

Poetry and prose contents

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TEXT prose**Thom Conroy***Living Notes*

We got to talking the other day, Sue and me, about the shape of things. Life was on our minds. Ours and those that abut and overlap, like sun and shadows of a canopy. The shape of living surfaced in this conversation, and we spoke of all the stories we knew, how they formed their bridges in space, ending so high above the earth, climbing to their terrible heights on nothing more than the fragments of implication, and leaving those who'd followed with no idea of how to untie the knot or find a way home. We said we thought such a shape left you dangling up there, and how this was a heartless and dominant trend.

'But it's the same with living,' Sue said. 'You don't get the tidy denouement or the easy flight of stairs. You're left stranded in one episode after another.'

I told Sue I didn't think this was so, protested that she wasn't going far enough in her critique. It was true that life was wont to leave you hanging, but it was equally the case that it might never get you up so high in the first place. 'We welcome the comfort of the rising action,' I said, falling shamefully into my lecturing stance, 'because we want a map, a way to plot a route through the ordinary, enigmatic, and haphazard.'

'So take notes,' Sue said. 'On life.'

Following our old custom, I adhered exactly to her advice, and for the next few weeks compiled data, dividing it for the sake of convenience into the good days and bad –

On good days, the children woke for school early, my dreams faded softly in my head like pink coals and left in their place a tender nebula of lost time, my son placed the warm egg of a chicken into my palm, Sue and I climbed the heights above the gorge and stood very close in silence while a hawk or a magpie or a regular old tawdry seagull circled and circled, we spoke of the shape of things, the phone did not ring, the grass did not grow, the lilt of my tongue was a limpid gift, Sue and I embraced in the darkened corridor, I folded two baskets of laundry, the sun struck the open waters of the sea, the moon drove the tides across the flanks of the earth, unspeakable images appeared on my computer of men weeping in the broken streets, stage lights were employed to advantage, the pastry of the lemon tart was remarkably light, a certificate was garnered, a flower was picked, Sue and I listened to our children singing a school production song together with hardly any quarrelling or random expressions of cruelty, the wine was very dry, the heavens shifted above our veranda so that the Clouds of Magellan were unveiled, the frogs began to sing, a bewildered mother stopped calling for her children because they had been found, by the glow of a night-light I observed the rise and fall of

my daughter's chest, I discovered a candle guttering in its dish, I discovered the blankets turned down, discovered a touch, a known but unchaste warmth.

On bad days, the floors were cold and my ulcer burnt, the cat had vomited during the night, the clock ran very fast, the work was not done, the walk was cancelled, the radio wanted my money, the phone did not ring, the grass did not grow, the lines were erased, the bridges crumpled like glass at my touch, I clicked shut the window on the men weeping in the broken streets, I rushed past the cars on my interminable errands and spent what I had not earned, the house was sour with coughing on my return, the laundry pile grew, the rain pooled, the straw of the chicken coop was damp and empty, the dogs began to howl, a woman with old shoes was going door to door, the news was not muted and the children heard it all, the pots smouldered on the stove, the money was deducted and counted, the minister of war stood at his post and talked about our choices, the sea was flung up the dunes and most of the surfers were frightened, I told everyone to shut their mouths, the money was recounted, I poured a long drink, the rain continued to pool, the cat went hungry, the children drew blood, Sue and I did not speak, we spoke too much, we decamped to our separate beds, and there I went on shouting and beating whoever I could deep into the night.

Later, I made my report to Sue, and she said I had stacked the cards, spoiled everything in advance by my division of days. She said if I was going to be scientific about the shape of living, I had to let the moments accrue in strict chronological order and leave the interpolation for after. I told her she was growing wise and snuck a kiss. She said it was about time I noticed and that she was on her way out just then.

And so I took more notes –

A covered bridge holds the fog as if in a box.

The grass begins to strangle the flowers and infiltrate the neighbours' yards. Nonetheless, I cannot confirm any definite growth.

A fluttering pain swims in my chest.

Another broken street. A different weeping man. Searing blaze in the blue sky, a firework, plunging.

One of our fish is found floating in the aquarium.

My daughter reports an unidentified luminescence on the garret-like roof of her bedroom the night before. In the morning, she insists I come that night to have a look. I promise that I will, but we both forget.

I pick up the phone. Wrong number.

Two loads of laundry before breakfast.

'Daddy, get my stick. No, not that stick, the one with all the leaves torn off that is my wand and which can destroy this house and everything in it.'

A frustrating scratch on the left lens of my glasses.

Sue rushing across the kitchen in her bare feet.

Two men on the deck of a city cafe, late evening, in crumpled shirts. Ennui like cigarette smoke in the air. It cannot be cigarette smoke, of course, as smoking is banned in the central business district. I observe to Sue and the children that I would prefer cigarettes to ennui.

I pick up the phone. It is my brother from across the world with stunning news, but what I marvel at is the cadence of his voice and the effortless way it strings me backwards in time.

A horse on its back, legs in the air. Later, it is gnawing grass.

