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TEXT poetry

Damen O'Brien

2 poems

To a Poet

and tomorrow there might not be words
lapping from that brackish seep we dip:
untamed things, cautious to your hand
and tomorrow when you call they may not come.

your neighbour might open his front door
or place a feeder in his yard and whistle
the words to him, that used to fly to you.
You never owned them and they never needed you.

and tomorrow other things may slip your reach:
names and dreams, your net may gather air.
Your friends may call you a fraud and worse
your enemies welcome you, for all your words are gone.

today I've sat beside the fountain's flower
and watched the lizards duck their heads and drink
and fed them muffin crumbs with ginger fingers.
Tomorrow I will not be here to feed them scraps.

today I have these scraps, which might be words.
Let the future feed itself, it's full today
and you and I should go down to that pool.
Call fear down, while it is yours to call.

Masterpieces

What devil could squat
in the chimney of hell
while the Tate has two,
the Guggenheim one,
and the Louvre hosts an entire retrospective?
He beat his sitters so badly that
appraisals always begin with the darkness
stained in his brushstrokes,

the passions sweeping in his brushstrokes.
For an entry fee,
the weeping women with their satin skin
will burn for you in the galleries of Paris.
Murderers, scoundrels and rapists
dipping their horsehair
in the compromises of art,
and there is no difference in paint
between saints and sinners.
Man is capable of such beauty
and the hearth of hell is cold and empty.

Damen O'Brien is a Queensland poet. He was joint winner of the Peter Porter Poetry Prize and has won the Yeats Poetry Prize, the KSP Poetry Award and the Ipswich Poetry Festival, and was shortlisted in the Gwen Harwood Poetry Prize, ACU Poetry Prize, Val Vallis Award, Newcastle Poetry Prize, and Martha Richardson Memorial Poetry Prize. Damen has previously been published in Cordite, Island, Verity La, Southerly and StylusLit.

TEXT

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Grey Area: After WG Sebald

Barrie Sherwood

I've been on numerous literary pilgrimages and hallowed ground has always turned out to be hollow ground.

The last meaningful line of *Voss* is "The air will tell us." I went to Patrick White's house in Sydney hoping for the air to tell me something. All I heard was the screech of lorikeets.

I stood one night outside Nabokov's rooms in Cambridge waiting for moths to arrive in the cone of lamplight. A hen party shrieked and swayed past. Then came a diminutive man simultaneously smoking a cigarette, eating chips with curry sauce from a paper bag, and – mobile phone wedged between shoulder and cheek – saying, "I *know* where you are. I *know* where you are."

I went to Katherine Mansfield's house in Wellington and made my way through the creaking, dainty rooms with a group of heavy-booted, leather-clad Harley Davidson riders on a nationwide tour.

In my teens I went to Hemingway's apartment on the Rive Gauche. All you could see in the windows was the reflected sky. The only bigger disappointment in Paris was not meeting any easy-going American girls at Jim's grave.

On the same trip I imposed upon a homestay host to drive me more than an hour across Provence to the cemetery where Albert Camus' body lies. We stood in the heat looking at the tended lavender and the polished stone. After an awkward few minutes he blew a raspberry (*un bruitage derisoire*) and said, "*Bon, ça y est.*" I shrugged. "Yup. There it is."

I went to the site of Malcolm Lowry's cottage near Deep Cove and did what? Didn't even get drunk in his honour. Just ate a honey cruller at a nearby café and watched the rain fall, making brush-strokes across Burrard Inlet.

I slept in Sir Thomas Browne's room at Pembroke College, under dreaming spires, and had no dreams.

I visited Stratford-on-Avon and found it weary, stale, flat and – at five quid a pint in the Pen and Parchment pub – unprofitable.

My greatest disappointment? I went to Rouen, the city Flaubert so despised! And I actually kind of liked it.

But in the case of WG Sebald – the German-born peregrinator who lived, wrote, and taught in Norwich until his sudden death in 2001 – perhaps there was cause for hope. This could be different. He

was the one who said, after all, that “the borders between the living and the dead are not hermetically sealed”, that “the dead are always coming back to us”, that “there is some form of travel or grey zone.”

My trip was occasioned by a visit to Malcolm – my HoD – for my annual exercise in head-hanging and excuse-making: the Academic Appraisal Exercise. “The creative stuff is all right,” he told me, “but you need more substance in your publications. You wrote on *The Rings of Saturn* for your PhD, didn’t you? Why don’t you publish something in a journal? It will look good. Sebald is still sexy.”

I told him I didn’t know what I could say about Sebald that would “look good”, let alone qualify as “sexy”.

“Why don’t you go back to Norwich?” he said. “Take a walk. Look at the clouds. Breathe the air. When I need a kick-start I head straight to Buenos Aires.”

The more I tried to dismiss the idea over the next few days, the more it seemed like the unavoidable thing to do. I had a little research money and I was on my way to France with BA soon anyway. I called the travel agent and – the most I could manage without purchasing a new ticket – arranged for a twelve-hour layover at Heathrow.

On the flight to London I made an itinerary of three destinations that I could easily visit in short time: Sebald’s house, the site of the old Norwich and Norfolk Hospital where *The Rings of Saturn* begins, and the University of East Anglia. In good Sebaldian fashion, I brought a camera along.

I arrived at Heathrow in the early afternoon, rented a car, and drove a few hours to the old rectory in the Norfolk countryside where Sebald used to live. I got out, stretched, and congratulated myself on having made it. Yes! Here I was! This feeling of accomplishment quickly evaporated. I stood in the empty, tree-lined lane feeling conspicuous and without any further sense of agency. Now what? A plaque on the gate – *Author WG Sebald lived in this house* – might at least have validated my presence, loitering in the street with a camera. I was actually considering leaving when a ring of smoke appeared directly above the house as if



there were a giant with a pipe reclined in the fields beyond. It rose languidly and drifted east, dilating as it set out towards the North Sea.

I tried to think of an appropriate line from Sebald to contextualize this phenomenon, which, for all I knew, was an everyday occurrence, the product of some local mill or brewery. Nothing came to mind, but there was no doubting that this ring in the sky was a sign. Part of a code. I know: that way madness lies. There are only so many times you can tell yourself, a la Salvador Dali, that the only difference between yourself and a madman is, you're not mad. Could writing a journal article really save



me from apophenia?

Not according to Sebald:
“writing and creating something is about elaboration...” he said. “And elaboration is, of course, the device of paranoia.”

