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TEXT prose

Jane Downing

The Raven and the Writing Desk

She glanced up from her notebook. ‘Oh, hello crow,’ she welcomed as the bird hopped closer, shifting its head from side to side, always on the lookout.

‘It’s not a crow,’ came a voice from a park bench to the right.

She’d thought she had the square to herself and hadn’t noticed the man arrive. He must have been lighter on his feet than the bird.

This bird in front of them was black, a sleek black it was tempting to label jet black. It was large, not as plump as a chicken, but at least as tall. It had white eyes. Beady in a generous light. Harboured evil intent when feeling less generous, like when she was alone in the small park with her notebook and her takeaway coffee from the nearby service station and got interrupted by a stranger.

She took a sip. \$1 servo coffee has the astringency of rocket fuel. On the long, cold mornings, it *was* fuel. She’d enjoy coffee again when the cafes reopened for the sit-down crowd.

Her silence that first morning successfully discouraged the human interloper. But she watched the bird and wondered, if it wasn’t a crow, what was it? She glanced over without turning her head. The man might know what he was

talking about. He was old enough to have earned crow's feet stepping out from the corners of his eyes.

The bird started pecking crumbs from between the mock cobbles at the centre of the square. She decided she had to know what it was.

'Sorry, not a crow?' she asked while continuing to look straight ahead as if addressing her question directly to the not-crow. By keeping her body language closed-off she hoped she was making it clear that this was curiosity and not an invitation to share a seat. *Keep Your Distance* reminded the ubiquitous health warnings around the park.

'Look at the feathers under his chin,' he said.

She looked. The not-crow tramped through a mulch of leaves and stencilled wet foot-prints on the cement path beyond. It then turned helpfully so she could see its front. Despite the sleek black of its jet black, the bird's feathers were not sleek all over.

'You mean the tatty bits?' she asked.

'These long throat feathers indicate he is in fact a raven.'

'Are you sure? It's not just a dishevelled crow then?'

'There's an app. You can look them up.'

This prolonged exchange was getting a bit, what was the word... friendly. But she wasn't about to confess she'd come out without her phone so she was free to concentrate on the lines in her notebook, that, astonishing as it sounded to her inner-ear, she didn't have a phone on her person. How could she have ventured abroad unprotected: talk about an open invitation for attack.

She tried to reassure herself that generations had walked the streets without a mobile to no ill-effect. Then she laughed at her own timidity. The stranger was clearly in the most vulnerable age range at this point in time. She'd only have to threaten to sneeze on him, to cough, to reach out to shake his hand. His mask was down to allow his long sucks on a roll-your-own ciggie. Unmasked. Unprotected.

She made a note in the back of her pocket-sized book to look up ravens when she got home. The page fluttered as the bird took off from where it'd circled

back to the spot near her feet. It flapped its wide wing span, once, twice, and gone.

The ancient started to sing in a quavering voice. ‘Nevermore, nevermore, nevermore, so quoth the Raven nevermore.’

A nutter after all then.

She always heard the ravens first. The scratch and clatter of their claws on the gutters of the shops that run down three sides of the park. The rush of their wings in descent. They were rarely seen together but relative size had taught her there was not one but two ravens thereabouts. Going in twos as nature intended. The small one was glossier, the bigger one more commanding with flamboyant hackles, the technical name for those throat feathers which she’d duly looked-up to verify hearsay.

They were beginning to expect her arrival and came to hassle her in shifts. Invariably waddling away in disappointment, complaint hoarse and lingering in their calls.

This routine was not natural, though the cause of it was. Until the virus was defeated, she’d been advised to work from home. Until this wave at least had passed, the changed arrangements had cluttered every room in the share-house she called home with others similarly directed. Isolation had not been conducive to solitude. Her time alone with her notebook was precious and meagre, and the quiet park was her solution. The spiral-bound books – a procession of them over time – fit snug in the pocket of her jeans so could remain secret until she reached her park bench.

She tugged the notebook and her favourite pen out as usual as she sat down a few days later, maybe a week. Her movement startled the raven. It made to take off. Doubled back on new footfall from the other direction.

The old man looked like he’d spent his life on horseback and only recently dismounted. This was unlikely. From where she now habitually sat, she often saw him exit from the back of the Best Super Chinese Market. He found his sea legs in the alley lined with bins and orange milk crates before beaching up at his park bench.

She thought, as usual, he can surely change his routine so their mandated hour of fresh air did not coincide. But it seemed she'd have to learn to share the space with both him and the ravens.

He shooed away the big fella with a hand. She wondered what a raven represented in Chinese lore.

'Why is a raven like a writing desk?' he asked loud enough to indicate he was addressing her and not the bird.

She had not expected utter nonsense. She stared at the day's blank page. She stared at the perfect blue sky. Decided both were easier to contemplate when there was a mark on them. A word. A wisp of a cloud. The cruciform silhouette of a bird gliding on the wind. Any focus, because the never-ending is hard to grasp.

There were 23,659 words on her opus at this point. By transferring word on the page to Word on the screen in the evenings, she was regularly updated with a reliable word count. And in all those words, she realised, she had not once thought to make mention of the sky. No wonder the old man's riddle reeled her in.

'Okay, so how are a raven and a writing desk the same?' she asked, her voice on its first outing for the day as hoarse as a raven's.

'There is no answer.'

Well, that was pointless, she thought. A waste of time. She wagged her pen over the page to gesture her extreme busyness.

'You do not know *Alice in Wonderland*?' the verbose and obtuse intruder persisted.

Did she look illiterate, she wondered, uncultured, the type who could not listen to Rossini's *William Tell Overture* without thinking of the Lone Ranger, hi-ho silvering away on his horse?

She protested that she'd read the book – 'yes, yes' – for she had of course come upon the eponymous heroine's adventures down the rabbit hole. She'd hated Alice. A naughty girl. A risk taker. *Sit down, be quiet, do as you're told, wait your turn...* Bring a girl up on such maxims and of course Alice will frighten the bejesus out of her.

‘When I attended Oxford it was a great game to compose an answer to the Mad Hatter’s riddle where the author had given none. We had tea parties to recreate the context of the original question.’

She looked over at her bow-legged Lone ‘Park’ Ranger. When he attended Oxford? Clearly his daughter ran the Best Super Chinese Market in a quiet Australian suburb. But, oh yes, she thought, ’tis a truth universally acknowledged that we all have a story, and every one of them is more interesting than mine.

‘Okay.’ She lay down her weapons on her lap and took the bait. Dove right in. ‘Tell me all.’

The bigger raven walked by, jumped into a derelict flowerbed, distracting her and providing a sudden answer. ‘They both have legs,’ she interrupted before he could start. ‘A raven and a writing desk. And they both have an *e* and an *r* and an *n*.’ She gabbled as she scanned the alphabet on the backs of her eyelids for more similarities between the two words. No more. She glanced over. Her riddler looked disappointed. This was a nonsense she realised before he could correct her, and she was being far too literal.

‘Aldous Huxley...’ he said.

‘Author of *Brave New World*,’ she inserted. Why did she need to impress an Oxford-type? She knew why: the issue of class, the one they weren’t allowed to mention in a classless society. She had not gone to the right classes; she was not from the right class.

‘Yes, Huxley thought somewhat along your line. He said, “because there is a *b* in both and an *n* in neither”.’

She didn’t get it. Her fault. Being from the wrong side of the tracks and all. That day’s \$1 servo coffee was fuelling nothing. She glugged another gulp through the plastic sippy-cup lid.

‘Poe wrote on both,’ the Oxford scholar added.

Now she smiled because she got that one. ‘So quoth the Raven, nevermore,’ she sang. The resident raven cocked its head at her. Throttled something menacing out as a rejoinder. These birds lent themselves well to bad omen and songs.

Then the old man did tell all. ‘Lewis Carroll himself, under much pressure, eventually wrote a solution to the riddle, though he’d never meant there to be one. He used the word never in his answer, cleverly presenting it as *raven* spelled backwards. *Nevar*. The proofer corrected the type, rendering his nonsense more nonsensical.’

A tall woman in a blazer cleared the corner of the line of shops at that moment. She did not pause, this intruder taking the diagonal route across their park. Towards her, and him. Three of them now in a tight triangle in the small square. She drew back into the metal of her bench seat. *Keep Your Distance* was making them fearful of each other. Compounding instinct. She should not have ventured out.

They could not pretend anything was normal. The rabbit hole she really wanted to go down led to a rabbit burrow, a soft nest, and silence.

It was an instinct she had to keep fighting. Every morning, up and out of the house.

But she could not write. Not properly. Anything she attempted about normal life going on in a contemporary world which *didn’t* mention the pandemic, was necessarily rendered as historical fiction. Anything she wrote where she imagined they were through this, was necessarily speculative fiction.

She did try each morning for an hour on her park bench. Thought, I might as well be writing nonsense à la Lewis Carroll. Only she found nonsense pointless. Thought, perhaps, *pointlessness might be liberating for the pen*. She so impressed herself with her inadvertent pun she stopped and immediately wanted to share it with the old man. And not just to impress him – so they could share some laughter. As if they were at an Oxford tea party. But he was not there that day.

As she lined up 1.5 metres from a construction worker in his hard hat the next morning, noting that the tools of his trade hung *outside* his pockets, she thought she had an answer to the riddle. They shuffled one place closer to the self-serve barista machine. An answer to the riddle before topping up with the spark of rocket fuel! She was on a roll!

Her answer: *the raven and the writing desk, one was in the park, one at home – but they were the same because they both sat in front of her waiting for her to write.*

Her answer was totally self-centred, she later realised, when she was numb with grief. She had stupid and grand ideas that her writing could make a difference to the world, but it all ended up personal. Try to be universal but it all comes back to me-me-me.

For now, she got her coffee, paid her dollar and went over to the square. The air was still, un-eddied by the vibrations of life-going-on. She was not far from home as the crow flies. She wondered why the ravens never visited her there. That day, they made a rare appearance together, their hackles drifting like wheat fields in the wind, their tail feathers dusting each other as they advanced on her bubble. She recorded them in the back of her notebook as tale feathers.

Interestingly, she had discovered on another bird app, that ravens are corvids. Remove the ‘aar’ of their mournful cry and this family were the birds of the hour. Which rather bolstered their reputations as Poe-ish symbols of ill-omen. Something else she wanted to share with her riddler.

‘Hiya guys,’ she greeted the ravens. ‘Tell me from the horse’s mouth, how are you like a writing desk?’ They were clearly waiting to see who should go first. She scribbled as she waited for them to make up their minds.

There was a noise in the alley. Her head shot up. Just the young kid from the chicken shop putting rubbish in the hopper. She waited. How many days since they’d exchanged greetings, the old man and her?

Ends were so very hard to write. She decided they required the formality of a writing desk. So the ending to this would have to wait until she got home. An end which should probably mention the colour of the sky as she entered the Best Super Chinese Market for a bottle of oolong fizzy tea with cherry blossoms on the label, and to scope the place. To ask in passing, your father...?

Endings were for when you are on your own not when ravens were crying from the gutters above.

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Stephanie Green

An Unforgettable Dining Experience

For a long time, I wanted to write a story about the night I introduced my parents to the fiancé's family. How we sat in the same restaurant as a well-known police chief who was later exposed as a crime boss. For the sake of simplicity rather than historical accuracy, we will call him the Chief. That night, half the dining community were quiet and afraid. They were the friends, minions and family of the Chief. The other half were noisy and oblivious because they were not known to the Chief, and that was fortunate for them. My parents and I felt no fear because we had no idea of what was happening. We could smell that something was not right. My mother, especially, had a nose for such things. But we didn't know what it was, not exactly. Our fear came upon us, most fully, years later. Because of the unknowing and the fear, it was a difficult story to write. Part of my problem was about who should be telling it. Another question was how much to tell and how much to invent.

Some readers believe every story they have ever read. Even fiction is sheer fact in the shape of a story, to them. Others believe all stories are lies, tricks or fantasies of the writers. To them all writers have a made up, sometimes warped, way of seeing the world. Most are middle-roaders of one kind or another, who assume that stories are a mixture of fact and fiction. But, to me it's not a half and half, two times fifty percent each way, kind of thing. It's a sliding scale, and there's always a tipping point in one direction or another, depending on where the pressure point, so to speak, is located. That night was

a kind of tipping point, and although I did not know it, the story could only ever have gone in one direction. As for what happened afterwards, the truth or the inventions, well, that depends on you.

On the famous night in question, my parents and I came into the restaurant promptly at 7pm, because it didn't do to be late when meeting one's potential in-laws. It was an attractive restaurant, in a modern, low-rise hotel, on the main road of a leafy, semi-inner suburb near the river, with pleasant rooms for guests arriving from interstate or abroad. My fiancé, the Maître d' and the Proprietor all came forward to greet the three of us, standing in a row as if we were something like royalty. My fiancé was the son of the Proprietor and, although he didn't own or work in the restaurant himself, he was well known to all who worked there. He ushered us in ceremoniously as his own special guests. The Maître d' drew out our chairs and slid them back in behind us, as if he were opening and closing a set of drawers. My fiancé was wearing a dark suit jacket over a black polo-necked jumper. He kissed me formally, on the right cheek, as if we never had kissed before. I thought he looked handsome, even suave, nothing like the boy who shared my evenings and weekends, who wore an old t-shirt over his bicycle shorts and crinkled running shoes with yellowed soles.

We shook hands with the other family members who were there to meet us: my fiancé's Uncle Augustine and Auntie Regina, his father and Susan, the Proprietor's second wife and mother of his only daughter. The dining chairs were covered with comfortable seat cushions, striped in beige and maroon, shaped for good back support. They were chairs that required no effort, chairs that you could relax into, the kind that all proper restaurants should own. Even so, everyone was tense.

My parents were tense, to start with, because it was the type of restaurant our family went to on special occasions only, with proper table cloths and silver cutlery and table service, where we had to be on our best behaviour. This was a special occasion, of course, because my parents were meeting my fiancé's father for the first time, and various other family members who might one day be our relatives. So, we were all on our best behaviour and therefore tense. There were other reasons.

My father was worried that the Proprietor would insist on covering the cost of the meal and that then he would owe something. This is one of the sheer facts in this story. My father hated owing anything to anyone.

