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**TEXT prose****Timia Breederveld*****Strings***

I walked home from work. A man in a grey suit approached me. 'It may be better to find another route,' he said. 'There's a roadblock ahead. Besides, the other streets have nicer views.'

I followed his advice and strolled back to the side street I'd passed just moments ago.

A woman came up to me and pointed at a nurse sitting on a bench. 'Better pay attention to her,' she said. 'One day, you might need that information.'

I gave her a questioning look. She shrugged and headed in the direction I'd come from.

'There's a roa—'

'No need to repeat that,' the nurse said.

I stopped.

'Don't stop there,' she said. 'Take a few steps to your right, and you'll be fine.'

I got dizzy.

'Please, tell me where you work,' she continued.

'Why do you want to know?'

'I just do,' she answered. 'How old are you?'

'Twenty-three,' I said. 'Anything else?'

'Actually, yes. How would you describe yourself?'

'Dunno, a regular guy.'

'That's not enough, I want to know more.'

'Why?'

'I just do.'

I took a seat next to her.

'Better not stay here too long,' she said.

'Why the hell not?'

'It's distracting you from your walk,' she said dryly. 'Look at me, remember me, and go home.'

She put a hand on my arm as I rose. 'One more thing. Take in everything you see.'

To my surprise, I said, 'I will.'

I shook my head and wondered what would happen next.

I passed trees that had stood in patience for centuries, their shriveled roots searching for ways to claim space. Light filtered through the gaps between their leaves and dappled the ground.

'You're getting there,' someone behind me said.

Not bothering to turn I replied, 'Getting where?'

'Details, details.' The man passed me and hurried on. His shoes made the clicking sound of a tap dancer's. His long grey hair tried to keep up with him as he moved.

Finally, my front door came into sight.

For the first time, I noticed its color and condition. The paint was cracked and faded. A tiny hole showed in its window, and the doorbell hung askew.

'Mother, I'm home.'

'How many times do I have to tell you not to call me that,' she said. 'I'm your

mom.'

'I met a nurse, in a pastel blue uniform, today. She was kind of chubby, in an attractive way. Her lips were painted dark purple. Cornrows accentuated her beautiful round face, and she smiled like she was in love. She just started talking to me as I passed her on the—'

'You can stop there,' my mother said. 'First of all, nurses don't wear lipstick. And second, telling me you saw a nurse would have been quite enough.'

'Thanks, Mom. I've had enough literary critique for one day.'

*Timia Breederveld was born in the Netherlands and lives in Egypt, where she makes underwater films and writes. Her short stories are inspired by daily Egyptian life and surrealism.*

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## **TEXT**

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## TEXT prose

## Eileen Herbert-Goodall

*Raven Medicine*

The man is surrounded by smokey air, drifting remnants of conversation, and late-night drunks. The smell of damp carpet rises to meet him, prods him. Hankering for description. Even here, far from his desk, words spin and tumble through his mind, insisting upon their right to be recorded. Recognised. Validated. They demand to demonstrate their potency, to display their poetic rhythm. To perform. Lately they have been communicating with him from a distance via his vintage Underwood typewriter, which appears to have developed consciousness.

Machines with their own minds; it was always going to happen.

*When are you coming home, Thomas?* the Underwood asks.

*Be patient, he says. Our words must be properly assembled, composed.*

But the machine isn't easily appeased.

*Coward, it calls.*

The man feigns ignorance and sips his drink; the alcohol's soothing heat slides into his gut. He lives above this bar, in the residential quarters of a hotel inaptly called The Palace. Positioned in one of the seediest parts of the city, visited by drug dealers, pimps and shady businessmen, the place is decidedly non-palatial. Most evenings, the man sits in his humble room upstairs and writes. For hours on end he works, tapping away at the machine's keys, concocting a trail of black on white. *Clack, clack, clack*, the metal arms call back. Some would say it's an anachronistic piece of junk, but he finds the Underwood much more stimulating than a screen seething with pixels.

Presently, there's no inspiring equipment at hand. On the contrary, he's a man sinking in whiskey and thwarted ambition. He seems to be struggling with depression, possibly even Bi-polar Disorder; his mood swings are ridiculous. But he has no more time for shrinks, for those smarmy bastards who remain safe and snug within their softly lit, cushy offices. He has no patience for their learned vocabularies, calm expressions and steady outlooks. What would they know about pushing boundaries and creating something innovative? Anyone can regurgitate verbose, clinic-oriented analyses. There's nothing new in that.

Words gather at the edge of his mind. Circling. Stalking. He resists, and they retreat. Here, surrounded by people, he's most likely safe. It's when he's alone that they come for blood. He skulls his drink, then orders another. The bartender obliges, and the man slips a handful of coins across the granite counter.