Still, I thought of
Mansfield’s reminder to self: “Risk! Risk anything!” I marched down the drive. Not getting any response at the front door, I walked around behind the house where I found a

low-slung clothesline and a chair serving as a drying rack alone at the end of the lawn, in front of a hedge. This photograph still seems to me to be yearning for some ekphrastic engagement on my part, though I have yet to even partly dissect its mystery.

I took the shot and heard an indignant voice.

“Excuse me? This is private property.”

I turned around to find a woman in the kitchen doorway, gripping the doorframe as if she would bolt inside were I to make the slightest move.

“Just who are you? And what are you doing taking pictures of my laundry?”

“This is... Is this the house where WG Sebald lived?”

“*Fifteen* years ago.”

It seemed like such a long time the way she said it. “Right. I’m very sorry. I was only curious. Bigtime Sebald fan.”

“Those aren’t his bedsheets,” she said.

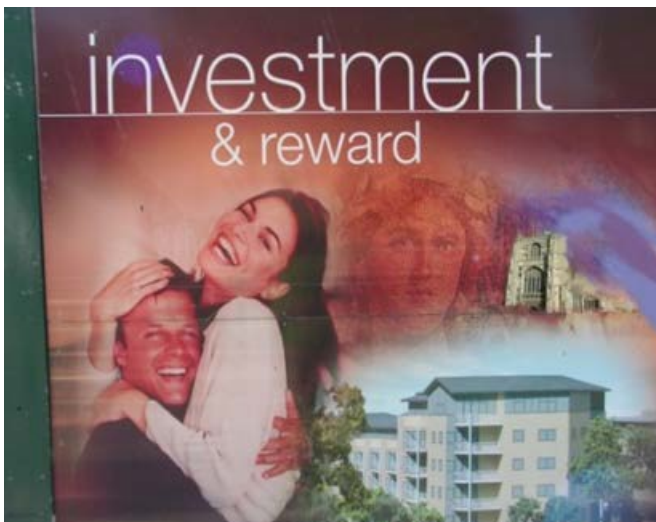
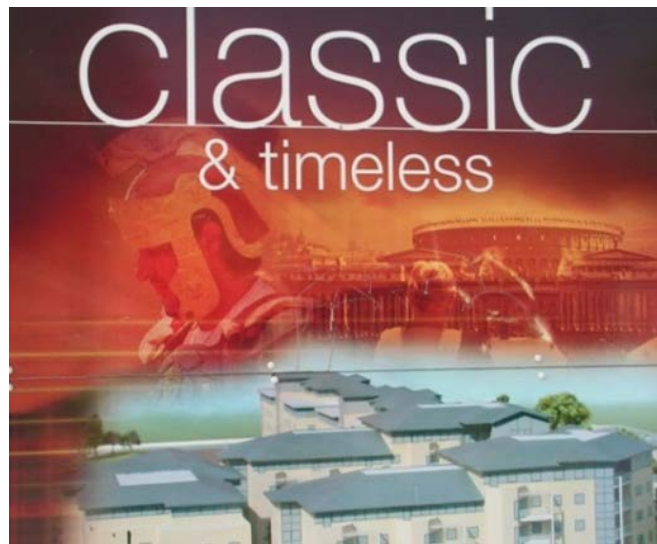




"I realize that. Ever so sorry to have disturbed you." I made some gesticulations of apology and backed away, then raced up the drive, berating myself for my stupidity. *Bigtime Sebald fan?* How Sebald would have cringed to hear that he had a *bigtime fan!* With the woman noting my number plate from the front window, I started the engine and fled.

The Rings of Saturn begins on the eighth floor of the west wing of the Norwich and Norfolk General Hospital. Here Sebald lay "in a state of almost total immobility" due to a slipped disc. And it was there, in time, where his body was taken after his death. The last time I had seen the hospital was in 2002; I had turned the corner onto Newmarket Street and the hospital's usually dour brick façade had been transformed by the sunset into something resplendent. Sebald's words came straight to mind: "Outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them and are designed from the first with an eye towards their later existence as ruins." The hospital had never looked so beautiful.

On this occasion, entering Norwich, I managed to get lost, the geography of the neighbourhood having changed so much since the



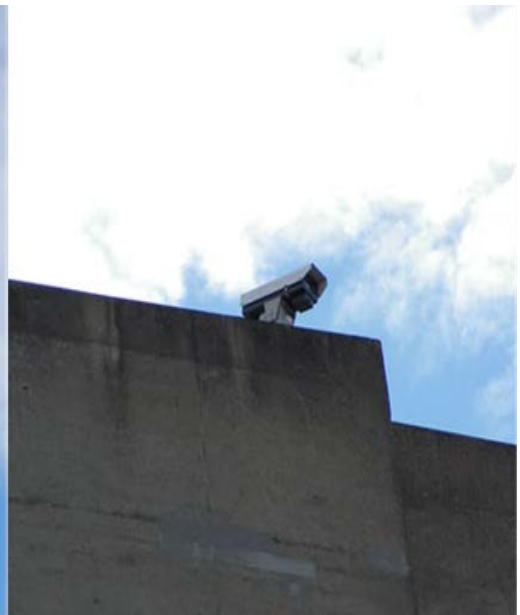
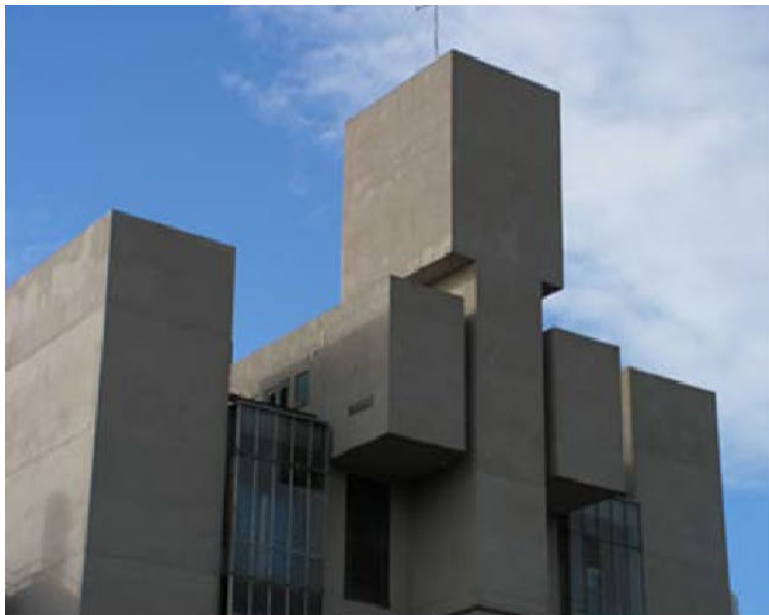
destruction of the old hospital. More construction was going on and I passed a sign that read, ominously, "ONE WAY SYSTEM IN OPERATION", then came to Phase One of a "classic and timeless" housing development called, simply enough, Via. The sign read: "your route to city living". I drove a hundred yards or so into the site and stopped.