I was worried because I knew my parents would feel out of place in this formal, expensive restaurant and that I would say or do the wrong thing, as I so often did.

My fiancé was worried partly because of me, maybe, saying the wrong thing, and for other reasons of his own.

The Proprietor was worried about a lot of things, including the fact that his only son was intending to marry a girl outside the tribe. ‘My father is a traditional man,’ the fiancé said, the first time he brought me to the restaurant. I had no idea what that meant. The Proprietor didn’t hide his worry, having said to me on that previous occasion, ‘You are a nice girl, an intelligent girl, I can see that, and I know you’ll understand that I want my only son to marry a girl from my old island. I know you’ll call me a hypocrite, because neither of my own wives were from the island either. A man must choose for himself. Even so, a father wants what he wants, and I want my son to remember that nothing is more important than his family and his heritage.’

As it happened, I had been to the Proprietor’s island some time before this, or one very like it. I had sampled its harbours and wines, its fried octopus and goat casseroles. I had heard the voices of the priests singing out across the harbour one Palm Sunday morning, as I climbed above the capped towers of the old stone church to photograph the view. I wanted to swim in the shell-lined sea but the sparkling water was far too cold and I returned home at last.

If this memory was part of what first attracted me to the fiancé, it taught me nothing about his family or his life. Although we shared a city, a country and a language, we told different stories about ourselves, never speaking of tribes, or debts to history, or deadly vendettas, or customs beyond the pale in a modern democracy under the rule of law. And because the stories of our tribes seemed so different to us, and we could not tell everything to each other, we could only pretend to understand, and agree on certain things like the need for soft restaurant chairs or a parent’s love for a child. Otherwise, we accepted the differences that divided and yet kept us so very much alike. We accepted them and acted accordingly because we had no choice.

On the unforgettable night, we talked of food because we were in a restaurant and eating was on the order of business. I told my parents that the chef was French. I am not sure why, except perhaps to make conversation when we all were tongue-tied. Perhaps I meant that the food was after a French style. In fact, Auntie Regina had told me the chef’s mother was Belgian, and his father, long dead, was from the old island, like herself, Uncle Augustine and the

Proprietor. As you know, half the people in the restaurant that night were from the old island or were the children of islanders who migrated a generation ago. In those days, though, a French chef was still *de rigueur* and for my parents it felt familiar. Even if this were one of the sheer inventions in this story, as an evocation of a certain time and place, it is authentic all the same.

My mother ordered rack of lamb roasted with thyme. She was the child of a sheep farmer, it's true. 'You couldn't fault the food,' she would say, at the end of the night, in her customary disparaging way. I didn't ask about the faults she did find, and she didn't tell, not then. Later, when I wasn't there to mind, she relayed her fault-finding to my father, but with his poor hearing, it's likely he didn't take in what she said.

The fiancé ordered the fish, the most expensive main course on the menu. I don't remember what I ate that night. I do remember that Susan told a story about her ten-year-old daughter's recent proclamation that she would never eat flesh, fish or fowl again. Uncle Augustine and Auntie Regina both ordered the casserole, smiling fondly at the foolishness of a young niece who knew nothing of poverty or famine. They made a handsome couple, the well-groomed uncle and auntie, for whom wealth was the one thing that you could count on, maybe, in difficult times.

After we ordered the food, we fell silent. There was something heavy in the feeling of the room that kept us quiet. It was partly to do with the Proprietor's intermittent absence. He had a place set for himself at our table but couldn't sit down with us long, he said, because he had to run operations. There were plenty of others to run operations in the restaurant, including the Maître d'. But the Proprietor had seen the Chief come through the door with his people in tow and it was clear they required special attention.

'He wasn't expected,' Uncle Augustine explained after the initial fuss was over, glancing away from the big man at the nearby table.

'He has already had a lot to drink,' Auntie Regina whispered, as if this explained everything. She was an elegant woman always in control of herself, a carefully thin woman with puffed hair and eyes that saw things her lips did not say. A woman for whom knowledge was much like truth and baking flour, best lightly sifted, as the saying goes.

The Chief and his entourage took up a lot of space, but a large round table was brought in from a storeroom and set down, with a bit of jimmying, in the centre of the room. It was a visible table with all those large people sitting

around it. You could not have missed it. An important man with his family and friends, well known in the State, not far from our own table, facing my way. He sat, glowering redly and drinking beer, while his wife looked around the room to see who else was there.

Was it then that we realised, more was being displayed than the dining room acrobatics of setting chairs and table places? The Proprietor and Uncle Augustine whispered at the bar about what the large man might do or say in their nice, modern restaurant with its tulip stemware and softly supportive chairs. They said nothing to us and worried that things might get complicated.

The waiters came and went softly, slim shadows in white and black, moving between their table and ours, as the Maître d' signalled over our heads. I heard uncomfortable patterns of sound rising and falling at other tables. Discordant whispers and outbreaks of laughter that struck our ears. My mother widened her eyes and pursed her lips. She was always looking for stories to tell. My father stared at his plate and wondered about the French chef's selection of desserts, wishing he were at home in his own chair front of his favourite TV show.

I said nothing, which was admittedly unusual. I was known as a lively talker, but I was quiet due to a perplexity I was feeling. This was partly about the fiancé's mother, known as Mrs H, whom my parents had met on a previous occasion.

Now, since we are dealing in facts, a decade earlier Mrs H divorced the Proprietor and it was not a clean or pleasant matter. Yet, somehow, Mrs H continued to know a great deal about her former husband's business. And she knew all about this dinner with my parents at the restaurant and, understandably you might think, she was jealous. And since we are dealing with character, I can tell you she was a clever woman. So, she did a clever thing. She did something that would give her a kind of presence on that occasion as a sharp reminder to the Proprietor of herself and a put-down for me who had the temerity to snare her son's attention. It was a small vendetta, of sorts. Nothing I tell you is really a lie.

A few days before the dinner Mrs H gave me some clothes. Because the clothes were elegant and I did not have many outfits to wear to proper restaurants, she rightly guessed that I would wear the new clothes on this night. She may have hinted to her son that I should wear them, because I would look so much more stylish in cream linen slacks and a knitted gold

thread top than in my usual Op Shop clothes. The fiancé may even have hinted to me in turn that it would please him.

So it was that I greeted my potential father-in-law that night dressed exactly like my potential mother-in-law Mrs H in her glorious hey-day. A time when she and the Proprietor were enamoured of each other, and he was just starting out on his illustrious business career, long before the birth of their boy, now recently affiancé. Now, when he saw me dressed in that outfit, he felt a terrible shock. 'I can't believe it,' he said, almost ashen.

Mrs H and I did not look the same of course. She had silver blonde hair and a round face. I had gold-brown hair and a long face. Also, I was taller, there was that. I had met the Proprietor twice before, wearing my own ordinary clothes. Yet, that night I must have appeared to him as a vengeful living ghost. Maybe that was another reason he could not sit down easily at our table.

I sat quietly, discombobulated and angry for letting myself be manipulated. The fiancé was quiet too, only offering my father the salt and my mother the pepper, smiling for Auntie Regina's photographs when required. Once he patted my hand as it rested on the table.

At my other side, disliking the silence, my mother began to tell her life story in sections, from the farming days, to the nursing days, to the travelling days, to the days of the South Pacific and thence to how she met my father, culminating with my late, but too early, birth far from home. This story-telling of my mother's was not merely for distraction. It was a reminder of who I was and where I had come from. In a way, it was a reminder to be proud.

Susan and Auntie Regina nodded and smiled, without understanding. Uncle Augustine went to the bar to keep company with the watchful Maître d'. I followed their eyes to where the Chief sat, his gentlemen friends arranged on one side and his family on the other. The Proprietor skated past their table, pouring wine for the women and joking softly with the men. The wife wore mauve and yellow paisley over a polyester flush. To cool herself, she drank glass after glass of iced white wine. The big man wore a bold checked shirt with short sleeves.

He struck me as a definite man. Terse for the moment, although one could think him expansive enough on a purposeful occasion, if provoked. No hesitation or ambiguity there. He was a man of action, but sometimes the wisest action a man can is to sit still in this busy well-known restaurant and be seen. He did not like it, the sitting, but he had to do it, and he had to do it in

company. So, he sat, for the most part, without speaking. Smiling was not a requisite part of it. No smiles from the rest of the party either. Instead, they ate, these large, flushed people. They ate their way richly through carrot soup and garlic prawns and seeping steaks in red wine sauce with potatoes à la duchesse and honey-glazed carrots and tiny whole green beans and chocolate ice-cream for dessert.

Now, the Chief's wife, Bernie, was not an old islander. She came from British colonial stock like the Proprietor's second wife, Susan. They had that in common. The two had met at social occasions, cocktail parties, dinners, and a bar-b-que. They had exchanged pleasantries about their children on an expansive pool-side deck, while in the billiard room below their husbands negotiated matters of business and matters of insurance. Of all that, the women would say, they knew nothing.

Susan decided it was time to be pleasant – her usual contribution to such occasions. Now, maybe Susan wasn't as bland as her plump, pleasant exterior indicated, or maybe the Proprietor had given her the nod, I don't know. While he engaged the Chief in offers of coffee and liqueurs, she lifted herself out of her soft chair at our table and went over to Bernie's side, smiled and asked after the health of the family. Susan was well aware that some topics, some questions in particular, can be easily misconstrued as the veiled hint of a threat, especially when the wife of a man such as the Proprietor is speaking to the wife of a man such as the Chief. So, to be on the safe side, she told one of her amusing if slightly bitter little stories about a recent driving incident. 'I had to laugh,' she concluded, 'when the other driver's car stalled.'

The Chief's wife wasn't as subtle as Susan and she didn't see the need to hold back on the matter of threats, veiled or otherwise. 'How's your young daughter?' she asked, to show she knew the who, the what, and the where of it. 'That expensive school you've sent her to must be nice. And the independence she shows, getting herself home on the tram every day at only the age of twelve. Wise to bring them up strong, perhaps, although I always drove our girl to school myself every day.'

Susan kept her bland mask firmly in place and smiled brighter, complimenting Bernie's eighteen-year-old daughter on her outfit. The girl sat with her back to me, a more natural blonde than her mother, in a blue fluffy dress. 'Tulle, is it? Over organza?' Susan asked. 'So pretty, though I do prefer the natural fibres myself.' The girl giggled, not sure what tulle or organza might be.

‘You must be about the same age as my step-son,’ Susan continued, nodding in our direction. The girl in the pale blue dress turned a pale cheek to us over one slim shoulder. She glanced, lowered her eyelashes and turned back so quickly, no one could tell what she had thought of what she had seen. Too late, we nodded politely. We were nervous.

Having tested the lie of the land and found it to be steeply sloping, Susan returned to her chair. The big man’s eyes followed her all the way back to our table, then to my fiancé, then to me. Fortunately, the dessert tray had arrived.

Now, you might well wonder, why the Chief was there that night? Neither the answer nor indeed the question, occurred to me until later, but you might well have guessed. He needed to show that he was not somewhere else.

The Chief was a man of first principles and sometimes a man such as himself must do more than negotiate his insurance. He must put out the match that would light the fire so that the sunny empire of his creation does not burn down. He was known as a man of action, but that night he was seen to have taken no action at all. We were the chosen witnesses. All of us. The islanders, their children, me, my parents, and the tourists who knew nothing of anyone but themselves. Between 8pm and 11pm on a certain Saturday evening, the big man was in the Proprietor’s restaurant and not in any other place that he ought not to have been. It was a fact that could be later proven by virtue of our collective testimony.

That night I discovered that being quiet has its advantages. It gives you time to think and plan. But the big man was watching too, and what he saw was my fiancé and me, sitting together in the company of our respective families; my fiancé and me, next to my parents, Susan, and Auntie Regina who never left the table, not once, until it was all well and truly over.

The fiancé patted my hand one more time and went over to the restaurant bar, to keep company with Uncle Augustine and the watchful Maître d’. If I felt abandoned, at least in that moment I believed it would be temporary. I still believed that the story of my life and his would be intertwined.

In those days, the State only allowed some types of gambling, officially that is. Gambling that involved horses was alright. Poor horses. Gambling that involved cards or roulette, for instance, was officially deemed to be suspicious and went on only behind closed doors. In reality, the said officials didn’t really mind gambling at all. They wanted to raise the stakes by adding to the excitement. So, this type of gambling was secretly encouraged, in back

rooms and top floors and basements where you could go to play for high stakes.

Uncle Augustine and the Proprietor knew of such places. They had even owned and run them, at an earlier time of their lives when they began to make their money. They also knew that the Chief enjoyed a high-stakes chance to make money. Therefore, once the meal was over and the necessary hours publicly witnessed, Uncle Augustine made him a tempting offer. He invited the Chief to go with him and the Head Waiter to one of those back rooms or basements, somewhere in the city, a place where only the big fellows played. There was no talk of debts or payments, only of high stakes and celebrity players. The straight-faced big man almost smiled.

He would go to this secretive high-stakes establishment with the Proprietor and Uncle Augustine, he replied. His gentleman friends could see his family home safe. He would go, he said, if the Proprietor's son, my fiancé, went with them too. He thought the boy had potential and he himself might teach him a thing or two about high stakes.

The Proprietor and Uncle Augustine were not pleased at this proposition. They believed there are some things that should not be passed on to the next generation. But they said nothing because they felt they had no choice. The proposition was established. The fiancé was curious and excited. He'd never been invited to back rooms or top floors or basements before. He knew I wouldn't like it. He knew my parents disapproved of gambling. But was flattered that at last he'd been noticed by one of his father's friends.

He patted me on the hand for the third and last time that night. 'Don't you worry,' he whispered. 'The cards won't catch me out.' He was good with numbers and thought that would keep him safe. I couldn't say, in front of them all, that the cards weren't my worry.

He kissed me on the left cheek that night, lightly, as if we had never kissed before. He went away and played the game. A year after the unforgettable dining experience he married the Chief's daughter.

If they were happy together, I couldn't tell you. After that I never once saw him. Not even years later, when the Chief, his gentlemen and all the ones who said they knew nothing were called to account. I never was called to testify. Can you believe it? The truth is I had nothing to tell.