Around him, voices rise and fall in a debauched suburban symphony.

The man celebrated his fiftieth birthday on the weekend. His sister, Jane, arranged a small gathering at her downtown apartment, claiming his little place simply wouldn't do. Her disapproval concerning his living arrangements is hardly surprising, given she's a successful real estate agent. In any event, the celebration rolled along according to her well-laid plans. The spread was impressive. Ham and tomato sandwiches. Asparagus hors d'oeuvres. Cheese and spinach balls. Alcoholic and non-alcoholic punch. People he hadn't seen in

years made an appearance. Long lost relatives, a handful of friends. Jane outdid herself by hiring a violinist, a young siren who charmed everyone with her dexterous fingers, doe-like eyes and round breasts. The afternoon was pleasant enough.

Taking a moment to reflect, he knows he should be grateful. He has people who care about him. A roof over his head. A job. Things could be far worse. Yet he's bitterly disappointed. He has no more than a loyal smattering of readers following his weekly column in the *Claremont Chronicle*, a small-time, somewhat disreputable newspaper. His work doesn't even make it to the printers these days. Instead, it's sent straight into cyberspace, where it's no doubt subjected to fleeting and forgettable encounters with an audience that's too easily distracted. He thinks he's probably in the wrong game. Fiction is where his strength lies; or so he likes to believe.

Staring into the amber liquid before him, the man is momentarily transfixed.

*Clack, clack, clack.* There goes the Underwood, calling out again. *Stop your drinking, Thomas. Time to play.*

The man pretends not to hear.

Upon the stage a girl swings from a pole, and the man can see that her skin is slick with sweat. This isn't a strip-club – let's get that straight. It's merely a dingy bar where female dancers use a shiny, vertical apparatus to demonstrate their exceptional athleticism. They are clothed, although skimpily, and their risqué garments remain securely in place for the duration of the evening. The girl on the floor is new; he's not seen her before. She wears a skin-tight, flesh-coloured costume studded with diamantes that snatch at the artificial light. Her cheeks and neck sparkle with what he suspects is green glitter, and this tacky addition lends her a reptilian, predatory air. He guesses she's still in her teens, yet there's something worldly about her movements. He's certain she could tell a great story. Enthralled, the man watches as she wraps a long, slender leg around the pole and bends backwards, one arm almost reaching the floor.

He can't help but wonder what such a young girl is doing here. Do her parents know where she is? Questions leave an ache inside his chest. His fingertips tingle with a sudden, nonsensical urge; he wants to remove her from the stage and wrap her in a towel, to protect her from the harsh realities of the world. He shuts his eyes and, predictably, the girl's fine form is replaced by letters. They spin. Twirl. Demand to be watched.

Black on white.

White.

White.

More horrendous white.

He has an aversion to white spaces. Bad memories live there. It's like this: his father, who was also an aspiring writer, would fly into a rage whenever words eluded him, which was often. As a child, the man had tried to appease his father by writing stories of his own. Usually it worked, presumably because his creative efforts diluted his father's own sense of failure. Unfortunately, on one occasion, his ability to toss words across a page did little to diffuse a volatile domestic situation, and the man's mother died as a result. She slipped down the stairs, apparently. Snapped her neck at the bottom. Authorities labelled the tragedy a 'terrible accident'. At seven years old, the man saw what had really happened; but he kept the truth hidden, even from Jane. Their father has since passed away, and the man figures it's best to let sleeping dogs lie, so to speak. But there's no forgetting; the secret has left an indelible stain upon his soul.

Evidently, he has continued to write. Old habits die hard. Even his bedroom walls boast several samples of micro-fiction scrawled in black Nikko. The landlord hasn't yet discovered the man's unique take on home décor, but it's only a matter of time before the status quo changes. He hopes the landlord

will appreciate his styling efforts; if nothing else, the stories are excellent examples of succinct expression.

Words, words. Petulant words. They taunt him, inevitably siding with the Underwood.

*That's because they need you, the machine says. We need you. You're the One, Thomas. You're the one who's meant to set us free.*

*Put a sock in it.*

He wonders if he happened to say that aloud.

*Damn. Loose lips sink ships.*

Glancing about, he's relieved to find that no one's paying attention.

At a nearby table, he notices a beautiful woman; she has a full face, blonde hair, eyes lined with kohl. Her strapless dress reveals precisely the right amount of pale flesh. She draws on a cigarette, then lets a bluish trail of smoke escape from her mouth.

The man can't remember the last time he held someone; he longs for another human's touch.