So, I'd found some legacy of Sebald, but was this all? The "Strictly No Parking" sign was as charged with cosmic connotation as the one-way system sign had been. Of course, a one-way system is in operation! Of course, you're not allowed to park! Did I need to come all the way here to find that out?



After a thirty-minute walk I gave up on the hospital site and went out to the university. The cloudy sky was beginning to clear and the campus was desolate. Which was appropriate, I suppose. As



Alan Bennett put it, “The fact is, in Sebald nobody is ever about. This may be poetic but it is a short cut to significance”.



I went into the Arts Building. The English corridor, stunningly bright, brought to mind a poem of Nabokov’s, from *Pale Fire*, titled “The Nature of Electricity”.

*The dead, the gentle dead - who knows?
In tungsten filaments abide,
And on my bedside table glows
Another man's departed bride.
And maybe Shakespeare floods a whole
Town with innumerable lights,
And Shelley's incandescent soul
Lures the pale moths of starless nights.*

The word *electricity* was, by the way, coined in Norwich, along with *literary, anomalous, ascetic, coexistence, ferocious, cryptography, hallucination, ulterior, holocaust, insecurity, exhaustion, migrant, medical, ultimate* and hundreds more by Sir Thomas Browne, who is one of the subjects of the first part

of *The Rings of Saturn* and whose skull once rested in the church of St Peter Mancroft, the one pictured in the “investment and reward” hoarding for the Via Condominiums that I’d seen earlier on.

Sebald’s door – the one with an empty chalkboard and a poster of Walter Benjamin next to it – was open. As I approached, however, it began to ease shut. I snapped a shot and hurried forward.



Snapped another and it just kept easing closed as if of its own accord until it had shut completely.



I stood there hesitating, with the weird idea that, were I only to knock, or break all convention and just barge inside, my trip would not prove fruitless. I waited for a sign. I stared at Walter Benjamin, hoping for inspiration. I gave him a little wink even; but Walter Benjamin is impervious to winks.

I had another idea. I counted the offices back to the stairwell and then left the Arts Building and doubled back into the



parkland. I found the windows of Sebald's office, crept up, and peered inside.



The office was empty.

How had the door shut when no one was in there? I felt the need to document this strange occurrence – perhaps I'd see something hidden in the photos. But the closer I got to the windows, the larger my own reflection became until I was as much the subject of the photographs as the office.

The day was already waning. My energy levels were waning. I left the still-deserted campus, found a Londonized pub in the Golden Triangle neighbourhood where they served venison burgers with chipotle mango relish and yam chips with truffle oil, watched part of a football match, then began the long drive back to Heathrow. Before I'd quite left Norfolk however, where the woods of Elveden Forest met an open expanse of heath, I pulled in at an empty rest stop. The moon was wonderfully luminous



and I stood beside the car looking up at the now clear sky. As I watched, the moon and two passing airliners conspired to make an X with their vapour trails. A cross to the previous nought, written across the sky. I took a picture and a caption from Sebald came straight to mind: "I have no message. I just want to say, isn't that strange?"

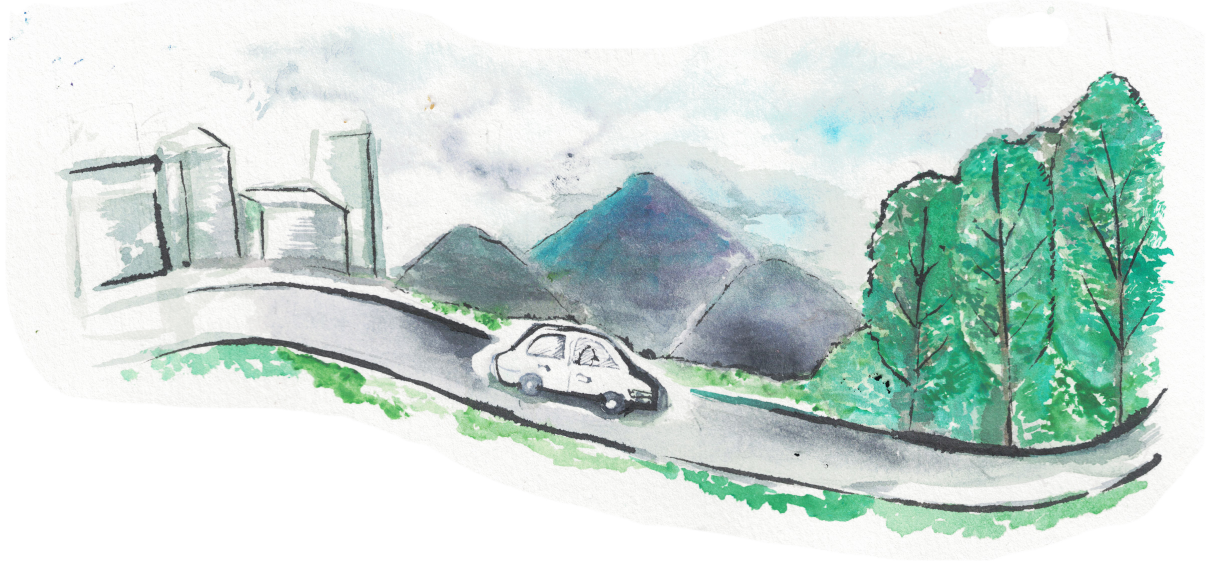
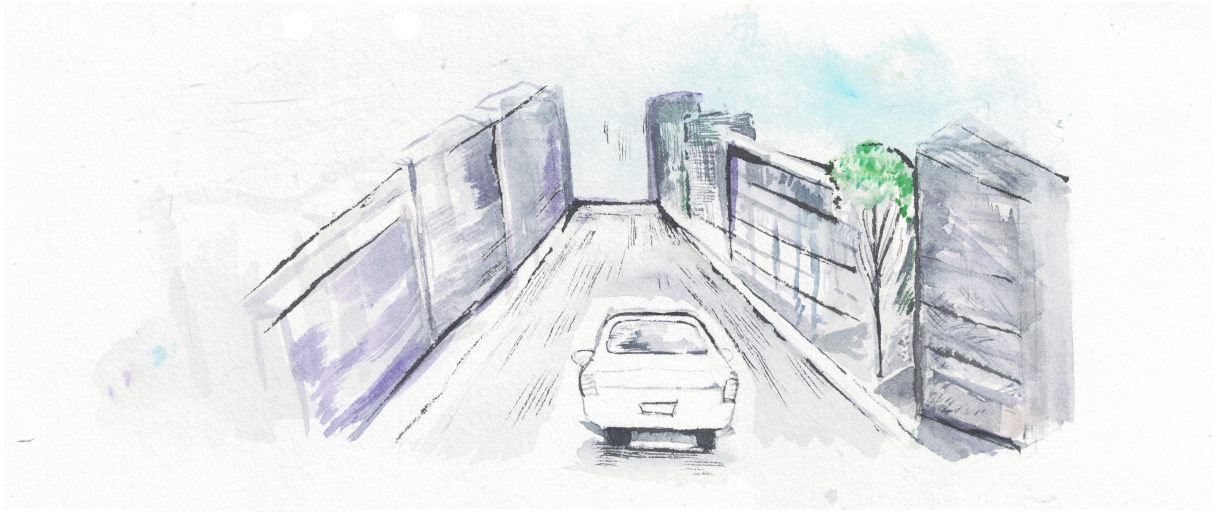
Barrie Sherwood is Assistant Professor in English at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has written two novels, The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa (DC Books, 2000) and Escape from Amsterdam (Granta, 2007).