Stephanie Green publishes short fiction, poetry and travel essays in Australian and international journals. Her creative work has appeared in anthologies such as the Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry (Hetherington & Atherton, 2020) and The In/completeness of Human Experience (Prendergast, Strange & Webb, 2020). Her most recent book is a collection of prose poems, Breathing in Stormy Seasons (Recent Work Press 2019). She also publishes extensively as a research scholar, recently contributing to 'Re-mapping Travel Writing', Special Issue 56, Text Journal (October 2019) which she co-edited with Nigel Krauth and Stefan Jatschka. She also has a chapter in The Routledge Companion to Australian Literature (Gildersleeve, 2020).



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TEXT prose

Jinendra Jain

See Like a Child; Think Like an Adult: Creating Space between Perception and Thought

When seeing, just see.

—The Buddha

In a world that celebrates the individual, where awareness is contaminated by the ceaseless preoccupations of the self, writers must explore another way of seeing – that of a child. Only when we see things as they are, can we begin to think about how things should be. Any vision for the future must flow from a clear view of the present. In this paper I explore: moments of undifferentiated awareness, when in nature or with my daughters, before self-consciousness slithered in; the self and such moments in neurological science (Goldberg et al.), literature (Peter Matthiessen, Annie Dillard), and secular Buddhism; how a child sees the world; and the possibility of recovering lost innocence.

In the Gaudiesque sky-domed cathedral of Konchok Ling, Upper Mustang, Nepal, in 2019, where wind and water have passionately sculpted a stormy sea of spires over many millennia, I climbed a steep ramp to the apse's rim, blessed by countless upturned faces – brows furrowed in prayer – floating on frozen red-waves beating against sheer-walls of fluted-organ-pipes; prayers aching to be sung to the empty sky.



Emptied of my ego, of everything except this impossible beauty – liberated, for a few fleeting moments, from shrill insecurities and absurd conceits – I stumbled upon bliss.

In 2012, the second stage of the ‘Himalayan 100-mile Stage Race’ traced twenty miles, in an out-and-back loop, on the Singalila Ridge. Kanchenjunga, the third-highest mountain on Earth, soaring more than 28,000 feet into the sky, was a constant



yet ever-changing presence. The mountain woke up bathed in a golden glow and slowly unveiled her immaculate white face, aching to be caressed by the sun. Sated, she pulled blankets of clouds and shadows over herself when the sun lit an orange fire in the evening sky. There was a point on the trail that day where the imposing south face of the mountain was framed by a pale gold pasture falling off into the cerulean sky. For a few fleeting moments, everything, except the mountain, was pushed out of awareness. I was bestowed with a child-like innocence which, Annie Dillard reveals, ‘sees that this [unselfconscious moment] is it, and finds it world enough, and time.’ But all too soon, thoughts slithered in – of the mountain’s beauty, of the run to this bend, of tired legs and laboured breath, of the hard miles still to run – and the moment was gone. These anoetic moments are now wistful memories of an ephemeral sense of freedom from the tyranny of self-consciousness.

Exploring such moments in his classic spiritual travelogue, *The Snow Leopard*, Peter Matthiessen writes: ‘The secret of the mountains is that the mountains simply exist, as I do myself: the mountains exist simply, which I do not. The mountains have no “meaning”, they are meaning; the mountains are. The sun is round. I ring with life, and the mountains ring, and when I can hear it, there is a ringing that we share. I understand all this, not in my mind but in my heart, knowing how meaningless it is to try to capture what cannot be expressed, knowing that mere words will remain when I read it all again, another day.’

In a paper titled ‘When the Brain Loses Its Self: Prefrontal Inactivation during Sensorimotor Processing’ (*Neuron*, vol 50, no. 2, 2006, pp. 329-339), neuroscientists Goldberg et al explain: self-related thought and sensory perception activate physically non-overlapping parts of the human brain; perceptual awareness can bloom even if the self-related part of the brain is severely damaged; and the self goes quiet during intense sensory experiences (such as Konchok Ling and Kanchenjunga). They write: ‘the strong subjective feeling is of ‘losing the self,’ i.e., of disengagement from self-related reflective processes, and ‘the term “losing yourself” receives a clear neuronal correlate.’

Zen master Eihei Dogen claims: ‘To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of enlightenment remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly.’ Biology thus bequeaths what Buddhism, and mystics from East to West, have long-known – *seeing-sans-self* – the possibility of finding presence in the space between sensory perception and thought.

At the ancient Dong Zhu Lin Monastery, in the town of Benzilan near the Yunnan–Tibet border, I beheld chirpy young maroon-robed monks drying crushed white marble – dyed red, blue, green, yellow and black – in the blinding mid-morning sun. Older Buddhist monks drew intricate geometric patterns on a wooden board, creating spaces that would be gently filled with coloured sands over many days by rubbing



small, ridged metal funnels called *chakpurs* till the Wheel of Time Sand Mandala lay incarnated. Soon after, the beautiful but ephemeral *Kalachakra* Mandala would be ritually destroyed and scattered in water, in celebration of the ineluctable impermanence of all existence – including the self.

Though he remained silent when the wanderer Vacchagotta asked if the self exists, the Buddha did discuss *anatta*, or ‘not-self’. The self, or ‘I’, he said, is not the ever-shifting quagmire of my success, fame, praise, and pleasure that quickly gives way to failure, obscurity, criticism, and pain; nor the sum of my anxieties, regrets, vanities, and beliefs; nor the roles I played. For ‘I’ once was a young trader, relatively fast runner, and loving son; ‘I’ now am a middle-aged risk manager and struggling jogger – fatherless – but blessed with two beautiful daughters; and ‘I’ will inevitably change again.

Yet I cling to the fiction of a self, an ‘I’, frozen in time – finding suffering in a futile insistence on immutability – neurotically building myself up one moment and tearing myself down the next. I understand all this, like I understand ‘Smoking causes cancer’, but cannot kick the habit. Still, I try, thirsting for rare moments of rest, between relapses, when emptied of the ego – like in Konchok Ling and with children – I am filled with the world. This world.

In 2019, under an overcast sky, my seemingly interminable clamber up a relentlessly steep and narrow trail clinging to the vertical walls of a river gorge – made muddy and slippery by overnight rain – led to Samar, Upper Mustang: a village of bald white houses wearing thorny brushwood crowns. Just outside the village, two little girls, not more than five years old, were happily collecting the bright red ribbons and flags meant to mark the race route. Their round, cherubic faces beamed innocent smiles – as wide and unselfconscious as the land I was trespassing on – kindling memories of my daughters back home.

To My Daughters

I still see you run into my arms,
swaddle me in your laughter,
and hold me in unblinking eyes
unruffled by thought.

I still feel your little hands
untangle the cobwebs in my mind;
I again take leave of untaken turns,
and of mountains: climbed and unclimbed.

I still wonder whether
my long-lost innocence
was the reason you cried,
when you came into this world;

and I still thank you every day
for showing me how to *see*:
only your smiling faces remain,
and there is no trace of *me*.

Innocence is a way of seeing the world – with wide-eyed wonder and total absorption. It is not the sole preserve of the infant or the inanimate; not impossible to reclaim. I can choose to see as I once did – through the eyes of a child – when there was no ego; when absence begat presence; when this world was Konchok Ling; and *samsara* was *nirvana*.

Jinendra Jain is a banker studying for an MA in Creative Writing at Lasalle College of the Arts Singapore, a degree conferred by Goldsmiths, University of London. He has worked in various trading and risk management roles for almost twenty-five years in Bombay, Hong Kong and Singapore, after graduating from the Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur and the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta. His essay titled 'Where the Present Plunges into the Future: A Trader Runs out of Bardo' was published in Meniscus (2020). This piece was presented at the AAWP Conference, Gold Coast, Australia in November 2020.



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TEXT prose

Helena Kadmos

Pockets

‘How often I’ve been there, my tombs, my corporeal dungeons, the earth abounds
with places for my confinement. Body in solitary, soul in silence.’
—Hélène Cixous, “*Coming to Writing*” and *Other Essays*

There have been times when I’ve taken myself away to write, but perhaps for other reasons, too. I’ve exchanged one cave for another – tighter spaces that afford release, as though the lengthening black strings scrawled onto paper or blinked onto a screen carry an actual part of me. I seek physical space, crave solitude, so that I can expand, stretch, stand my ground, breathe. To these places of hermitage I credit my completed theses and my published words; to making these possible I owe thanks for the kindness of others, the generosity of homes and beds; an empty desk. Some writers celebrate novels that were written in noisy cafés, or in the hours before dawn. My complicated relationship with space has both enabled any success I’ve enjoyed and stifled it. But I remember retreats, though not always easy, with fondness. They wrote the stories I have to share.

For a long time, when I was younger, the notion of being on my own was fantasy – a wisp that my fingertips never grasped. Before our third child was born my husband took a yoga teaching course that included weekends away in intensive workshops. For one of those, I drove him to the venue so that I could

keep the car with me. We pulled up to a grand, stony monastery and the boys were excited to see where daddy would be staying. My husband carried his backpack; I had our youngest on my hip and the older one pulled my hand to get ahead. The room was small with a single bed, desk and chair, and a narrow old, brown wardrobe. A slim window behind a yellow transparent curtain cast a 70s hue. There was nothing to this room, but as I stood at the entrance with the kids clinging to me, I couldn't stop tears forming. My husband hugged me and I tried to be gracious about it, but all the way home I didn't register if the boys were quiet or not in the back of the car, if they asked me a question or had fallen asleep. I just thought about that yellow room and that single bed that only one person could fit into.

When I eventually got away on my own, my stories were still ruminations in my head. When our third son was almost four, I went to Melbourne for three days to visit a friend. While she worked during the day, I explored the city without destination, my purpose being aimlessness itself. I viewed art in galleries and let trams carry me to the end of lines. I went to the Dendy cinemas two days running and watched arthouse films in nearly-empty rows. Every sensation stimulated me, forming fragments and vignettes in my mind. And yet, when I joined my friend and her company for dinner in the evenings I worried about the worth of my presence, the value of my conversation. I didn't feel I had the pulse of current affairs or hot intellectual topics. My stories seeped back into my skull, sucked deep into my lungs, sunk to my toes. I was nearing the end of my 'just-a-mother' years; I was on the cusp, but of what, I didn't know.

Or, perhaps I did, but understood something about timing, because in the end it happened quickly – owning the decision to abandon a part-time occupation as a school teacher to accept a scholarship-funded place in a creative writing PhD program. Each thesis is unique, even apart from the disciplinary conventions around it. Outside of the Humanities a candidate might be primarily involved in lab or field work, analysing data and evaluating results. But ultimately, every project ever completed, had to be written. And no matter how a candidate approaches their own work there is a destiny with writing that must be faced. For me, that obligation was met in bursts. When I entered the program, I still had two children in school and although I thought we'd passed their needy years, I was rarely able to prioritise my work over my family and household. I worked when they were at school, but rarely five full days, meaning that week after week I under-delivered on a project that was designed for fulltime attention. I made up for this through trade, occasionally 'cashing-in' time-credits by going away on my own for short bursts to focus on my thesis.

For instance, a couple I knew had a 1960s duplex in a quiet suburb near a marine park south of the city. In the last two years of my candidature, when I started to feel sick in my stomach at the enormity of what I'd undertaken, I went sometimes to this small house and for a whole working week, I wrote. I developed a routine that I obeyed as faithfully as an ascetic: I'd wake early, make tea and read. From 8.30 to 4.00 I'd write, breaking only for food that I'd eat in the back yard, in sunshine, hearing the promise of the sea just beyond. At the end of the day I'd follow that promise, walking the beach for an hour, inhaling crusty seaweed, bloated fish and empty shells, and, sucking back the sting of salt, I'd face the horizon and offer salutations to the lowering sun. I'd return to cook dinner; I'd watch TV, go to bed, and repeat this pattern the next day. These spells didn't feel luxurious – like what I envied when I saw my husband's small bedroom at his yoga retreat many years earlier – they felt necessary. During those weeks, I often felt lonely. I called my husband and made him recount family movements and outcomes. But more trying than what was absent, was what had come with me: I was alone with my writing, a relationship that took far more work than any other to yield satisfaction, and it often felt terrible to be trapped with it. There was little sense of abandonment or ease, but through these episodes of intense concentration I learnt to write. My focus and discipline was a measured determination to produce what had to be. I set myself targets I determined to meet before leaving for home, which meant sometimes writing into the afternoon on the last day as sheets dried on the line; sitting cross-legged on a kitchen chair above freshly-mopped floors. Not long after I completed my thesis my friends sold the place, and so that house is fixed in my story as a setting with a singular purpose.

The problem with relying on such specific circumstances in order to write is that retreat, by definition, is escape from normal life. Post-candidature it became more difficult to arrange these escapes as I needed to establish paid work, undertaking teaching and unpaid commitments to strategize towards financial security. Too many know how this story goes – it is punishing, demoralising, and often fruitless. In those years I grieved multiple losses, not just hopes, and identities, but people, too, and my stories burrowed inside again. Into those dark pockets went my abilities to read, as well as write. I choked on the printed word. Literature gagged me. But sometimes a question finds an answer, and space in time and place opens. More than once this came together for me in the western woodlands of Boorabbin National Park. There, alongside the Golden Pipeline between Perth and Kalgoorlie is a property that is a marvellous testament to ingenuity. Made almost entirely from reclaimed materials and in a state of perpetual development, the couple who own it have crafted a compound of neatly arranged dwellings, offices, stores, bathrooms

and kitchens among a nurtured native garden. It hints at what future communities might look like if we are to seriously deal with the accumulated detritus of our wanton consumption; it is beautiful in a post-apocalyptic aesthetic.

Alongside a carefully curated scrap yard at the far end of the property is a caravan. Painted in camouflage colours it squats on bricks under weeping eucalypts. There's a cast-iron bath at the front and a fireplace by its side that adds ambience on winter nights and warms the water for the bath. Into this tiny space one late winter study-break, I took my laptop and teaching materials, a few clothes, and food to last me six days.