Trying not to ogle, he considers the possibility of crafting a story around the blonde. He writes of sad old men, mischievous kids, lonely wives, desperate criminals, faithful dogs, circus folk who exist on society's fringes. Anything. Characters make arbitrary appearances within his work; they tend to choose him, rather than the other way around.

It's best, he finds, to let the ideas cut their own path.

*We're tired of waiting, Thomas, the machine cries. We need a purpose, to know why we're here.*

*Don't we all.* He doesn't need reminding that his own sense of identity has been seriously hindered over the years. As yet, his talent for weaving imaginary tales is yet to be recognised. *Screw those editors and their compendious rejection letters. Could they do any better?*

Sitting here at the bar, he conjures a mental image of one of the many offending persons with whom he has corresponded over the years. The editor is a middle-aged, thickset gentleman with thinning hair. He wears black-framed spectacles that dominate his features. The man sees himself strolling into the editor's modern office, where he takes in the sickening city views. The editor clamps his hands down on his desk, preparing to stand. The man tells him not to bother, leans across a tidy pile of paper, prises the editor's lips apart with his fingers, and shoves the rejection letter into his gaping orifice. The editor's bulbous eyes swim with fear, and something else – contrition? Yes, contrition. Fumbling, the editor pulls the crumpled ball from his mouth, then watches, speechless, as the man walks out and slams the door behind him.

*That felt good, he thinks, sitting at the bar. Should have done it a long time ago.*

The girl on the stage is all spinning limbs and stretched sinuous tissue.

Cradling his whiskey, he turns to look at the blonde once more and admires the sensual curve of her neck. He could join her, if he wanted. He has the gumption to sit directly opposite her, introduce himself, light her cigarette. He could tell her how he's a tormented writer, an artist bent on maintaining his integrity while trying to survive in a world where most can't wait to sell out for a quick buck.

*Clack, clack, clack. Focus, Thomas, the machine orders.*

*Can't you see I'm trying?*

The man finishes his drink, rests the glass on the counter and attempts to pick up the scenario's thread.

*Don't force it, the machine says. Let the words bleed to the surface.*

The blonde would look at him, blink those kohl-rimmed eyes, and say, 'There's a bestseller with your name on it just around the corner, Thomas Grey. You wait and see.'

He would thank her and ask if she'd like to come see his antique typewriter. It's a true treasure, he would explain.

She would smile, puff on her cigarette and reply, 'Of course, Thomas. I'd love

to.'

In the doorway of the bar a stranger appears, skittling the man's concentration. The stranger is young. Handsome. Successful-looking. His perfectly fitted suit accentuates his impressive physique. He glances about, spots the blonde and flashes a smile. The blonde sees him and waves. The stranger heads towards her, back straight, his stride relaxed and confident.

The man hates him.

Getting to his feet, the man squints as the ground shifts beneath him. He leans against the counter, steadies himself, turns on his heel and heads for the door. Walking towards the blonde, the man catches her eye and winks. She looks straight through him, as if he's nothing more than a ghost.

*Could be a story in that, he thinks. The tale of Thomas Grey, a man who devolves into phantasmic form after staring at the keys on his typewriter too long. A man adrift in no man's land.*

The machine is determined to have the last word: *Let's hear it, then.*

Later, as he sleeps, he dreams he's standing in a thick forest, waiting at the top of a well that's brimming with ink. It's daylight, but the air is heavy with mist. In his hand, the man holds a mirror. He looks at it, wondering what it's for. As if on cue, a woman appears. Her brown dress is loose-fitting; its wide arms and hem are decorated with simple tassels. Feathers litter her long hair; she has thin lips and dark eyes that shine with esoteric knowledge. 'It's for you to see with,' she tells him. 'Lean back.'

He wonders who the woman is, but senses he mustn't ask: to do so would be to cross an unspoken boundary. The man does as he's told, bending backwards over the well.

Using one hand to support his neck, the woman stands beside him and watches.

'Look into the mirror. Focus. What can you see?'

He obeys, gazing up, yet somehow down. 'Nothing but blackness.'

'Keep trying,' she says.

The man continues to look, glimpsing dark ripples and faint waves of movement. Then he sees something else; a form gradually takes shape. It's a bird. A giant black bird. It stands upon the inky surface, staring into the mirror. Staring at him.

'What is it?'

'A raven.'

'A raven?' she asks.

He moves the mirror slightly and gives a nod. 'Yes.'

'What's it doing?'

'Watching me,' he answers.

'It's as I thought,' she says.

Lowering the mirror, he straightens and meets her gaze. 'What does it mean?'

The woman's expression is blank. 'Death is near.'

'Someone's going to die soon?' he asks.