TEXT prose

Eloise Grills

Radical Self Care





It is difficult to worry about my skin or to be
jealous of writers who are more successful
than I am in the soft autumn foliage.



Difficult but not impossible.

I am trying to do things to help my mental health like
Anita told me to.



Push myself out of my comfort zone.



The burnt eucalypts dim the sunlight.



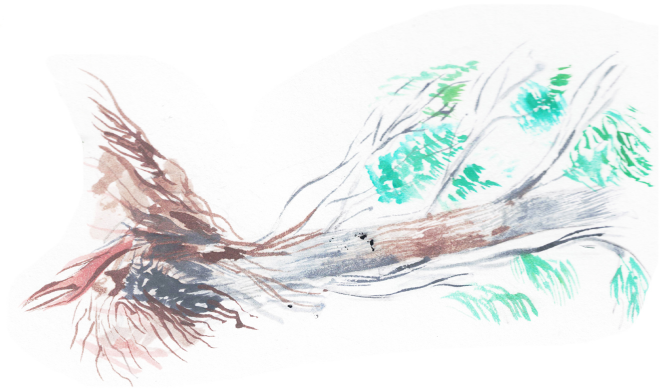
Fine webs cling to the tinted moisturiser on my cheeks.



I keep on coming to forks in the road, which mock
me with their clichéd dichotomy.



There's a human turd in the short grass.



Eucalyptus lies across one of the paths.



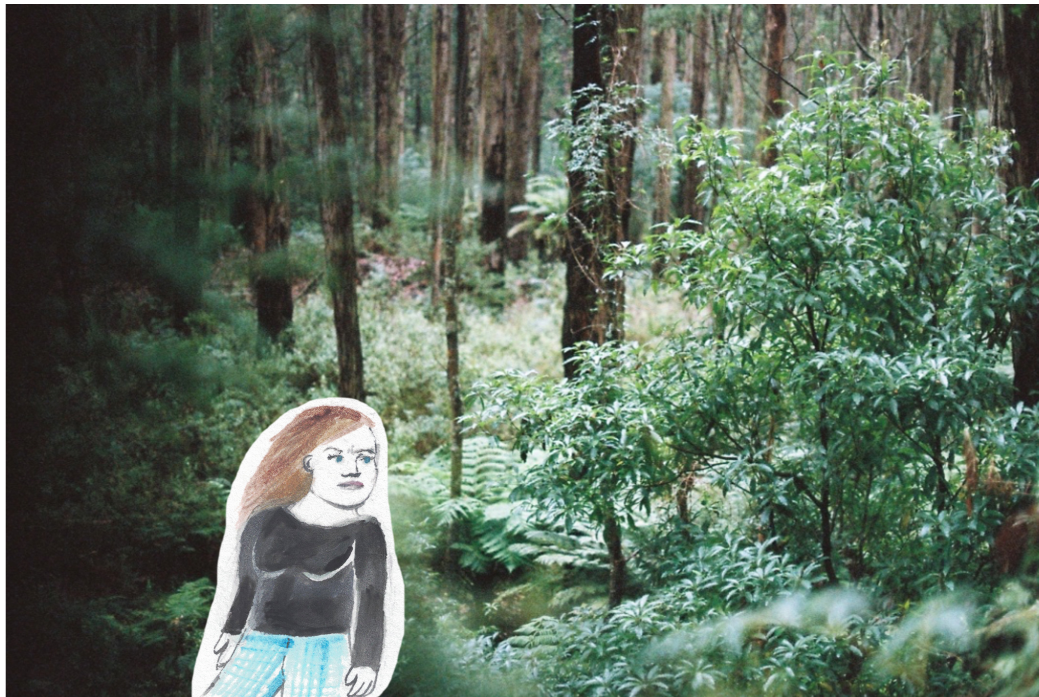
It looks like a dumping ground for a serial killer.





Landscape reminding me of an article about
being a girl, walking alone. But not just that.

The fear has layers.



I'm afraid of what's out here but also of what's happening within me

The hardest bit about letting go is dealing with not knowing



There is a version of me beyond this forest who is emotionally stable.





I can't see them clearly. I don't know what shape I'd
arrange their features into. If I painted my future who
knows which brushes I'd use.



I don't know if my creativity is mapped to mismanaged feelings,
if without them I wouldn't be the me I know.

I don't know who that person would be.



Eloise Grills is a comics artist, writer, zine maker, photographer living in Melbourne. Her work has been published widely, most recently in The Lifted Brow, The Spinoff, Queen Mob's Teahouse and Meanjin. She tweets and grams as @grillzoid and shares comics through her patreon: www.patreon.com/grillzoid

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TEXT poetry

Rupert M Loydell and Maria Stadnicka

Patchwork

Why are experience and feeling so important to her? Why does she trust herself when she is ill and ignore all advice? Why does she think she knows what good writing is, that sharing emotions is a poem? She wants the truth but only her truth, wants spirituality but no rules, theology or creed.

My flesh is experience. My child comes home after school to ask what solitude is. 'Take a dictionary and search it out, Alice.' It rains. I preserve humans in small jars on my kitchen unit.

Her faith is a patchwork, she chooses what to believe and discards the rest. I want to dislike her but don't, yet stand away from most of her work. She thinks my attitude is postmodern, that I believe too much in language, yet wants to use words to convince us what she says is right.

I live in one space. There is no room for outside, no room for interjection, adverb, pronoun. Only me, only the presence of dust makes everything vibrant.