Inside the van, the original double bed and the small kitchen remained. But everything else had been stripped out, the table replaced with a narrow benchtop, and at the end where bunk beds would have been, two IKEA rockers faced each other, as if in conversation. Functionality extended beyond the van itself. Outside the back was a full-size sink and running hot water, a fridge, microwave and sturdy bench. A metal cupboard had been converted into a shower, with a Perspex covered hole in the door to let light in. Inside it, a section of treated pine palette kept feet above pooling water. Fifteen metres away a toilet was ensconced in the scrap yard: a perfectly solid long-drop inside a three-walled hut of corrugated metal. The open wall gave the occupant excellent views of the bush.

Entering the van was like crawling into a warm belly. At night I slept soundly. In the mornings I stayed under the covers with the electric blanket on and reached for written words, reading poetry because the achievements were small. I made myself meals for one in a tiny saucepan and sat on a steel chair at the front door and watched birds flit on the cement barrel of the pipeline. In the evening I made my own fire that I fed with my gnarled and twisted brokenness. In the firelight the wine in my glass looked like blood. But importantly, for sustained periods of time I perched at the narrow bench and reached inside the van and beckoned to my stories, and they took the risk to join me in that silent, private, slightly musty space.

In middle-age being alone isn't the fulfilment of the fantasy that I once imagined. With my sons leading their own lives, I follow my own path most days now, anyway. I work; I look after my home; I visit aging parents and others who rely on my support; I try to contribute to society. But often these tasks are completed against the soundtrack of my thoughts alone, no longer punctuated by other voices, cries, laughter, questions, or pleas. I think it was those interruptions to the storytelling that was going on inside that taxed me

most when I was raising children – not the physicality of caring, but the mental ruptures. When I saw my husband’s monastic retreat room, I cried for the thought of being left to dream. At this time in my life aloneness isn’t what I once needed it to be. I can see now that the legitimization of writing time that PhD candidature enabled was a privilege. It also left an unrealistic legacy, a practice of writing that requires exacting specifications of external and internal space that are difficult to achieve. Since conferral, the reality of my title as doctor in contemporary academia is that I have to choose: paid work or time and space to read, think, imagine and write. In the past five years I’ve juggled these competing pursuits. I grab paid work when I can because I don’t know how long it will last. I’m saving furiously.

But there are rare windfalls. On that last trip to the wilderness, I accepted my hosts’ invitation to eat with them in their railway carriage. If a satellite had tracked us, it would have homed through the dark expanse of the bush, to the ghostly shapes of the compound at rest, to the one dwelling enlivened by light; through the window to the three of us sitting at a round antique table, with crumpled cloth serviettes on our laps and our empty plates pushed away from us. It would have found us laughing, relishing human company there, nowhere, flushed with heat from the pot belly. Then I’d be seen pulling my laptop onto the table; the other two settling into poses of quiet stillness as only people who’ve known solitude can muster. I’d be reading off the screen, narrating a story I’d started at that same place twelve months earlier, but had not been able to finish. I’d be sharing it then because the wilderness had gifted the conclusion to me while I wrote in the van that week. As if offered in two palms the final paragraph, wholly formed, was brought to my lips. And on the eve of my departure, for those illuminating moments on a cold winter’s night in the desert, in the heart of generosity, I embraced the simple joys of having nailed my story, of being permitted to own what I do, and of having people to share that with.

Helena Kadmos is the Academic Coordinator at the McCusker Centre for Citizenship at UWA, where she lectures in citizenship and community engagement. She pursues research interests in the short story, memoir and women’s lives, with a focus on the impacts of precarity on women’s writing. Helena explores these themes and publishes findings in scholarly articles, fiction and creative non-fiction.



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TEXT prose

Dean Kerrison

Occupied

On the Georgian Railway, my mate Giorgi and I buy whatever coffee we can get – instant, takeaway cup, no lid. I'm back first at our seats, Giorgi's Russian friend Anastasia gazing out the window, chin on folded arms. In the arid mountains and fields that quickly become green and lush with villages, I wonder if she's musing about dramas back in Tbilisi, or an abandoned life from years past, or the ankle-splashing of the Black Sea that's only a few hours away. You never know what Russians are thinking. I sit and open to my bookmark in John Steinbeck's *A Russian Journal*.

'The people of Georgia seemed to us more relaxed than any we had seen so far, relaxed, and fierce, and full of joy. And perhaps this is why the Russians admire them so. Perhaps this is the way they would like to be.'

Giorgi spills half his coffee on his seat next to Anastasia. She jumps up in a fright. A smirk rises beneath Giorgi's beard, escaping as a laugh. He shrugs his shoulders and I laugh too.

*

Walking away from the Black Sea boulevard of Batumi, Maria the Ukrainian bartender and I pass a mosque where the call to prayer recedes. Scuffed and

mostly green carpets spill out to the street to accommodate the herd of worshipers.

‘Why don’t some people go to another mosque so this one’s not so packed?’ I ask.

‘It’s only one, even though Muslims are a quarter of Batumi people. But many churches.’

We meander through the cobblestone roads of Georgia’s biggest resort city, dead quiet on the brink of winter. The bar Chacha Time, where I met Maria working last night, isn’t open yet. Only inhabited by the ghosts of Russian tourists in the summer, lustfully downing shots of chacha amid the wall graffiti:

‘20% OF GEORGIA IS OCCUPIED BY RUSSIA’

Commotion. Yelling. Sirens.

Around the corner towards Europe Square, riot squad police with yellow jackets beaming like the streetlamps jostle with a screaming crowd. Shields push civilians away from the footpath onto the closed-off road. A young woman clutches her bloodied face of anguish. A bearded man swabs the blood with his hand, then wipes it onto his pants. A boy in a yellow beanie stares, expressionless and numb.

‘What’s going on?’ I ask.

‘Far-right and Orthodox Christian protesters ... happening since yesterday’s premiere of *And Then We Danced*,’ Maria says.

‘Oh yeah, the movie about the gay male dancers, right? I read about warnings to stay safe around the protests in Tbilisi.’

Down the road, men yell in Georgian before launching home grown missiles, eggs, phones. An officer protects himself with his shield before egg splatters down its surface, dripping onto his shoe.

Firecrackers. Cries of women. Protesters running into the barricade of police and wrestling on the ground. Priests who look like Santa Claus dressed in black try mediating with the law enforcers who they probably consider to be replicas of Judas.

Officers secure the cinema door. Attendees crouch within the guarded passageway, hiding from the shame of the alleged sin of watching a film. They're ushered into the building, bags and bodies inspected.

Firecrackers blast, again.

*

I arrive home in Tbilisi, the capital. Over my balcony, an Orthodox church reaches up into the dusk sky. The bells thunder – echoing up the mountain to the fortress – obscuring the notoriously erratic drivers' swerving and slamming of brakes and horns.

I put on my coat and log into Tinder for the first time in a month to see what's new. The chilling wind blows, my thumb swipes right a few times and someone under the name of Eve messages me:

'Hi :)'

Eve's profile has a single generic head-shot: straight hair, pair of sunglasses, lip ring.

'Hey, how's it going?'

'I'm frustrated due to the male market I have here'

'What exactly do you mean?'

'Most of the guys are not good enough'

'Right, so what's "good" in your view?'

'Physically good in this case. Don't have specified characteristics. You count as good.'

'Well I don't have a sport-star body so maybe I'm not suitable for you ;)'

'We don't need a sport-star body, no worries :)'

Why'd she say *we*? Kinda random. I guess she means me and her.

The blackening sky leaves behind the church only a fiery rainbow that's uninterested in displaying colder, pacifying colours. The golden arc behind alights the Holy Cross, the last thing to vanish into the dark as the rainbow extinguishes beyond the mountain.

'So, me and my friend (female) are looking for a threesome experience with a guy and before we show ourselves we want to make sure it's really you by seeing your Instagram account or Facebook or WhatsApp. If you're interested of course'

'I see. Well, my Instagram ID is on my profile here... I could be interested – be good to see yours too so we can decide if we're happy to take next steps.'

Eve gives her WhatsApp number and says she'll provide their selfies. I'm sceptical of the whole situation. I'd like to think I'm more clued up than the type of guy who couldn't believe his luck and jumps into a trap that extracts too much of his resources and dignity. But at the same time, I hope they're hot because I want my first threesome and to step up the hedonism of the past few months to the next level, where maybe I'll have proven something to myself. Worth the risk.

On WhatsApp she sends two five-second clips of them together. I'm not convinced – the videos could be of any random girls.

They wanna meet tomorrow to get to know each other and see if we like each other 'in live'.

'Yeah, it'd be good to casually meet first to see if the vibe is there or not, no pressure' I write.

'Yes exactly'

'Actually, one small request. As you're together now, could you take a quick video saying, Hey Jake so I can be surer it's you :).'

They do it. Seems more legit.

She says her actual name is Nina, the one with dark and frizzy hair. Her friend is Ketí. The Tinder account was fake – many Georgian girls are reluctant to show their actual selves on dating apps. I imagine there's stigma around them having casual affairs, expected to find one man and get married and live happily ever after, I guess.

Nina says 9pm tomorrow at some tea house I've never heard of. Are they planning to scam me into a few-hundred-dollars bill or plant someone to steal my phone and wallet or something?

I suggest going to Canudos instead which is nearby, a bar I'm more comfortable with.

*

The next night. On the bus, I'm more nervous than for any date I can remember. Not worried about possibly getting down and dirty with two cute-looking girls at the same time but I just don't trust the situation fully. I take enough cash with me but leave my cards at home. Precautions. Passing the St George Church on Rustaveli Ave, passengers look out and perform the sign of the cross twice.

Sitting in Canudos' beer garden. Waiting. Outside is deserted and cold. My hands are freezing but gloves are too inconvenient when you need to use your phone and wallet. People would be inside, chatting amid cigarette and bong fumes, but no sound of it. Pulling my chair in closer sends vibrations down the street. Quarter past nine. Noise that's not from me. Louder footsteps.

Nina's hair as curly as in the videos. Ketu has green stone eyes, glinting away as we kiss on the cheek. All sit.

Straight posture. Eye contact.

'How do you know each other?'

'Friends from university,' Nina says.

'I'm curious about you both and all of this.'

'Yeah, I bet you have some questions.' Nina calmly smiles.

Ketu's olive face stays stone-like as her eyes, and like me. I know I want them both but appear resolute.

'What's your motivations for having a threesome?'

'Something we both wanted to try.'

I wonder what Nina answering for both might mean – perhaps Ketí is shy, or she’s going along with Nina’s plan. A car zooms past on the road behind me.

‘Any expectations or boundaries or things off limits?’

‘No. Rather go with the flow.’

‘Cool. Whose idea was it?’

‘Both. Is this a job interview?’

Laughter. Really, it’s them whose evaluating me. I’m just trying to turn the tables, or give the impression of.

‘Thought it’s better to over-communicate so no one gets hurt. You’re wanting to do it tonight?’

Ketí shakes her head. Her silver cross necklace dangles across her jacket.

‘Sweet. Better to get to know each other first,’ I say.

Nina suggests another bar. Walking down Rustaveli Ave, she asks about my hobbies.

‘I love scuba diving but don’t do it much. It’s an ethereal world down there, this large expanse without human control or intervention’ – hands expressing out-and-upwards – ‘drifting among the sea life that you’re trusting to not eat you. Holding your fate basically. You feel alive.’ The girls smile. ‘But I guess in Georgia you’re more about skiing?’

Down a side street, Nina tells about going to the ski fields every winter since she was five, when the mountains were big and scary but now stand for escapism from rules and expectations. But Ketí’s from Batumi and spends her summers basking on the Black Sea pebbles till her skin’s as red as the day’s fading horizon, sunburn pain forgotten as her family downs shots of chacha to celebrate that they’re still alive.

The bar is crowded. Only a small table with stools is free. I point to it and walk in that direction.

‘No.’ Nina shakes her head. ‘Let’s go somewhere else.’

We walk out.

‘Let’s go to Dive bar,’ Nina says.

Fuck. People who I know will be there for sure. And they might fuck this up. But what other option is there at this point?

‘You been to Dive before?’ Nina continues.

‘Many times.’

‘Yeah, it’s popular with expats.’

Down an empty road towards Dive, I’m aware they’re judging my every movement, that they’re in charge of this dynamic. Perhaps everything’s predetermined, they already know how this is gonna’ end. I’m a puppet in their show. Comedy or tragedy? Their secret. Or maybe they *don’t* yet know when destiny’s curtains will call, that they’re also characters. I could be the wrong actor auditioning. Sent home. Never featuring in their script. Wondering what went wrong.

The streets are grey. Square Soviet buildings. Dirt-stained bricks and crumbling cement. An old lady dressed in black with a head piece is hunched over.

‘You a Christian, being from Australia?’ Ketí leans her head in front so I can see across Nina.

‘Was born one, yes. But gave it up young.’

‘Catholic or Protestant?’

‘Yeah, Catholic. You’re Orthodox, right?’

‘No, Protestant. But Nina’s Orthodox.’

‘I see. But you’re not very good Christians, I don’t think.’

They laugh.

‘My father is a priest, actually,’ Ketí says.

‘Wow, really? I bet he doesn’t know what you’re really like.’

At Dive we pass the patrons sitting outside, some around the fire. We’re too cold to stay out and Ketí has a headache. Inside I find a free corner on a bohemian cushion-style bench.

‘I’ll get drinks.’

At the bar I order a jug of beer and three cups, plus a cup of water for Ketí.

‘I didn’t even ask if you girls like beer.’ I place the stuff on the table, with the water in front of Ketí.

‘What’s this?’ she says, kind of with disgust.

‘You said you have a headache. Alcohol will dehydrate you more so water should help.’

‘It won’t do anything.’

‘Okay. Just trying to help you.’ I pour the beers.

‘Cheers to us,’ Nina, who’s in the middle, says.

We gently clink cups. Always plastic cups in Georgia. I remember all the times in past months when cups of beers have knocked over from the lightest of touches or unstable surfaces shifting. Because recycling is too much trouble. The table, timber pallets with gaps in between. I pray I don’t spill anything.

‘Yeah, to you crazy people,’ I say.

They’re asking me what I do and so on.

‘I’m kinda on the run,’ I laugh, ‘after getting charged for drink-driving and losing my licence. So I left for China pretty much immediately to teach English, then tried to make things work remotely through stuff like writing and editing. Georgia was always the end goal.’

‘So why Georgia?’ Nina asks.