'It would seem so.'

'Who?'

She shrugs. 'How would I know?'

'Could it be me?'

The woman thinks for a moment, her brow creased, then says, 'Possibly.'

'Possibly?' he says. 'Can't you be more definite?'

'Things aren't always as they seem. Seeing death often signals new beginnings, or re-birth.'

'What sort of re-birth?'

She moves away without answering.

'That's it?' he calls after her. 'That's all you're giving me?'

The woman tosses words over her shoulder. 'You are not your past, Thomas Grey. Let things go and you'll find your true voice.'

'And if I don't?'

‘Then you’ll bear the consequences according to the universal law of cause and effect.’ She walks on, vanishing into the mist.

He’s left alone, embraced by the forest’s mist, which seems to have thickened in the quiet.

When the man wakes, the dream is still with him, simmering beneath his skin, and he knows he should write something, sift the images of his subconscious for a few precious gems; but his head hurts from the whiskey. He hears rain thrumming against the metal roof. Throwing back the covers, he gets out of bed and heads for the kitchen. He makes coffee and takes some pain relief before approaching the typewriter; it squats in the middle of the desk, judging him. *Where were you last night?* the Underwood says.

The man places down his cup, stretches his arms above his head, then sits in front of the machine. *I am not beholden to you, my friend,* he thinks.

*Don’t kid yourself, Thomas Grey,* it answers. *I own you.*

Shutting his eyes, the man questions his sanity, as he’s done countless times previously. He knows a fragile mental state is the price to be paid for possessing a sharp creative edge; his neurons have a way of short-circuiting and burning themselves out. In hindsight, it may not have been the best idea to stop taking his medication.

He shoves a blank page in behind the platen and rolls it down.

*Brrrrr. Brrrrr. You’d be lost without me,* the machine says. *Useless.*

*Shut up,* he tells it.

*Make me.*

Rubbing his forehead, he wonders why he’s participating in such a pointless conversation. The pain inside his head grows. Swells. Morphs into a blinding white light. Closing his eyes, he touches his pounding temples.

There’s something wrong. The man detects the onset of trouble and looks at the machine accusingly, but it’s quiet. Sullen.

The pain inside his head becomes a screaming fiend.

He slowly stands, moves back and, for some inexplicable reason, looks up.

That’s when he sees it – a dark patch on the ceiling.

Bewildered, he blinks. The patch is spreading. Something wet lands on his cheek and he wipes it off. The man rubs the substance between his fingers, smells it, and realises it’s ink.

His heart gallops, intensifying his headache.

He looks to the ceiling again, where black ink pools, then falls in quivering, heavy droplets. Frequent and swollen. Incessant.

There’s a ringing sound and he understands that it’s coming from the phone on his desk. *Yes,* he thinks. *Someone to talk to. Someone to help.* He takes a few steps, attempting to dodge the flow of ink, but it’s now falling with force, smacking audibly against the stained carpet.

*Clack, clack, clack. Where are you going?* the machine asks.

The man falls to the floor and crawls along on all fours, inching forward while his head threatens to split open. The phone rings on as a stream of ink taps, taps, taps against his back and runs down behind his ears. He shut his eyes and whimpers.

The ringing stops.

Alone again, the man knows he’s battling a deluge of wasted words, a swamp of unfulfilled potential.

*Such a shame,* the machine calls. *You were the One, Thomas Grey. You were the one who could have made us sing, but you never believed.*

The man’s senses are smothered as the wet darkness swallows him whole.

Downstairs, in a dim corridor lining the back of the bar, the proprietor of The Palace makes a call.

A man on the other end of the line picks up. ‘Robertson’s Building Services.’



‘Hey, Norm,’ the proprietor says, cradling the receiver against his ear. ‘I need your expertise.’  
‘What’s wrong now?’ the man asks.  
‘Got a leak in the roof. There’s water pissing in all over the place. I need it plugged fast.’  
‘Alright,’ Norm says. ‘I should be able to make it there within the hour, but it’ll cost you.’  
‘It always does. I’ll go fetch a few cartons of your favourite brew.’ The proprietor hangs up, walks down the corridor and heads for the cellar.

*Eileen Herbert-Goodall holds a Doctorate of Creative Arts, which she attained from the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC). She has had her novella, The Sherbrooke Brothers, shortlisted with the Busy Bird Great Novella Search Competition. She was also recently awarded ‘shared-first prize’ within a short story division of the Fellowship of Australian Writers National Literary Awards. Her nonfiction articles have appeared in various newspapers and magazines. She presently teaches high school students through the USC’s Creative Writing Excellence Program, and is also working on a selection of short stories.*

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