I want room to question, space to doubt, not her heartfelt songs of sickness, love and grief. I am not convinced by ardour or intensity, give me confusion and complexity, make me wonder what it means. Poetry should be like the storm outside, causing power cuts, felled trees, sleepless nights, flash floods and temporary ruin.

Dear Beckett, you knocked at the right time. The silence is deafening. I have been watchful enough.

Rupert Loydell is Senior Lecturer in the School of Writing and Journalism at Falmouth University, a writer, editor and abstract artist. He has many books of poetry in print, including Dear Mary (Shearsman, 2017) and The Return of the Man Who Has Everything (Shearsman 2015); has edited anthologies such as Yesterday's Music Today (co-edited with Mike Ferguson, Knives Forks and Spoons Press 2014), Smartarse (The Knives Forks and Spoons Press, 2011),

From Hepworth's Garden Out (*Shearsman, 2010*) and Troubles Swapped for Something Fresh: manifestos and unmanifestos (*Salt, 2010*); and has contributed to Punk & Post-Punk, Journal of Writing and Creative Practice, Musicology Research, New Writing, Axon, TEXT, English, Revenant and Journal of Visual Art Practice. RML@stridebooks.co.uk

Maria Stadnicka is a writer, freelance journalist and lecturer. Born in Romania, she lives in Gloucestershire, UK. She won 12 Romanian National Prizes for poetry and worked as a radio and TV broadcaster, presenter and editor in chief. Her work appeared in magazines and literary journals in Austria, Germany, Romania, Republic of Moldova, USA, UK and Australia. Published books: O-Zone Friendly, Short Story about War, Imperfect. Further information about her work at www.mariastadnicka.com

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TEXT prose**Susan Presto*****Death of the author***

The deceased, let's call him, slept naked that night on his side, snoring, his body curled around pillows. The sheets sloped crazily onto the floor and his bare arse hung slightly over the edge of the bed. The insect was full of eggs and staggered around the periphery of the bed until it brushed against his skin. The deceased farted and shifted slightly. The bug was presented with a warm, foetid, fertile hole and proceeded into the darkness. The deceased flinched and scratched at his arse then rolled onto his back and began to snore again.

The bug sat comfortably in the warm moist space. As the babies emerged from the eggs over the next few days, they did not suffer from a lack of nutrition or moisture. They swiftly grew fat and healthy in the rich environment in which they had hatched. Within a matter of hours after cracking out of their eggs, the baby bugs learned to walk and use their suckers. Within days they were navigating the passageways of their home and finding other sources of nutrition. They were growing fast and always eating and shitting. After a few days of making a mess, they would simply move to another part of the intricate passageways that constituted this home. The tunnels seemed endless, a new clean fresh environment was literally just around the corner.

The deceased did not shit for a week after that first night of colonisation. He was always on the go and he drank a lot of wine. On the eighth day, he finally shat a watery greenish liquid. It was a Saturday morning. He did not look in the toilet to see the green slop and the wriggling larvae. He went back to bed and stayed there all day, drinking from the large warm Coke bottle he kept beside the bed. Every few hours he got up to have a cigarette and lean out of his bedroom window. When he slept there was a lot of coming and going in the bug world. After the loss of lives that day, the bugs knew something needed to change if their colony was to survive in this environment.

Every night the deceased would take all his clothes off and sleep naked. This meant the bugs could then easily leave and find mates outside the immediate family. Although things weren't perfect in the deceased, there really wasn't another home anywhere close by that was so fertile and plentiful. Even though there were casualties from time to time, it was still a very successful breeding ground.

In a short period of time, some of the bugs became quite large and found their way up into the bowel. Although a few younger bugs had died when they first arrived there because their shells weren't tough enough for the harsh environment, they began to toughen the older they got. As each new generation of bug was born, they evolved and adapted to this new space and were born with tougher shells.

This new home was a wonderful source of an ever-wider variety of nutrition than before. More and more babies were hatched every day and the community was fairly content. Unfortunately, some of the bugs got so large that they were crushed leaving their home on forays outside as the deceased began to scratch at his arse. Eventually only the younger, slimmer bugs ever left and they would only leave in search of mates. They would almost always come back again before they got too big to navigate the entrance to their home safely. It was the best local source of nutrition for their babies.

Over time, the entrance to their home became less hazardous. The sphincter loosened as the bugs worked their magic and the fluid that began to trickle from the arse was a wonderful source of nutrition for the newly hatched. Eggs were deposited all around the entrance which slowly but surely widened over time to accommodate the growth of the colony. Soon even this new space was not enough. As the colony grew, the inhibition of the deceased's normal body function was another downside. Just in time, the bugs found the large intestine because the ulcers the bugs' faeces created in the bowl had begun to poison the system.

The deceased never knew what changed. One day he had trouble getting out of bed and the next he practically leapt out in eagerness to start the day. Just when he reached the point of deciding he really had to see a doctor and actually making a doctor's appointment, he woke refreshed and invigorated. *I must have been depressed*, he said out loud to himself. He picked up the cigarette packet and put it back down again, with a puzzled smile.

The bugs quickly moved all their eggs and breeding systems into the wonderful moist fertile cavern. The stomach juices were the perfect foil to the hard egg casings and defecation that had previously caused ulceration in the bowel and colon. The stomach juices broke down the egg shells and the protein became absorbed into a system that had previously been weakened by the infections from the ulcers. The deceased and the bugs began to work symbiotically. The bugs simply had to wait until the stomach acids processed the foods to a certain level which was individual to the bugs at different stages of their life cycle. The deceased could eat and drink whatever he felt like whenever he felt like it, and the bugs turned it into the essential nutrients that his body needed. As bugs died, they were absorbed by the stomach and reused by the deceased as energy.

Since arriving in his stomach cavity, the bugs and the deceased fed each other better than they had ever been fed before. The bugs bred stronger and more active progeny and the deceased woke every morning and leapt out of bed. His skin took on a more translucent quality yet was tougher and harder. He wondered if he was seeing better, but put that down to fancy.

Sometimes the deceased would have guests in his bed. This worked well as the bugs could hide en masse easily within the folds of the sheets until such time as the guest would be sleeping or otherwise preoccupied. The bugs had evolved a saliva with an anaesthetic nature which allowed for lots of extra activities including new host entry for bigger egg-laden bugs. Time could be short on those sheets some nights, so this new ability allowed for quicker, more effective transition from host to host. Attempts were made at other entry points, however all entries through facial passages were hampered by the complex web of nerve endings that would alert the host, even with anaesthetic saliva. There were many deaths along the way until it became obvious that there really was only one way to enter a new home. Once entry was made, however, success was assured and another colony began. Now that the bugs knew how to live in

harmony with their hosts, they could begin to populate many new locations. And they did.