Glad I’m facing away from the crowd so no one spots me and gets in the way.

‘They make it pretty easy with visas, many people speak English so the language barrier isn’t so bad, and I like Eastern Europe, if Georgia even is in Eastern Europe.’

‘But I don’t think most people know the country exists,’ Ketí says. ‘How did you know about Georgia?’

I top up my beer. Their cups are still pretty full, and Ketí’s water might as well be an ornament. Maybe they were being polite about liking beer.

‘I didn’t know anything about it until my ex lent me her copy of John Steinbeck’s *A Russian Journal*, in which he travelled there and Ukraine and Georgia after World War Two to document what the places and people were really like. Because things were of course starting to heat up between the US and Russia into the Cold War.’

‘What did he write about Georgia?’ Nina asks. Her voice is so gentle and curious and sweet. I want to place my hands on her shoulders and kiss her lips and sense her brown eyes disappearing under their lids.

‘He wrote about Georgians being passionate lovers of food and song and dance. Russians told him that until he’s seen Georgia, he’s seen nothing. And how when Russians died, they didn’t go to heaven but to Georgia. I think Batumi was where Russian veterans were sent to holiday after a lifetime of hard work.’

I never got round to returning the book to my ex, her name in her cursive handwriting inside the cover, with me on the other side of the world. A loose end I didn’t tie up. My hand on Nina’s knee a second. I soften myself.

‘So that got me interested in the first place. And I like visiting countries that people where I’m from don’t know much about, to find out some realities beyond stereotypes and customs and politics,’ I say. ‘And what takes up your days?’

‘We’re lawyers,’ Ketí says firmly. This is where they’re testing me to not be impressed. They’re not lawyers anyway, yet. Graduating from their Bachelors later this month.

I nod. ‘Mmhmm.’

People yelling and playing beer pong in the other room. Different languages flying around. The Georgian woman who organises Couchsurfing meetups says hey to me.

My hand on Nina's thigh a bit longer. Her hair spiral pasta. Eyes flickering between surrender and control.

'Let's get some fresh air if you're warm enough now.'

The lone table across from the outside crowd is ours, giving some privacy. A guy throws more wood in the fire and it spits, flame up high and my arm is around Nina's jacket, same colour.

They move the conversation to relationships. Both broken up in the past year.

'What about you?'

'Yeah, was in one for a few years too. Been a good couple of years since, exploring what's out there.'

Nina to the bathroom. I move to Ket's bench. She's more relaxed now, leaning into me. At the fire is an American chick I know with some dude. More people fill the space between, standing around. Nina's back.

'You want more beer?' Ket asks.

'Yeah, if you do,' I say. She goes inside.

'Your hand's so cold.' I hold Nina's hand. I run my other hand through the pasta hair and push it aside and our faces draw closer and we exhale small misty clouds of frosty air towards each other's lips then dissipate as she pulls away.

'What about Ket?' she asks.

'Yeah, you're right.'

The next cup goes down in a flash. As long as I just chill and don't fuck up, this should happen eventually even if not tonight, whatever the script that's been written.

I knock the damn plastic cup of beer over the table, liquid spilling onto Ketí's leg.

'Shit. Sorry. I'll get something from inside.'

'No, I have tissue. But you owe me.'

Two men shout at one another. Everyone outside looks over. They're grabbing each other's jackets and pushing. One guy swings and misses at ... fuck ... the other guy's my mate. Two American dudes, one the owner of the bar, rush over to break them up.

'That's my friend.' I get up. 'Sorry. I'll be back.' I run over and pull my mate back while pushing my hand towards the other guy. The owner gets in my way and pushes me.

'Get away. We don't know you. Don't try to mediate,' the owner says.

'Fuck you, man.' I block his palm away. The guy causing trouble walks off with the other dude.

'No, fuck you. You wanna stay here or not?'

From the back of my head I feel the girls' omnipresent eyes watching as they sip more beer. I hold my tongue and my body.

'He's okay,' my mate says about me.

Back with the girls I pretend nothing happened.

'So why haven't you done it together with a guy already?'

'Haven't found the right guy,' Nina says. 'And I'm not into Georgian men. They're like family, you know?'

Ketí likes silly guys. Nina serious ones. What am I then? Not sure. First one they both liked.

Nothing's happening tonight. No worries.

'Even if nothing *ever* happens between us at all, I love how open-minded you both are anyway. I think it's really cool, especially in a conservative country.'

They share a glimpse. The sense of interviewer lingering in their eyes drifts away. They smile and say thanks and I go to the bathroom.

My hand stays on Nina's thigh. Ketí says something in Georgian and Nina replies. I finish the beer.

Nina turns to me. 'Ketí wants us all to leave... to hook up.'

'And you?'

'Yeah.'

I show them the texts from my female Russian housemate telling me to not bring girls back, because she doesn't want to hear the 'oohs' and 'ahhs' of three people all night when she needs to wake up at eight in the morning – 'it's just respect.'

This only makes Nina and Ketí much more interested.

I order a taxi.

*

The ride is silent. We buy an extra bottle of semi-sweet red wine from the supermarket across from my place.

In my room, before I've even taken a sip, Ketí has finished her small glass.

'It's like juice,' she says and grabs the bottle.

'You know what else would taste better?' I ask.

'What?'

'Nina's tongue.'

They giggle.

'Kiss her.'

Kneeling on my bed, they lock eyes and quickly look to their hands gripping each other's waists. Lips. Red wine tongues. Ketí pulls Nina down with her. Scissor legs. Tops and pants launched at the wall. Their hands slide under each other's underwear and Ketí bites her neck and I'm an outsider on the edge of my bed intruding on their fun and now Ketí licks her pussy and I pour another glass and is my presence and this 'threesome' just an excuse for them to fuck each other?

Nina grabs me. Making out with both. All naked and hands everywhere.

'I want you but first you should return the favour to Ketí,' I say. Ketí's on her back. I move her cross necklace aside and lick her nipple and rub her clit. 'You take over.'

While Nina goes down on her, she arches her back and I enter from behind. As we speed up Nina can't focus on both. Her knees give out, lying flat, head bouncing on Ketí's belly.

They smoke on my balcony. The flickering streetlight casts a blurry beam across the church's face.

Ketí and I. I'm concentrating on my breathing like a ninja. Deep breath. The last thing I wanna do is blow already while there's two of them. Inhale through your belly, man. Control yourself. Nina's lying next to us. With a wide smile she eye-gazes me, projecting a galaxy of untethered femininity. 'There's sadness in your eyes,' she says, 'but in a good way.' I stroke her cheek. Our foreheads brush and her lips are soft and thank God she's used a mint since her smoke and our fingers are interlocked and why am I feeling such intimacy with Nina while I'm deep inside her best friend who's moaning quicker and louder in paralysis? My breathing! Fuck. I pull out while there's still time but before I can replace it with my fingers Ketí jolts out of her altered state.

'Please continue! That's the closest I've been to coming in a year!'

Fuck. 'Sure.'

*

We all take crazy photos on the bed.

'I like your voice,' Ketí says.

‘What about it?’

‘You tell me what to do.’

Nina says she’s getting cigarettes from the living room.

‘And what do you like about that?’

‘I need it because I have daddy issues.’ Ketí throws on a hoodie, pulls her cross necklace out to the front, and goes to the balcony.

At my bedroom door, Nina and I are facing.

‘Can you let me through?’ Nina asks.

‘What if I don’t move?’

‘I’ll be sad.’

‘Would you be sad if I were fucking you in the shower?’

‘No.’

‘Let’s go then.’ I grab her hand.

*

I cover their taxi on my app.

‘Let me know when you make it home.’

‘Home. Thanks for an amazing night :)’

I walk ten minutes up the hill to the Trinity Cathedral. No one’s on the streets at this hour and I’m clenching fists in my coat pockets to keep them warm. From Tbilisi’s roof I scan over the city, pinpointing all buildings from every corner, their lights and everything they touch. The cross above the dome at the courtyard’s entrance is small and faint. The TV tower illuminates in fluoro blue high above the river and fortress. My long hair blows in the gust. I think of a passage from Steinbeck and back home I flick through to find it.

'There was a huge moon over the western mountains, and it made the city seem even more mysterious and old, and the great black castle on the ridge stood out in front of the moon. And if there are ghosts anyplace in the world, they must be here, and if there is a ghost of Queen Tamara, she must have been walking the ridge in the moonlight that night.'

*

Nina and I meet the next afternoon on Rustaveli Ave – I spot her from a distance with the pasta hair and red jacket, a reminder of her lips and tongue and our fire I'm not confident of keeping ablaze. On a park bench she doesn't let me kiss her, uncomfortable in public. She gets teary from sharing about the recent death of her granddad who designed the Trinity. We walk around the city and end up at a café, where she challenges me on the accents of random people then asks me to find out. I'm terrible with many accents, guessing a couple is Polish simply because lots of Poles travel here, but somehow Nina knows they're Slavic. The eye-gazing wide smile again. Flames are in my blood but I don't know what's burning beneath her skin.

*

They both come over the next night. Then again, the following day. My Russian housemate disappeared all weekend for some reason. Walking out my door the last time, Ketu and Nina wave and say bye.

'Talk during the week,' I say.

This has gotta slow down.

*

In the next few days I don't invite them over, just asking Nina if they wanna tag along with things I'm doing with my friends.

Already in bed. Migraine. Comfortable watching Netflix.

Beer and chacha with others, my mind occupied.

Demonstrations outside the cinemas against *And Then We Danced* are still waging on, accompanied by the warnings and outrage flowing through the expat Facebook groups. I wish I could be John Steinbeck now, walking among the protestors – the traditionists – and finding a way to empathise with their

fears and understand their hatred and see the best in them. But I'm not Steinbeck. I open his *Journal*.

'In these terrific Georgians we had met more than our match. They could out-eat us, out-drink us, out-dance us, out-sing us. They had the fierce gaiety of the Italians, and the physical energy of the Burgundians. Everything they did was done with flair... And nothing can break their individuality or their spirit. That has been tried for many centuries by invaders, by czarist armies, by despots, by the little local nobility. Everything has struck at their spirit and nothing has succeeded in making a dent in it.'

*

My invite to the girls for drinks the next weekend is met with Nina saying, 'Sorry, got other shit to deal with.'

Up at the Trinity Cathedral at sunset, people enter from one side. The citrus sky circles the city and dissipates but I can't make out any distant buildings. They're in the shadowlands and I'm just a guy. The bells are sounding the last call, my neck stretches up at the giant cathedral and backlit cross, and I brush my palms up-and-down the sandstone wall. I rub my hands together, granules scatter onto the ground, and blood is smeared across my palms and fingers.

Dean Kerrison's work often focuses on the (dis)connection of the outsider in a foreign place. He's had a playscript, fiction, nonfiction and poetry published in TEXT Journal, Meniscus, The Bangalore Review, The Lit Quarterly, Allegory Ridge, and more. He's working on his first novel as part of a PhD at Griffith University.



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TEXT prose

Tamara Lazaroff

Not A Story But An Exchange

I have thought a long time about how to begin, and also how it began. My story with Farah Tahirbegović, the late Bosnian punk folk song singer.

Was it the morning I arrived in Sarajevo? The sky was grey. At the international bus station there were pigeons pecking at concrete. I got a 20 Euro fine for not having a ticket on the tram to the city, even though the driver had waved me on himself, not having been bothered to change my large note. Of course, he didn't know anything about it when the inspector came on board. And when I gave her the money, I swore – in English. But no, no, that shouldn't be in my frame.

How about how the café I went to later, after I'd checked into my Booking.com room? It was a kitsch place – Yugoslavia nostalgia hanging on the walls – and the three other patrons, all middle-aged men, were sitting at their own individual tables conversing, talking. Across the space, they didn't really need to project their voices because the room was so small, but I still had the sensation that they – we – were all islands unto ourselves. As it turned out, the three men were writers. A novelist, a journalist and a poet. There must be a joke that starts like that. It could be my beginning, too, but it's not.

One more try. The reason I had come to Sarajevo, a side trip from my Macedonian language studies course, was the film festival. Every day after

that first day, from my room I would walk down the hill, have my coffee at the writers' kitsch café, and then make my way to the cinema, go until midnight, like watching films was my job. There were some great films, too. Films that broke my heart; films that broke my idea of what a film should look like; films that made me see old things like they were new. But that is not what I want to remember. What I want to remember is that on my way to the cinema, on my way down the hill, after the café and just before the marketplace, on my left, there was an apartment building, Austro-Hungarian in style. From one of its windows, the only one that was open, I would always hear the sound of someone playing a piano. A beautiful sound, a sound that poured out onto the street. Pouring, pouring, pouring. Now. That's closer.

*

The trouble is that when I think of the story of Farah Tahirbegović and me, there really is no story. No this-happened, then that-happened; no string of correlating cause-and-effect events. But there are some facts. Or rather, an actual web of communications and connections over time. Though not in any linear or chronological order, each piece, each part, holds onto all the others with fishing wire, a spider's silk, a tangle of invisible hands.

*

Ferida was the director of the Farah Tahirbegović Foundation for over ten years, a fund for young Bosnian artists of various disciplines, which she set up herself though recently, sadly, she tells me, she's had to give it up. Over our two long Messenger conversations in the space of a year, I also learn that Farah was not predominantly a musician or singer, as I'd imagined, but a writer (and editor and publisher) which I like very much. They met at a refugee centre, writes Ferida in her text bubbles, in Slovenia during the 1990s, during the early days of the Yugoslav Wars. At the time, Ferida was trying to get back home to Sarajevo, back to her parents and the love of her life, after a badly-timed poetry residency in the US; Farah, who was much younger, only nineteen, organised a reading for her in their temporary country of exile. That night, the night of the reading, Ferida told Farah that if she did make it back, and if she survived, and if she had a child, and if that child was a girl, she would call her Farah. And that is what she did. As well as establishing a foundation in her name. This doesn't surprise me at all – that Farah made such a huge impression, and so quickly, on someone else.

