at her husband covered in ink and in his underwear. The translation was stained with a perfect imprint of his face – lines and wrinkles mingling with monsters and men. 'I came to see how you were going, and lucky I did – they almost shelved you away this time,' she said, wiping the ink from his face and trying her best to look perturbed, though she couldn't help letting a smile shine through. Ulises' heart fluttered. He had seen that smile a thousand times before, but each time noticed a tiny change – a wrinkle, a ripple, a curl in the corner.

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