One night the deceased left the window open and fell deeply asleep, on his own. He'd had a busy week. Since his new lease of life, he hadn't been spending many nights alone, and he'd been given many new responsibilities at work. Not much sleeping had occurred in the last week so he slept deeply and there was no one there to wake him when the air temperature dropped below freezing. The deceased woke the next day sneezing and coughing. He rose from his bed less energetic than he had the previous few months. He struggled out of bed to close the window and collapsed back again with a strong hacking cough. The bugs barely noticed the change until no fresh supplies arrived that day or the next. In the end, this was why they were ultimately all so vulnerable.

Once in the doctor's office, the deceased described his symptoms. The doctor listened closely. When inspecting the deceased's body, the doctor paused at the sight and feel of the abdomen area and again around the genitals, however only for a moment. He spent a long time looking very closely at areas of skin. *He positively glowed with good health in every other respect.* The doctor would say so on record.

After the physical inspection, the doctor asked a lot of questions about the deceased's diet. The doctor made brief notations on the computer and clicked a button on the keyboard. This punched out a prescription for antibiotics. It was discussed that the deceased take the antibiotics first, then return to be reassessed. As the door closed behind the deceased, the doctor clicked once on the keyboard and a website with videos of dancing cats filled the screen.

That night the deceased sat down with the new box of drugs. He read the tiny instructions printed on the big box and took two pills for the first dose, as recommended. He also did not open the wine bottle, as recommended. He sat soberly on his lounge and flicked the remote to make the television come to life.

That night the deceased fell asleep on the couch in front of the television. A few hours later he woke sobbing and holding his stomach. He made a scrambling series of leaps towards the bathroom but never made it fully before a volcano erupted from his anus. The pressure of the eruption blew his pyjama bottoms down to his knees which tripped him up and caused him to smack his head on the door jamb. The deceased collapsed to the floor and wrapped one arm around his midriff with his knees to his chest, the other hand to the gash on his forehead. He passed out, and that is how he was found.

When the two pills entered the deceased's digestive tract and met with liquid, they began to dissolve and trickle down to the stomach. The bugs died on contact with juices generated by the pills. As they disintegrated, their tiny bodies emitted a caustic gas which bubbled and peeled the stomach lining. Some saw what was happening and began evacuation of the queen and the pupae. So many bugs with pupa and eggs on board trying to exit was ultimately the reason for the blockage. Death came upon all except the very few who managed to escape before the stampede. The gases created by the disintegration of the colony, mingled with the juices from the double pill dose, caused the massacre which ultimately killed everybody. As the deceased died quietly on the floor between his bathroom and his lounge he mumbled of shining futures, of great ideas, of flight into fame and publication, with wings which had now been stolen.

The room was white except where the shadows made it blue. The usual group gathered around the high stainless table and took their places, tools in hand. The first slice made them all step back and gasp. The scalpel cut easily through the sternum and down through the stomach cavity to enable the two sides to be prised apart. *Something's dead in here!* Everybody laughed loudly, stepping away from the corpse in front of them and waving their latex-protected hands in front of their noses. A doctor with a flashlight and tweezers then stepped towards the deceased. He pulled the mask down over his mouth and nose from where it had been sitting on top of his head, and secured it firmly. Looking closely at the open cavity, he shone the light up and down and poked inside with the tweezers. *Smells acidic*, he said. Another doctor stepped up to the deceased and peered in. *Looks like some sort of chemical has been ingested which caused this acidic reaction and basically burned out the stomach cavity. That would be enough to cause death.* The doctor stroked his chin slowly for a few seconds, then took off his latex gloves with a snap and slipped his hands into the pockets of his crisp white lab coat. *Stitch it back up and I'll sign the report.* Everyone nodded, except the person making notes on a clipboard, and stepped towards the deceased to attend to tubing or stitching or mopping. The person with the clipboard coughed and cleared their throat. *Don't you want to take a sample to determine exactly what sort of chemical was ingested before closing the cavity?* The doctor pushed the mask back to the top of his balding head. *I know what sort of lifestyle the deceased led, so I can make a very educated guess that it was **not** something prescribed by a physician we would find if we were to waste any more money and precious time on this corpse.* A few of those in attendance on the deceased paused, but only a few, and just momentarily.

Susan Presto is a PhD student at Griffith University and an English teacher at a boys' high school on the Gold Coast in Queensland.

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text@textjournal.com.au**

TEXT prose**Sam Meekings*****The Standard Advice***

The standard advice to those thinking of becoming writers is to write what you know. The fact that this is clearly the most ridiculous and restrictive piece of advice imaginable does not seem to put people off from repeating it again and again. Edward Gregory Charles was determined to follow it to the letter: with the pragmatism typical of the late nineteenth century, he made it his mission to fill up his mind with experiences.

Every family has one, though it's rare for a family to be so unfortunate as to find themselves with more than their fair share. Afflicted individuals tend to be remote, self-obsessed, and for the most part woefully unequipped to deal with the realities of modern life, and so it no surprise that in some Eastern European countries, women who want to place a curse on a hated enemy make a wish that their adversary's children will grow up to be writers.

I did not learn that my family was one of the unlucky ones until it was already too late. I first heard about Mr Charles when I was seven. We were visiting my grandparents, and that was the day that I said I wanted to be a writer. Previously I had hoped to be a dog when I grew up, then the world's first pregnant man (I had not considered the logistics, but only thought that it would be fantastic fun to have a little best-friend living in my belly) and then, after a school trip to a local cathedral, a bishop, since I assumed they got to sleep each night camped out in the magical light of the stained glass. In response to my earnest announcement, my grandmother cleared her throat then said that our family had already had a writer, and that had not ended too well, and so it was probably best to think of something else.

He was my grandmother's great-uncle, and according to family legend he was always restlessly searching for new and unique adventures that he might turn into stories. After attending university on a hard-won scholarship, he started upon a Grand Tour of Europe, commencing in Paris, where he lived for a time in a cramped flat in Montmartre, spending the evenings in cafes and salons in the fashionable footsteps of Degas, Renoir and Moreau.

How he afforded such jaunts is a question of some controversy, since my family was and remains far from wealthy; the most likely explanation I have heard is that he cultivated a habit of "befriending" those with more money than sense.