*

Gena is my aunt – a distant aunt on paper, on our family tree. One of the links we share is that my paternal grandfather and her uncle spent five years together in the same prison cell in Greece during World War 2 after deserting the Communist cause and the idea of Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia before it was born – something I didn't know until Gena told me in her Logan lounge room a few months ago. (Though I knew my grandfather was a refugee, and that this is partly why I am here. In Australia, I mean.) In the same lounge room, on the same weekend, Gena translates Farah's memoir, *Letter to Parents 1993*, about her refugee years and the circumstances right before it, a book which Ferida had her husband post to me from Sarajevo the year before last – as a gift. Gena translates the whole thing, this gift, from Bosnian to Macedonian and Macedon-lish, orally – I cannot read Bosnian (or Serbo-Croatian) but Gena does, having grown up in the former Yugoslavia – but only, of course, after she has fed me homemade baklava, freshly baked bread and a hearty bean stew. Because we're both so full and sleepy, I'm sure she must be skimming and skipping a little, and so I interrupt with my questions, my main concerns. Does she say anything about music, about *sevdalinka*, about the old folk songs? No, not much, a sentence here and there. There are also some expressions, some words I don't understand. Like: *zhivee zhurka*. Gena says, using her own memories of her own university days back in Yugoslavia, it's the feeling you have when you are young and living with friends; you're close, you're having a good time, and because you have no worries you sleep wherever your head falls, like a cat. And an *index*? It's a written report, a card that your department keeps of everything you have studied, and all the exams you have taken and passed (or failed); it is the thing that Farah did not have time to get before she had to get on a bus and leave her city under siege. And that is why when she arrives in Slovenia, she is not allowed to continue with her studies in literature. There is no proof. But there is love, and unity, and friendship, says Gena. Friendship, above all else.

*

I am in the departure lounge at Melbourne domestic airport, returning home after visiting my own old university friends – or, at least, I'm trying to return. Because we'd been laughing so much, having such a good time, I'd forgotten my worries – *zhivee zhurka* – and missed my flight. It will be hours now before the next one arrives. And so, I have some time to search out Farah on my iPhone, knowing that I won't find her – not the actual Farah. She's no longer alive, and not directly because of the war but a more commonplace illness, which, I learned some time ago, took her fast. Still, I try. This is what I do, and have been doing for already seven years, when I can. Am I obsessed? Am I lonely? What I tell Ferida and Gena is that I am writing a story, but

really all I want to do is talk about her, hear about her, bring her close. This is what makes me type her name into the search engine, this time an academic one, and I'm surprised when something actually comes up. It's a cultural anthropology paper about gender and music-making in exile, specifically about young, female Bosnian refugee musicians in Slovenia during the '90s who found ways to reinvent themselves and their situation, to deal with their collective grief and bring people together, rather than separate and destroy. In part, it's about Farah. It's about Room 135C at the Šmartinska Street refugee centre, Ljubljana, where she invited new friends to fill the empty hours of no school or university, to play, to make music. It's about the *sevdalinka* she suggested to them, these displaced and largely urbane youths in jeans and Converse sneakers who had no previous interest in traditional Macedonian and Bosnian folk songs whatsoever. Eventually though, under her loose leadership, they came around and, as a makeshift group of shifting members, ended up performing their DIY, punk-like interpretations, not only at the refugee centre but at Slovenian bars, rock clubs, the city squat, and achieved what the authors describe as an unintentional underground cult status. The authors – Alenka and Miha – were, after all, there to see, as the footnotes tell me. On stage and in the audience, they also heard the visceral hoots and shouts and cries of those present; heard the way Farah sang was like it was food. As did Marina, Vesna, Damir; and they are made mention of, too. But I already 'know' them from the documentary film I must've watched a hundred times, the one by which I was originally introduced to Farah. And so together I tie them all, the people and pieces, old to new, words to image to sound. I read and reread, and as I do I have the feeling that I am standing in a tight circle of friends of friends of friends in which Farah, and what she gave – what she gives – is at its centre. And then there's the call. My plane is boarding now.

*

It wasn't actually at the Sarajevo Film Festival that I first saw the documentary by which I first learned about Farah Tahirbegović but a few months later at home, in Brisbane, where I was having a film festival of my own, using the online archives as a guide. The Sarajevo Film Festival Audience Prize, 2009. Winner: *Sevdah*. Short for *sevdalinka*. Short for the sorrows of the heart transformed into art. It got me right away, too, this film. Pierced me in just the way I like. The shuffle of images seemed so familiar, as well as the Sarajevo cityscape. The corner kiosk. Wasn't that where I eventually bought a prepaid tram card? The elderly, stooped woman confidently crossing a busy road. I saw that, too. And the pair of woman's hands, just like my grandmother's, swollen and knuckly from work, rolling the pastry dough so very, very thin that if she were to lift it up you could see right through it, like a membrane, a

memory, a portal to the past. The past. The film is not really about Farah at all on its surface – it's about a tangle of things like loss, grief, roots, heritage, honour, musical tradition and change, starting again, legacy, the return, tracing the fine lines of personal and larger histories – but Farah's presence, and absence, imbue it from beginning to end. She's the impetus, the inspiration, the subtext and the object of the impossible search, though she is never seen, not until the very end in a still photograph dedication. Neither is she heard, and only briefly heard about. In one of the opening scenes, the filmmaker, Marina, and one of her main protagonists, Damir, sit together closely and listen to a recording of a *sevdalinka* song on a laptop, a song he and Farah used to listen to together; and they speak to each other about what Farah meant to them, and the ways she had and still imprints their lives. Their faces are in closeup. Warm smiles, the spray of lines around eyes. The way the filmmaker's hand tenderly caresses her own arm. This is what moved so much. The gift of being granted witness to an intimate but platonic, almost familial love.

*

Of course, after watching the documentary, I googled the name 'Farah Tahirbegović' right away. Who was she? The first substantial thing I found – and there wasn't much – was a live audio recording of an old song called *Uchi Me Majko* (Teach Me Mother) from the Ljubljana days, which an original member of the band, Benjamin, had uploaded on YouTube. I have to admit, like the young people in Room 135C at Šmartinska Street refugee centre, I had always found these old folk songs slightly ridiculous. I'd half-heard and dismissed them at the large weddings that we, as an extended family, went to in Sydney, Newcastle, Wollongong; and on the Macedonian-language radio programs my aunties played on Sunday afternoons. I believed they had nothing to offer except the conservative values and gender-cornering I sought to tear myself from – and I did, I had, I had estranged myself almost entirely and it was a cause of grief. Still, I must've retained something of them, the old songs, because I did recognise, at least vaguely, the melody to *Uchi Me Majko* and the oddly mystifying lyrics depicting a dialogue between a mother and son, one in which he asks his mother how to love a girl; and she replies that he should build a fountain. A fountain. Not a show-offy thing spraying fancy jets and fans of water, but a fountain for living: drinking, bathing, washing, sustaining. A fountain connected to a spring, ever-flowing; when it's done it should gush, unstoppable, inexhaustible, indestructibly. But how to love? How to love deeply? That is the question, and the object in Farah's rendition is not 'the girl', not a romantic attachment but her roots, her culture from which she has been removed. And the way she sings! She provides an answer, pouring, pouring, pouring as if from the very source so that I, too, feel a coming back to

life; an integrating of parts previously severed. As her friends say of her in the *Sevdah*, Farah had a gift: she could take a song and, like a teacher, underline the most significant phrase and then sing it back so that something very, very important could be understood.

*

Build a fountain. That's what I have done. After Farah, that's what I realise I have done. How did I do it? I relearned the Macedonian language; I studied at university part-time for five years. Then I went to Macedonia and studied there. I read a lot of books. I talked to a lot of people. I went to seminars, went to the Sarajevo Film Festival, a poetry festival in Ohrid; I learned my people's history. I learned my grandparents' histories, too, rebuilt my relationships with them and let others, less life-giving, fall away again. Later, I wrote a few stories of my own, taking care to refashion the old into the new. Like Farah, who took out the traditional and rather patriarchal last line of 'Teach Me Mother' – *the bitch didn't come* (to the fountain the son built) – I found a way to not simply reiterate but reconfigure what I didn't like and to underline the best of what I'd long ago discarded. In short, I found a way to love.

*

Maybe in the end – and maybe all along – it has been the love that I have loved. Farah's love for the old songs; her friends love for her and each other; hers for them; mine for them all and their circle of giving and receiving, receiving and giving, with no one really at the centre, each one filling the others' cups.

*

In the end, maybe there is no end, just as there is no real beginning. There's only me in my lounge room, alone but not alone, Bluetooth speaker connected to my computer, listening to Farah Tahirbegović and dancing, dancing.

Tamara Lazaroff is a Macedonian-Australian writer of fiction and creative nonfiction. Her autofiction collection In My Father's Village & Other Freedom Stories (Pollitecon Publications) was shortlisted for the 2020 Woollahra Digital Literary Award; and her novella Husk, Root, Bone was published, also in 2020, by Big Fiction Magazine (USA).



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TEXT prose

Georgia Rose Phillips

The RRP of Narrative

As you bend in to retrieve a coat hanger from a draw of tangled black plastic, Colleen's white-blond curls emerge over the tip of the counter. You watch as her thick tortoise shell-rimmed glasses materialise above the charcoal line of the bench. As she leans towards you, her mop head of curls brush past the edge of the ancient monitor that Head Office refuses to upgrade. Stock makes money not new computers, Romeo, Head of Operations, wrote in an email, that arrived at 1am.

There you are, Colleen says, as she slaps her hands down on the counter. Her bracelets wobble like a rail of business shirts being wheeled across the department floor. As she focuses on you, her eyes widen into their full-bodied shade of brown. Through the bluish tinge of her lenses her blinks are owl-like and exaggerated. In an attempt to avoid the intensity of her gaze, you accidentally make eye-contact with the customer she walked straight past and ignored, to get you. In doing so, you are pulled into her conspiracy, despite belonging to a Parent Company – who hires you to dress mannequins, and dress mannequins *only*. You must not serve customers; it is a mantra your manager repeatedly stipulates in her incessant messaging.

Where have you been? Colleen asks, eyeing you suspiciously. She gets a thrill out of performing an authority beyond her position. Her spicy scent spills over the counter and you know from the pungent burst that she has been upstairs in

cosmetics, dousing herself with an odd concoction of bold-noted Eau de Parfum testers. This was the cause of Warning Number Seven: Abuse of Store Property. You remember the way Colleen tilted her head back and laughed shrilly at the grandiose phrasing of her offence.

I have been here all morning, you say, as you push a cardboard box full of navy chinos to the side. You cut open another box. They are identical, but beige. Colleen acts like everyone else is in the wrong place at the wrong time to overcompensate for her own wandering. That was the cause of Warning Number Four: Failure to Remain Within Designated Store Zone.

You smile at Colleen. Colleen looks away. Smiling is not in her repertoire – you have heard her say this to other staff members on the shop floor. One had suggested smiling more after Warning Number Twelve: Failure of Mystery Shop. Naturally, Colleen was livid.

You watch her turn around again, eyes glazing over the customer staring at her expectantly. She only mildly processes her environment. She is careful to avoid eye-contact and thus, offering a suggestion of availability. You know this will befuddle the customer as it once befuddled you. When you first observed Colleen, she was donned in all black with her name-badge superstitiously pinned upside down, cutting across the store in a haze of scattered determination.

How is the book coming along? she asks, suddenly full of chirp.

Well, thank you, you say, resenting your own politeness. You would like to detail how difficult it is to write a novel. You would like to tell her about the self-doubt that haunts the process. The days full of writing that do not make it into the final draft. The thousands of words that get cut and never read. The private state of constant flux you wade through. You would like to describe to her the way the rhythm of your world of language is never in sync with the patterns of the material world, to extrapolate on the lack of distinction between creative work and everything else.

You do not tell Colleen this. Colleen thinks that everyone under the age of forty-five is fragile. She has assured you that you are an exception because you do not complain and have a strong work ethic. As a result, you find yourself describing the process of writing a novel that in no way reflects the reality of it.

Did you know *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was a book, before it was a movie?
Colleen asks you.

The customer is still standing there. Glaring, in your direction. You wonder if Colleen's aloofness is an attempt to leave the customer to spend more money. Then you remember, Warning Number Seventeen: Refusing Responsibility Towards Store Budget. You see Colleen on the store phone again to HR, saying she doesn't give a damn about what customers purchase when there is no commission involved.

Yes, by Truman Capote, you say.

Have you read it? she asks you.

Yes, the book is quite different to the film, you say, as you deconstruct another box into itself. This always makes you think of Derrida. The collapsing. Then, you are thinking that narrative is much like a box. Self-contained. In possession of thematic perimeters that hold the promise of something unexpected below its surface.

How so? she asks.

You pause to think. You fold over another box-edge. You are wary of shattering any of her illusions. In the Province of Retail, you find yourself skirting around politics and difficult conversations. You know that you cannot be both fully present here, and in your creative work, your honest work, you think, where difficult topics are prioritised rather than ignored. You search for a half-truth. A reflection of what the book is, but not what you originally implied it was when you said it is was different to the film.

It is richer and more immersive, you say. Before adding, longer. Nodding. You are satisfied with your response.

That comes with the terrain of books, you add. The nuance, you offer to her vaguely, wondering if she knows that you are implying the film may have downplayed some of the details. You did the same thing when you wrote your New Year's Resolutions List. You made the language non-specific, so you could not fail them.

The customer in Colleen's designated zone is now waving a magenta shirt with frangipanis on it in your direction. The fabric seems absurdly bright for the winter outside the windowless, and thus, timeless void of the department

store. She is standing in the centre of the space that you watched the floor manager exasperatedly walk the perimeter of, yesterday. He was trying to visually outline the shape of Colleen's responsibility. It was a new tactic. Part of her Performance Management Plan that everyone knows she is on, except for Colleen because she does not check her emails.

Here, the floor manager said assertively. This is your space, he added as he circled his arm around, as if stirring a cauldron. This area belongs to you, before adding, it is your responsibility. Everything that enters this section is under your jurisdiction, he clarified. HR had encouraged him to use positive, responsibility-first, improvement-oriented language. You have worked here long enough to know that this is part of their retention scheme. It involves keeping even the most mutinous staff employed for at least twelve months.

We all work for David Jones, but you, Colleen, your state is, Men's Sleepwear, he said.

Colleen glared at him.

Clear? he asked.

Yes, she said, unaffectedly.

Good, he added, before departing. Taking large, yawning, managerial steps away from another futile attempt to curb her wandering, he hurried back to the emails he had left open on the store computer. Head Office refuses to order him a desk. How much money can a desk make? Romeo asked, in an email with a surplus of rhetorical questions and exclamation marks. Who do you think you are!?!?? James Patterson?!?!?

What is the book about? Colleen asks, bringing you back to your surroundings. You go through this every shift.

The female cult-leader, you say, as you are tearing open the plastic sleeves polo shirts come in. They crinkle and imprint an artificial smell on everything.

Oh, that is right, it is a romance, she decides.

No, it is not really a romance. It is about a female cult-leader, you say before bending down to pull another box towards you.

Does she fall in love? Colleen asks. Hopeful. Her chin resting on her open palm as she leans against her elbow on the counter. Beyond her, you can see the customer has given up on waiting and is now picking up her bag; preparing to make the journey towards you. You know you need to exaggerate the motions of your unpacking to avoid being at the brunt of her frustration.

She falls in love briefly, you respond.

Why only briefly? she asks.

There is more to the story, and then you stop. You realise you are afraid of the subject matter of your own book. Creative work feels unrealised until the final sentence. You have not learnt how to talk about it, yet, the direction it could take the conversation in. Its incompleteness makes it nebulous and difficult to articulate. When you do bring it up, people become unpredictable.

Kim from Hosiery said she wants to be a character in your book, Colleen continues, snatching at your lapsing attention.

Oh really, you say, trying to end the dialogue. Trying to force its closure. Sometimes you long for narrative authority in Real Life.

So, I thought I could be in the book too, she continues. I don't have to be a main character. I could have a brief cameo, she says.

You smile into Colleen's suggestion. Beyond her you can see the customer cutting past the sea of fabric and the row of mannequins frozen in uncomfortable positions. Her eyes are fixed on Colleen, determined to be served by her. You are hoping Colleen will be afflicted by a sudden compulsion to serve her, but you know this is highly unlikely.

When will it be ready? she asks you like you are pregnant and have been given a due date.

Ideally, June 2022, you say, as you lower your body towards the ground and crouch to dig through a box of hats. You would like to disappear into the box. To vanish entirely below the same edge of the counter Colleen emerged over.

June 2022! She says in horror. Why on earth, could it possibly take that long? Danielle Steel pumps them out, she says, doing a pumping motion with her fist.

A voice emerges from the overhead speaker. Operator 7 to Women's Swimwear, Operator 7 to Women's Swimwear.

Colleen's eyes widen, as if struck by inspiration.

You know what that means?

No, you say.

Someone is trying to steal something, she says, as a look of delight threads through her features.

Over the line of the desk, you watch as Colleen turns around, and accelerates effortlessly into a swan-glide float across the glossed tiles. She passes the rail of clothes you spent all morning colour-blocking into outfits. Then, she drifts past the customer, craning her neck to a hard left, avoiding any temptation of an intervention. You watch the outline of her shrink into the distance before she disappears beyond the point where the escalator meets the ceiling. And just like that, you are thinking, your protagonist has absconded—

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TEXT prose

Julia Prendergast

2 stories

Time

I look up at the wooden clockface.

I'm seated on the carpet with the other children. Our teacher moves the clock hands manually, explaining how time works—the big hand and the small hand, sometimes wide apart, at other times close.

Time is always moving in circles, she says. She looks out of the classroom window and I look, too. I can see the shifting gum leaves, like tongues.

Turning back to the clockface, she takes hold of the ticking hand, spinning it so it touches the small black lines around the edge of the circle. She passes me a real clock. *Listen*, she says. I hold my breath and listen to the clock's whispery heartbeats.

We barely notice the second hand, she says, *but it is there, nevertheless, moving time forward. Tick-tick-tick. Softly. Like a paintbrush*, she says, stealing another glance outside.

The gum leaves sweep the windowpane in soft gusts.

She shifts the big hand to a quarter past. *See how the small hand moves*, she says, *when I shift the big hand*. She looks at me directly—time is a circle song. I tap it on my knees with my paintbrush fingers, looking into her eyes.

She says: *When we get to half-past, it becomes something-TO rather than something-PAST—29 minutes-to and so on*, she adds.

I raise my hand. *Can it be half-to*, I ask, *instead of half-past?*

No, she says, and sighs.

But I wonder ...

At half-to you are on the way to the hospital to have your stomach pumped and I'm sent to school to learn time.

Later, you are crisp and new-clean in your bed and you explain—not about the pumping, about why it was necessary.

I glare at you with a quarter-to eyes.

Years later, I understand.

At half-to my baby's head is crowning and I say: *Get out. Get out*. The midwife says, *Nearly there, Honey. Don't push. BREATHE*. I'm inside out—I can't tell the midwife that breathing is automatic, like a tick-tock song. I meant for *her* to get-out. *And him*. Both of them, with their half-past words.

Many years later, I understand more fully.

I'm sorry, I say, sighing.

You're dead so you can't answer—nevertheless I hear you and feel your breath against my cheek, half-to, your words marking time.

Sea-song

I say: *Let's make our own way, today*.

Perhaps I add the word *separately*—

I want to stretch my arm out of the car window, blast the sea-song on repeat, belt the chorus at the top of my voice—I want to sing it on loop like a clawing memory, spinning my wrist and curling my fingers to the instrumental riff

as if I'm back there, night-dancing in sea-licked air, the spindly-soft grass against my calves, my skin seething and drawing in on itself, sweaty salt-tongued-madness.

Charybdis was a sea monster—later rationalised as a whirlpool. Before she displeased Zeus, she was a nymph.

Fuck this thinking. I merely suggested that we part, for a day.

Your eye, you say.

The blood vessels in my eye have burst—smatter-shot in all directions and spark-lit like fine red kelp under my eyeball's glassy pane—bristling beneath your torchlight gaze.

It's nothing, I say. A trapped bruise. In the eye the blood has nowhere to go.

I don't care for your displeasure.

I turn away—I can't see you, anyway—my pulverised eyeball thrashing with underwater kelp snakes. Coiled clusterfucking inversion... There is nothing shiny, here.

Of course, Charybdis exploded water. There is only so long we can suck it in and hold it there.

I want to sing the sea-song over and over, again, until I'm beneath the surface and what never happened feels real—until you're here with me, in the cool-heat of underwater blood snakes.

Let me give in and be asked nothing in return.

Let this snakeblood longing settle into my memory-reel like a long exhale, like the relentlessly sighing sea. As if memory is snakeskin.

Julia Prendergast's novel, The Earth Does Not Get Fat was published in 2018 (UWA Publishing: Australia). Julia's short stories feature in the most recent edition of Australian Short Stories (Pascoe Publishing). Other stories have been recognised and published: Lightship Anthology 2 (UK), Glimmer Train (US), TEXT (AU), Séan Ó Faoláin Competition (IE), Review of Australian Fiction, Australian Book Review Elizabeth Jolley Prize, Josephine Ulrick Prize (AU). Julia's research has appeared in various publications including: New Writing (UK), TEXT (AU), Testimony Witness Authority: The Politics and Poetics of Experience (UK). Julia is a Senior lecturer in Writing and Literature at Swinburne University, Melbourne. She is the current Chair of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP). Julia is an enthusiastic supporter of interdisciplinary, open and collaborative research practices.



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TEXT script

Cameron Raynes

Dog Rock

EXT. RIVERBANK. AFTERNOON

An estuarine river, lined with mangroves. Big sky. Bird SONG. DANIEL (19, pensive) scans the river. He turns away, trudges up the riverbank. Shorts, thongs, scruffy.

The stark outline of a massive powerline tower in the distance behind him. A wire fence cages a disused evaporation pond. Almost post-apocalyptic. Daniel tracks toward a small tent. From O.S. comes the GROWL of a car driven roughly. HOOTS and CALLS of unseen people. The CRASH of breaking glass.

The boy kept his back turned just in case there was someone there. Someone who could see his fingers were trembling and might think him unwell. Or worse, diseased. Dis-eased, he thought. It summed up his protagonist, the ‘driver’ of the short film he had in mind.

He’d read somewhere that a script was best written in present tense. ‘Daniel’ seemed like a good choice of name. It was a strong name and he couldn’t recall seeing it used lately in a film. At any rate, it would do for now.

Present tense. What was it with words? How was it they always found a way to reveal more than you wanted them to?

The boy bent down and grasped the nearest peg and wriggled it out of the hard earth. The line slackened and the light material it was supporting billowed, then faded. When all the pegs were out, he rolled up his tent.

INT./EXT. CAR BOOT. AFTERNOON

POV from inside car boot. Blackness. Sudden brightness as car boot opens. Daniel shoves the tent inside. The boot SLAMS shut.

Black. End POV.

Julie surveyed the mess of packing crates, old cupboards, chairs, lamps and furniture around her. The shed had the smell of a thousand, tiny deaths: husks of blowflies in the aluminium window tracks; a residue of Baygon where the Sergeant had sprayed last year's infestation of Argentine ants.

She hated this place. It smelt of him. She opened a wardrobe and pulled out the suitcase she had bought from the Salvo's store in town three days ago. Julie didn't want to take anything she hadn't bought with her own money.

At the door of the shed she paused, listening. The driveway circled around their brick and tile house; the back door just ten metres away. Across the concrete and up the steps to the house, quietly, lifting the suitcase off the ground so the wonky wheel wouldn't clatter. She opened the screen door slowly and stepped noiselessly inside the room. The kitchen benchtop on her left. It was gloomy inside, the curtains drawn against the sun still fierce at five in the afternoon. She placed the suitcase carefully on the tiled floor.

'What the fuck do you think you're doing?'

Sometimes it felt like she was watching herself from above. Or, like the life she was living was a scene from a film.

INT. JULIE'S HOUSE. AFTERNOON

Julie turns to her right to see SGT. FITZPATRICK (38, muscular), in police uniform, sitting in an armchair at the far end of the room. He has an impassive look on his face.

She scurries quickly around the benchtop and into the kitchen, the island bench now between them. She eyes a knife lying carelessly on the benchtop.

'I'll turn everyone against you. It'll be just like Mullewa all over again,' said the Sergeant. At the mention of that wasted town at the far edge of sheep and wheat country, five hours' drive north of Perth, Julie's stomach knotted. She

staggered to the sink and retched. Nothing came up. Mullewa. The memory of the ruined drive-in picture screen, a mess of rusted iron stark against a wash of blue sky, filled her mind.

‘You don’t have the guts to leave me,’ he said.

She reached for a glass, turned on the tap, her hand trembling.

‘And you don’t have a fucking car either.’

Julie turned to see her husband holding a set of keys in each hand. She brought the glass to her lips and drank. Through the window she saw Ryan Munro edging slowly down the driveway, toward the back door. He glanced up and she mouthed a ‘No’ to him through the glass.

‘And tell Munro if I catch him on my property, I’ll kill him.’

INT. DANIEL’S CAR. LATE AFTERNOON

Daniel drives past stacks of shipping containers. He drives over a bridge, glimpses of a working port through his side window. Cranes. Cargo ships.

The dashboard. The temperature gauge reads ‘High’.

Daniel drives down a suburban street. He pulls up outside a neat, brick house. The driveway is empty. At the end of the driveway is a large shed.

EXT. DANIEL’S HOUSE. LATE AFTERNOON

Daniel strides down the driveway toward the shed, his backpack on. He stops at the door, looks at the lock, inserts a key, turns it.

The boy stepped into the shed and waited for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. His stepfather had set it up as his carpentry space, calling it his ‘retreat’ and insisting his stepson remove the soundproofing and his precious Fender and Mesa Boogie amp. Now, there were benches and tools running along one side of the room; timber stacked neatly along the opposite wall, and overhead. There was a drill press, a table saw, a thicknesser. Other machines the boy didn’t know the names of.

The boy plugged his phone charger into a socket on the wall and connected his phone.

Outside, he crossed the tidy lawn to the back door of the house and slipped quietly inside.

The house was silent. Down the hallway, he stopped at the first door on his right, turned the handle slowly and stepped inside. His old room. He couldn't be here too long, he knew that. It would bring him undone. So many stupid memories. The poster of Kelly Slater riding a left-hander at Margaret River. His movie posters. *Reservoir Dogs*. *Dunkirk*. A single bed. A monitor sitting on his desk, its lead dangling uselessly over the edge as if still trying to make contact with the computer he had been forced to sell. A bookcase, notes stuck to the wall. Photos of the boy with friends at the beach. The time before things all went to shit. Another, the boy at ten, a man standing beside him, his face etched with pain.

The boy opened a drawer of his desk and riffled through it. A small torch. He picked it up and put it in his pocket. A postcard of a rock shaped like a dog's head. He forgot to breathe for a second or two. Could this be the 'inciting incident' for his protagonist? The call to action? He flipped it over. 'Remember the deal' was scrawled across the back of the card.

From somewhere toward the front of the house came the creak of a door opening. The boy flitted to his still-open door, closing it quickly as footsteps sounded down the hallway, heading for his room. He held his breath as they passed. He waited. One minute, two. Not wanting to be in his old room anymore. The way it spoke to him of a time when he'd woken joyous in the morning, alive to the possibility of what the day might bring. When he could no longer hear a sound, he quietly pushed his door open, poked his head out, and glanced up and down the hallway. Nothing.

He was out the back door in a heartbeat, the hinges of the screen door squeaking behind him.

'Who's there?' called his mother.

The boy dashed over to the shed, ran inside and closed the door behind him. He went to his phone first, swiping up to see a notification, a message from Jonno. He hesitated, clicked on the message: Fuckin loser.

The boy tossed his phone back onto the bench, along with the postcard.

INT. SHED. LATE AFTERNOON

BEGIN supply-gathering MONTAGE: Daniel finds a length of vacuum hose, loops it, ties it up with a piece of cord. He rummages through a tool chest. The workbench where the postcard and phone sit. Alongside them is the hose and drill.

A pack of cable ties. A roll of masking tape. A cordless drill. END MONTAGE.

The boy hoisted his backpack, full now, onto his back. He looped the hose over his shoulder, phone and postcard in hand. He opened the shed door and the brightness dazzled him. His shoulders slumped when he saw his mother striding across the lawn toward him.