Following the obligatory excursions to Italy and Greece, he made a rash and somewhat baffling decision to follow in Darwin's footsteps to the Galapagos Islands. After this, the chronology of his travels becomes somewhat muddled, though his correspondence from the time (as well as the accounts he wrote for various London newspapers and periodicals) show that he was in St Petersburg when the revolutionaries threw the bomb beneath the royal carriage

and killed Tsar Alexander II, and later was in Cairo during the short Anglo-Egyptian war and witnessed the beginnings of the subsequent occupation. It is said (though there is no proof) that his many lovers included a Russian countess, a Chinese pirate-queen, and the wife of the Viceroy and Governor-General of India.

Yet despite (or perhaps because of) spending his thirtieth birthday in the jungles of Borneo, and his thirty-third with the literati in New York, he was still no closer to actually publishing a book. Therefore, when his letters home stopped, his family did not worry themselves, for they assumed he had forgone all distractions so that he might finally produce his masterpiece. What they did not expect, five years later, was to find him turn up on the doorstep of the very terrace he had abandoned as a cocksure young man. By all accounts, he was dishevelled and decidedly worse-for-wear. He asked his sister and her husband if he might rest a while in the spare attic-room at the top of the house. She readily agreed, and he never left that room for the rest of his life.

That is not to say he died that night. Far from it; he outlived all his siblings. My grandmother herself met him when she was five or six years old. By my reckoning that would have been towards the end of the 1930s, and therefore Mr Charles would have been approaching eighty. She said she could recall with perfect clarity visiting that small terrace and being led up the stairs to the room at the very top of the house. The sight of the faded brown paisley wallpaper, the stale reek of urine and dry rot and, propped up in the little brass bed and looking like some ancient, shrunken mummy freshly unwrapped from its linen strips, Mr Charles himself, smiling and offering to guess her exact age – ‘to the very day, young lady, to the very hour!’ – using only the evidence of her height and weight, made a haunting impression on her.

Do you really never leave that room? she had asked him, thinking that perhaps the grown-ups were playing a trick on her about the old man who lived like a spider up in the dark attic, spinning stories as quickly as arachnids spin webs.

No need, he had replied. *My memory, he told her, is all but fit to burst. There is no space for anything more. If I were to see something new, I would almost certainly be forced to forget something of my past in order to make room – and that I could not bear. I have seen so much that the best I can hope for is to hold onto it for as long as I can.*

How much of this is really true, I cannot tell. Aspects of this strange speech have likely been embellished over the years by my grandmother, and furthermore it is impossible to say how much of it was simply intended to amuse his naive great-niece. Yet that is the family legend as it has come to me: a man who witnessed so much that rather than attempt to better his youthful adventures he chose instead to relive them, clinging to the past as though trying to savour the hint of perfume long after an exotic guest is gone.

However, quite why his sister, and later his niece, put up with humouring his lazy eccentricity, cooking and carrying up his meals, and emptying his chamber-pot every day without complaint is beyond my understanding.

Not only did he never leave the room, but he never again put pen to paper. He boasted that he had destroyed all his notebooks, and to this day I have been unable to find more than half a dozen pages of his writing. Perhaps that is the real reason many writers tend to be such grumpy bastards: they have come to understand that the world fights against being written down.

Life was too much for Mr Charles, and he began to think that he could not write about it all without making it lesser somehow, without turning the unique excitement of his experiences into something plain and ordinary. They would not be the same on the page – he would not be able to do them justice, and worse still they would no longer be his. And so, the answer was not to sully them at all, not to water down his life with lesser variations on those same experiences, with parties or lovers or trips that were paler imitations of those that had first excited his imagination. He came to believe that the world exists beyond even the best description, that every sentence written is a belittling of real life. He therefore chose to keep his memories for himself instead of struggling on, like the rest of us, to try and communicate something just beyond the limits of speech.

Sam Meekings is Assistant Professor of Writing at Northwestern University in Qatar. He is the author of Under Fishbone Clouds (called 'a poetic evocation of the country and its people' by the New York Times) and The Book of Crows. He has taught writing at NYU (Global Campus) and the University of Chichester in the UK. He was awarded an Authors Foundation Award from the Society of Authors in 2015 for his current work in progress and has a PhD from Lancaster University. His website is www.sammeekings.com

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TEXT poetry

Gabrielle Everall

Good Madness

I try to tell the psychiatrist
about the good madness
But he's locked up
in Kraepelinian insanity

Can't you feel it
I say
What Ian Curtis calls
'the beauty'
What makes Kurt Cobain
so happy
'cause he's found his friends
they're in his head

The good madness
of head butting Tony Abbott
The good madness
of not standing for
The bad madness of
Donald Trump's
national anthem

The good madness
of watching as
a Moreton Bay Fig tree
becomes a woman's body
and dances
like a sacred apparition

The good madness
of chaining
one's naked female body
to a tree
to prevent the demolition
of the Bibra Lake wetlands

The good madness
of 'the interior'
not the bad madness of 'the
obsession with exteriors
and ego'
The good madness
of 'breakdown as breakthrough'.

Text in quotation marks is from RD Laing, *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* (Penguin, 1976: 113, 110).

Gabrielle Everall completed PhD in creative writing at The University of Western Australia. While doing the PhD she wrote her second book of poetry, Les Belles Lettres. Her first book of poetry is called Dona Juanita and the love of boys. She has been published in numerous anthologies including The Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry, The Turnrow Anthology of Contemporary Poetry, Performance Poets and The Fremantle Press Anthology of Western Australian Poetry edited by John Kinsella and Tracy Ryan. She has performed her poetry at the BDO, Overload, NYWF, Emerging Writer's Festival and Putting on an Act. She has also performed at The Bowery Poetry Club in New York and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. She currently studies at Melbourne University.

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TEXT prose

Peter Nash

Hard Copy

Everyone knew if you went to Jimmy Chives' joint on Friday you had to play a game. There were always twenty-seven cards. Twenty-seven because each player received a stack of nine and nine times out of ten the same three players showed up. The stack of nine fell into three categories. Antagonist, desire, and weakness. The idea was simple. Jimmy suggested a theme and you wrote about it. After everybody left, Jimmy would take the most popular answer and use it to write a story.

Tonight's theme concerned revenge. Tonight it was about a long-haul trucker and a cop that didn't make it.

'If a person served a prison sentence for a crime they didn't actually commit, would they feel justified in seeking revenge upon release?'

Jimmy didn't answer his question. He just gave his friends the title to go ahead with: *The Demise of a Truck Driver*.

There were three sides to Milltown. One side had a trailer park, a liquor store, and a laundromat. That was Jimmy's side. Old town Milltown lay in the middle. And the other side was what all the fuss was about.

When Detective Russo knocked on the door of Milltown Memories and proprietor Derby Waterford failed to appear, the officer dialled his cell phone.

Derby was at a table across the street outside Elmore's Café. When he saw his telephone light up he realised there was a cop already standing outside his door.

Detective Russo watched as a Cadillac was forced to brake hard in order to allow Derby the right-of-way.

Detective Russo said, 'Pedestrian versus Cadillac.'

'They always stop,' Derby said.

The officer caught Derby looking twice. 'What's wrong? You expecting someone older or is it because I'm...'

'You're the detective,' Derby said.

‘Where was the note when you found it?’

Derby explained that they were always jammed between the wiper and the windshield.

‘Same paper, same hand?’

‘Yep,’ Derby said. ‘Same.’

‘Do you have it on you?’ Russo said.

‘Threw it away.’

‘How about the others?’

‘Same,’ Derby said.

The interior of Jimmy’s trailer was papered with notices involving rejection. Sitting at the window end of the chipped formica table, Jimmy’s friend peeled a strip of chrome from the rusted edge and looked at the ceiling.

‘Outta room for fuck-off letters,’ the friend said, eyeing the rejection slips.

Jimmy took four glasses to the sink, pumped the handle, rinsed them with his fingers and poured another round. Straight, no ice. ‘Writin’ a new one that rocks,’ he said. ‘Fact is, I’m sending it to the *New Yorker* soon as it’s done.’

The friend picked up a card, wrote something and then looked at Jimmy.

‘Like the fifty fuckin’ others,’ the friend said.

Jimmy reached behind him with his right arm and removed a newspaper from a half-door cupboard and spread the paper on the table. The story was a feature in the *Milltown Chronicle* regarding a typewriter and some short stories. The article stated that Derby Waterford claimed to have purchased the items at a yard sale and the vendor had described how they were discovered in the loft at the time the family moved in. The last part of the feature was a detailed description of items currently for sale at Milltown Memories and that all stock carried a discount of up to twenty per cent for the next month.

The friend said, ‘Buy the motherfuckers, maybe you can find one to copy.’

‘Waterford won’t sell,’ Jimmy said. ‘I enquired about the price.’ They were no longer for sale and when Jimmy mentioned the *Chronicle*, Waterford said,

‘Yeah, before I knew about the original owner.’

On a corner one block west from Derby's shop stood a bar named the Rusty Rudder. The last outpost, or first eyesore, of the town, depending on which side of the tracks coloured your view. Directly opposite, on the other side of a freeway, a row of aligned, identical and manicured dwellings reflected beige-pink, or pink-beige, dependent on the sun.

Ajax was the only person in the Rudder the morning Jimmy ordered a beer and a shot. Jimmy cleared his throat and looked at a stainless steel trough positioned behind the foot rail. He put his beer down and walked toward the rest rooms, then stopped, turned around and sat down again. And spat.

'Everything's fuckin' changing,' Jimmy said.

'Nother?' Ajax said.

'An' a shot. When's the lease up?'

'Soon,' Ajax said. 'Better hope the Mafia come through.'

'Or?'

Ajax took a half pint bottle out from a drawer under the bar, took a hit and pointed towards the freeway.

In an attempt to preserve Old town Milltown, Derby Waterford presided over a local cohort named the *Milltown Mafia*. It had already been a big week for the Mafia due to overwhelming support for a petition regarding an injunction.

At another Friday session, Jimmy related to the card crew an acquaintance's reaction regarding Waterford's change of mind. The individual was of the opinion that Milltown Memories was way over-stocked, that Derby was fully engrossed with the Mafia and probably couldn't fucking type anyway. The person also noted how every Saturday, shine or rain, Waterford always parked his two-tone 1953 Ford Mercury coupe behind his store and by 4.30 was usually alone. And if someone happened to swing on the bumper causing an alarm to sound, Derby would get his fat ass outside pronto. And all anyone who might just be standing near the front door would have to do, was walk in and walk out.

When Jimmy described how a typewriter might present well on camera, the answer was Jimmy didn't need a machine, he needed a solid story. And besides, if he couldn't even acquire a few sheets of paper how the hell did he expect to become any kind of a writer. The card-crew compadre who proposed Jimmy purchase the items enquired as to how fast Waterford had actually gotten his sorry ass outside. Jimmy replied he had no clue because the genius whose idea it was backed out as soon as they realised Jimmy was serious. A question arose as to how long after that Derby might have noticed he was short a few stories.

'There's so much cool shit in there,' Jimmy said. 'You seen that beat forty-eight Rock Ola jukebox in the window? The son of a bitch wants ten

grand for it.'

For over a week Jimmy had carried the outline for 'The Demise of a Truck Driver' folded inside his wallet, waiting to go over it with a writing associate. On one particularly promising morning, Ajax sent word that Jimmy's contact was drinking in the Rusty Rudder. The outline Jimmy wrote closely followed the plot of a story he had appropriated from Waterford.

The Demise of a Truck Driver. (Outline by J. Chives.)

Lee is a long distance truck driver whose relationship is threatened. The person messing around with Lee's partner owns a trucking company. A friend of a friend offers Lee cash to transport drugs. Lee wants to take the partner on an expensive vacation. A deal is made and a connection rides with Lee for protection. A vehicle cuts the rig off causing it to run off the road. A motorcycle cop arrives and gets nosy. The cop notices a strong odour coming from beneath the flatbed. The cop radios for back-up. Lee's protection panics and shoots the cop. The cop dies. Lee is arrested, convicted, and serves a long prison sentence. Lee is finally released on good behaviour. Lee re-enters an empty world. Twenty-four hours after obtaining freedom Lee acquires a gun and drives across town to where his ex-partner and ex-employer live. Lee stops at a convenience store. While Lee is waiting in line an armed robbery occurs. Lee is fatally wounded during the hold-up.

As it transpired, by the time Jimmy arrived at the bar his contact had departed so he spent the day drinking beer and making a few bucks shooting pool. He was still there at closing time and it wasn't until early afternoon the next day he discovered the zippered compartment open in his wallet and the outline missing.

Recently, at another Friday card game, a participant related how they had just read a current bestseller about a truck driver who goes to prison for being an accomplice in the murder of a law officer, receives a lengthy prison sentence, and within twenty-four hours of release is fatally wounded during an armed robbery while on his way to extract revenge by shooting his former employer. Detective Russo told a colleague that ballistics obtained from the bullet holes sprayed into the red upper half of the driver's door indicated the

weapon had been fired by a person standing approximately ten feet away from Derby Waterford after he slid behind the wheel of his two-tone Mercury coupe for the final time.

And Jimmy Chives never wrote another word.

Peter Nash is an Honours student studying creative writing at Griffith University. This is his third story for TEXT.

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