‘Oh, my boy,’ she said.

‘Mum.’

‘I’ve missed you,’ she said. She looked him over, noticing the stains on his shirt and shorts. He could see she was close to tears.

‘Oh, I’ve missed you so much.’ She touched him on the arm. He didn’t move. From the front of the house a car growled as the driver changed gear, preparing for the corner dead ahead. The mother and boy glanced toward the street.

‘He’ll hit the roof if he finds you here.’

The boy shrugged. ‘It’s alright. I’m going now.’ He turned to leave but his mother hung on to his arm. She noticed the postcard in his hand.

‘Dog Rock?’ She was puzzled. She studied his face. ‘Are you still staying at Jonno’s?’

‘Yes, Mum.’

Her hand fell away from his arm. ‘Look after yourself,’ she said. ‘Please?’

The boy nodded and walked away from his mother, down the driveway. The mother clamped her arms across her chest as he went, pressing against the pain the way someone at the scene of a car crash might press down on a deep cut to stem the welling up blood.

As he drove away from the house, the boy looked at his old street in the rearview mirror. He wondered whether this would be the last time he saw it. At the crossroad he looked ahead. The sun was in his eyes.

He flipped the sun visor down and took the north road.

The suitcase was open on the bed. Julie folded a blouse and placed it neatly on top of the garments she had already packed. Everything had to be folded correctly, to make it fit. Everything felt like it was part of a puzzle, the design of which she couldn’t figure. She was reaching for a skirt when she heard something. Someone calling her name?

She rushed from the room, her heart pounding. Munro at the screen door, searching the room with those brown calf-like eyes that sometimes gave him the look of a boy. When Julie opened the screen door, Munro slipped inside. They embraced wordlessly. Julie broke the clutch first, flustered. She took Munro by the hand and led him toward her room.

The boy had been driving for nearly two hours, nursing the car at 80 even when the big trucks were right on his tail, flashing their lights as the sun slid down the western sky. The temperature gauge was nudging the red zone. His fuel was on a quarter. On both sides of the car, the land was flat and dry and brown. Through the windscreen he could see eucalypts rising from the plain, signalling a town of some sort. He was always looking for signs. Things that might yoke together his thoughts and impressions to reveal the pattern of the world. Things he might use in his stories. Ahead, a structure of some kind, slowly revealing its abandonment to the elements.

EXT. DANIEL'S CAR. ABANDONED GARAGE. LATE AFTERNOON

Daniel throws open the passenger door. Snatches the hose. He winds down the back window, pushes the hose in, winds it up so it catches, shuts the door.

Daniel takes the other end of the hose and moves to the rear of the car.

Daniel at the exhaust pipe. The hose is just long enough to fit. He takes out a cable tie from the packet in his hand.

O.S. the CRY of a child. Daniel lets go of the hose and looks around. No one in sight. He slumps to the ground, his back against the rear wheel, head in hands.

Julie was at her suitcase, Munro at the foot of the bed. He picked a blouse off the bed and handed it to her.

'I'll come with you,' he said.

'Oh, Munro,' said Julie. 'You'll be ruined. He'll destroy you.'

'He doesn't scare me.'

Julie stared at him. 'He's got nothing to lose now.'

From the front of the house came the *crash* of door slamming shut. Julie and Munro stared at each other in horror.

‘Honey, I’m home,’ came the prison cell voice of her husband, from the hallway.

The Sergeant stopped at her bedroom door. Through the narrow chink between frame and door he could see the window was closed, the sunlight beating on the faded curtains. He pushed the door open, entered the room, swept his eye over it. The bed, the suitcase, Julie. The built-in wardrobe behind her, one of its doors slightly ajar.

INT. JULIE’S ROOM. LATE AFTERNOON

From Munro’s POV, inside the wardrobe: His own ragged BREATHING. A chink of light. Munro’s hand on the inside of the door, trembling slightly as he holds it shut. Sgt. Fitzpatrick, through the chink in the door.

END Munro’s POV.

INT. DANIEL’S CAR. LATE AFTERNOON

Daniel sees a rest stop. He slows down, pulls over.

He parks under a tree. Just off the rest stop is a battered old Landcruiser, a hammock strung between trees. A blackened circle of stones. A billy hanging from a wire.

RUSTY (63, grizzled but friendly) looks up, then goes back to stoking his fire with a long stick.

The Sergeant moved toward his wife. She stood her ground even as fear scurried over her face. The Sergeant smiled at her. He realised, with just a pang of surprise, he was enjoying this and knew it probably wasn’t normal to feel this way. He knew he must hide this kind of thing from those around him. With the exception of his wife.

‘You think anyone will take you on?’ he said. He moved toward her, his hand raised, seeking her face. He touched her cheek, gently. Julie flinched, just a little. ‘A sad case like you?’ The Sergeant shook his head ruefully. He looked over her shoulder at the door of the wardrobe. The one slightly ajar. ‘For better or worse. No?’

‘No.’

The Sergeant slapped Julie so hard her head jerked to the side.

Julie turned back, scared but angry, looking right at him. 'That's the last fucking time—'

The Sergeant slapped her again. Harder. She turned away.

'I don't like it when you swear,' he said.

Julie felt the pieces of the puzzle coupling and uncoupling inside her.

The Sergeant looked over her shoulder at the wardrobe. All was still. He chuckled. 'Just as I thought. Piss fucking weak.'

He turned and left the room.

All the shadows were horizontal and a line of stunted sheoaks marked a dry creek bed skirting the old man's camp. The hood of the boy's car was up, and he leaned in from one side as Rusty gripped the hose and squeezed it. A ragged tear revealed itself under his gentle pressure.

'She's fucked,' said Rusty.

'Shit,' said the boy.

EXT. CAR AND ROAD STOP. DUSK

Rusty looks closely at Daniel, then his eyes flicker to the shadow-filled interior of the car: clothes in a jumble, a pillow, a half-folded tent, a coil of vacuum hose on the passenger seat. His eyes linger on that.

RUSTY

What about that hose there?

Daniel looks at the hose. His face reddens. He shakes his head.

RUSTY (CONT'D)

You saving it for something?

Daniel looks away. A beat as Rusty sizes him up.

RUSTY (CONT'D)

I might have a fix.

Rusty heads toward his camp.

Daniel stares at the hose on the passenger seat.

INT. JULIE'S BEDROOM. DUSK

Munro sits alone on the end of Julie's bed, his face in his hands.

From O.S. the splashing SOUND of someone cleaning themselves.

The old man had found a half roll of packing tape on the floor of his Landcruiser. He finished winding the tape around the split section of pipe and leaned back, hands on hips, stretching. There was a sheen of sweat on his brow, but he still felt there might be a couple of good years left in him.

'It might get you another couple of thousand kays,' he said.

'That's all I'll need,' said the boy.

The old man looked up quickly, caught the boy's eye. The boy blinked and turned away, his back to Rusty, wiping his eyes as he did so, hoping he wouldn't burst into tears in front of the old man. Damn his kindness.

The old man just grimaced. He leaned in again, because he wanted to get it right, he'd always wanted to get things right, and that was the undoing of him, and he knew it but did it again, just for the hell of it, gave the tape another turn around the hose, then tore it off the roll and completed the wrap, tightly.

'What's your name, young fella?'

'Craig,' said the boy, hating himself for lying.

'Well, Craig. I could use some company tonight.'

The boy looked up and down the road. He hadn't seen a car go by for twenty minutes or more.

'I'll put some extra beans on,' said the old man.

The old man's fire was dancing, and the boy wondered how it would be, travelling on foot like one of the early explorers, to see a sight like this from afar. The filmic aspects of the scene were not lost on him.

The old man and the boy sat near the fire, and beside each stood an empty can of beans. In their hands they wielded sticks, marshmallows on their ends, waving above the flames.

'That's when I had my breakthrough,' said Rusty.

His marshmallow suddenly caught on fire. He pulled it out of the flames, waved it through the air. Flame trailed behind it.

‘Time isn’t circular,’ he said. ‘It’s not a snake, chasing its own tail. That’s bullshit.’

The boy pulled his flaming marshmallow out of the fire and blew on it. The flames went out.

‘It’s a fuse. The past is ash. Nothing but ash. It’s gone.’ The old man popped the marshmallow in his mouth and closed his eyes. ‘It can’t hurt you anymore.’

The boy waved his hand around the old man’s camp. ‘What’s all this then?’ he asked.

‘This?’ said the old man, grinning. ‘The present?’

The boy nodded.

‘This is the part that’s burning. That’s why you gotta keep moving, keep dancing. Otherwise it’ll burn you up.’

The boy ate his marshmallow, thoughtful.

INT./EXT. DANIEL’S CAR / RUSTY’S CAMP. DAWN

Daniel drives slowly away from Rusty’s camp, his hand raised in farewell.

Rusty raises his hand in reply. He has a wistful look on his face.

INT. JULIE’S SHED. DAWN

Julie lies on an air mattress on the floor of the shed, a lamp beside her, her suitcase in the shadows. Her eyes are open. From O.S., BIRD SONG.

INT. DANIEL’S CAR. EARLY MORNING

The sun is above the horizon. Fields of wheat whip by.

Daniel checks the dash. Temperature, medium; fuel, nearly empty.

Daniel approaches the outskirts of a small town. He sees a roadhouse and puts his indicator on.

The street was quiet. Julie struggled with her suitcase, lifting it so its wheels ran lightly on the road, but still the dodgy one squeaked. Halfway down the street she gave up and let the wheel herald her procession. Across the road, curtains twitched in the window of a red-bricker and Julie wished she had never been born.

EXT. MAIN STREET, COUNTRY TOWN. EARLY MORNING

Julie walks on the footpath, pulling her suitcase, the wheel SQUEAKING.

She passes underneath the balcony of a two-storey country pub. BOB (30s, scruffy) and TERRY (40s, overalls) lean against the wall, chatting. Julie looks at Bob.

JULIE

Bob.

Bob frowns. Julie looks down, keeps walking. Her face twitches, she is sweating. From behind her, subdued LAUGHTER.

Ahead, a roadhouse.

Julie pushed open the door of the roadhouse and walked inside, dragging her suitcase behind her. She rubbed her hand across her brow and it came away wet with sweat. She saw who was at the cash register, watching her, and silently cursed.

‘Mrs Fitzpatrick,’ said the hatchet-faced man behind the counter. He was one of the men who played a regular game of cards at the station with the Sergeant. He studied the suitcase beside her and peered over her shoulder. ‘Where’s the Sergeant?’

Julie ignored him, pulling her purse out of her handbag. ‘You sell tickets for the bus?’

‘Off for greener pastures?’ asked the man.

The boy watched her from a table near the window. He picked disconsolately at the dried-up cheese and salad roll he’d made the mistake of buying.

‘The bus to the city,’ she said.

‘Does the Sergeant know?’ asked the man, leaning in.

A look of dismay flitted across Julie’s face.

‘Whatever,’ said the man. He fingered a book on the counter. ‘Hundred and eighteen bucks. It’ll be here in an hour.’ He snapped the book shut.

Julie opened her purse and tugged at her credit card. The top half of the card came out, the word 'You' taped to it. Julie stared at it. She dug into her purse again, pulled out the other half. This had 'Fuck' taped to it.

Julie's lip trembled. She turned away so the man couldn't see her face and stared out the window.

INT. ROADHOUSE. A FEW MINUTES LATER

Julie sits at a table. She has her phone in her hand. Her hand is trembling.

On screen: 37 unread messages from 'Fitzy'.

She taps the most recent.

On screen: 'Happy holidays!'

She pushes the phone from her like it is infected. It RINGS. She turns it hurriedly off.

Daniel approaches her table. He stands in front of her.

DANIEL

I'm going west if that helps.

Julie looks at him, still reeling.

'I could give you a lift,' said the boy. He pointed to his car in the parking lot.

Julie looked out the window. She shook her head; she couldn't look him in the eye; it was all too humiliating. 'It's fine,' she said.

The boy started to say something but stopped, turned away.

EXT. ROADHOUSE. A MINUTE LATER

Daniel sits in his car. He turns on the engine. He looks at Julie through the window, sitting by herself. He shrugs his shoulders, puts the car into reverse, begins to pull out, looks over his shoulder.

A police car cruises slowly by just behind him. Daniel brakes and the car stalls.

DANIEL

Aww, shit.

The boy watched in the rear-view mirror as the police car moved off. He looked straight ahead, at the roadhouse. The woman had disappeared. Then he spotted her at the edge of a cubicle, tracking the police car as it went.

The boy looked at the key. He was tempted to just go. He had made up his mind he would get to Dog Rock before he did anything that could not be undone. He had made a pact with himself two years ago, and he meant to keep

it. Visit the place where he'd spent the first two years of his life. Meet his cousins. Reconnect with his dead father's family. His eye swung back to the woman. She was looking at him. She reached for her suitcase and he watched as she walked from the roadhouse and to his car.

She opened the passenger-side door, leaned in. 'Is that offer still on?'

The boy looked at her, glanced behind him at the tent and hose and crap in the back of his car. He considered the suitcase on the pavement.

'Is that all you've got?' he asked.

'That's it,' said the woman. 'The rest is ash.'

The boy squinted at her. Did she just say that?

A beat. Close up on the boy's face.

'Why not?' he said.

The woman threw her suitcase into the mess of things on the back seat. She jumped in the front and put her seat belt on.

'What's your name?' asked the boy.

'Julie.'

'Are you in trouble?' he asked.

'Constantly,' she said, and managed a smile that spoke of warmth and light.

The boy turned the key. The motor gave a ragged protest then chugged into life. He reversed out, put the car into first, lined it up with the open road.

EXT. ROADHOUSE. MORNING

The car swings out onto the dusty highway,
heading west.

'And what's your name?' asked Julie.

'Daniel,' said the boy. 'My name is Daniel.' It was a relief to no longer feel the need to lie, and he felt stronger than he ever remembered. He felt a sudden surge of joy he thought he probably didn't deserve, but he let it fill him anyway.

Cameron Raynes teaches creative writing, history, and contemporary Aboriginal issues at the University of South Australia. His expose of the workings of the Aborigines Department in South Australia was published as The Last Protector by Wakefield Press (2009). His short stories have been published in Wet Ink, The

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