'I don't really care what you're saying because you don't care what I'm saying, and so I think there's nothing more to say.'

Inexplicable luster of a stranger's ring.

On a poster a puppy is missing. It has my name.

After an evening of reading about Egypt and Syria and North Korea and even the new local ordinance on education, I find everything is much worse than I imagined, and when Sue comes into the room and sees what's open on the screen she walks over and closes the lid of my laptop and walks out of the room. *Is it really, I think, this easy?*

It's raining. The wind in my lungs comes straight out of Antarctica. This I know because an acquaintance told me.

Sue rushing across the bedroom at the sound of a child's nightmare.

'We all make mistakes, yes. And you're mine.'

Dust, everywhere so much dust.

Three days of mucus in my daughter's throat. Her loathsome music playing all day, and in the evening, the memory of the two of us sitting in the doorway of another house on the same side of the world where my brother lives with a light pattering of rain outside. This was summer rain in this memory. Here there is no summer.

A pain in my wrists snaking up my arms as I type.

Comments from the neighbours regarding our cat, our car, my son, our recently deceased chicken, the growth of our grass.

A white, slightly over-sized t-shirt soaked with new, very bright blood.

The phone rings. My money is wanted.

The wind, I am told, is only from Australia and not Antarctica. I continue to spread the story about it being from Antarctica.

Rumbling, as if from many car doors shutting at once. My children and I huddle under a table, which, as it turns out, is exactly the wrong thing to do. Out in the yard, in bare feet once again, Sue rushing to us.

Many people gathered in a public space with placards espousing a cause I believe in and, nonetheless, the clogging response of cynicism in my throat.

Unforgivable expressions of regret and contempt that I record but later censor.

The poster is not there, and nobody knows anything about the missing puppy.

Twenty straight minutes of loud jazz while the storm approaches from the far side of lime-coloured sheep paddocks. An hour later, I doubt the veracity of this experience, and return to the paddocks. They are silent, the sheep all gone. I find the sight chilling.

Chinese vase of dead but elegant flowers.

In the dead of night, the awful cat, once again, gagging.

‘Pay attention, dad – I’ve liked onions for like, weeks, now.’

The phone does not ring.

We remember our walks in the gorge and start to make vows regarding them and other seemingly urgent matters relating to lifestyle.

A dog is howling.

‘Hide, she’s at the door again!’

The moon is resting, a slip of paper over the white river of the driveway.

Sue rushing, seeing me, thinking of my compilation of data, and suddenly slowing down.

The rain is pooling.

The smell of bread slowly permeating, distracting us all.

Later, I mentioned these findings to Sue, but she was on the way out the door again. We made an appointment for a rendezvous, but we were tired when the time came. The next night, we were also tired. The following night our son grew unreasonable, irritable, and very loud. We threatened to spank him. We regretted this later, and the regret was a dirty feeling from which no amount of gossip or ironic observation could cleanse us. I tried to speak with Sue about the findings about after this again, but there were additional complications. There was war in all quarters. Nearby and far away, suffering was afoot. Some of the suffering was the result of starvation, and some the result of boredom. The following month an acquaintance of ours was found dead by his own hand, and all of us returned to what we secretly knew. The little confidences. We were not surprised. This surprised us.

I brought up the data after this. We were on a perfect holiday, the kind we almost take for granted here with starfish and a rainbow haze strung from one headland to the next. It was not the moment to talk about the shape of living. After all, what was there to say? Was this not the shape of living directly before us? Most of what the data revealed was known anyway, and since it only supported my original hypothesis it seemed churlish to return to it

Some months later, perhaps a year after our first talk, the wind is moaning and the long grass is peppered with stray limbs. Rain pools in the sunken grave of the chicken, which, it turns out, my son no longer remembers burying. Sue

believes this is trauma, but it could be he simply has a bad memory. ‘Yes,’ Sue says, ‘which is the result of trauma.’ I don’t reply, but it seems to me that there is suddenly much more talk of trauma than there was this time last year.

The rain lashes the house and the children stand in the kitchen, dripping. They begin to undress before the fire, but my daughter gets down to her shirt and underwear and then turns and goes to finish undressing in her room. ‘Where are you going?’ her brother shouts after. He is six, naked, hair hanging in front of his eyes, and I place my open palm on his chest, stop him at the door and tell him that his sister is going to change in private. Maybe it’s something about the tone of my voice, but my son asks no questions. Merely turns and heads back to the pile of dry clothes before the fire, standing there and staring and looking like he wants to say something. He doesn’t say anything, and neither do I.

In the sink, the dishes are waiting.

The next morning my daughter wakes us to report that there is water dripping out of the ceiling next to her bed. It is a leak, and I am nominated to climb onto the garage, leap over to the almost-level kitchen roof, and then mount the steep gable and investigate. Thus, in the midst of a mauling downpour, I find myself two stories in the air, straddling the ridgeline of my house.

And so I have become a man on the back of a whale, and in the belly of the whale, my family are waiting. Lights are shining from the bay window, I see them spilling onto the broad puddles of the driveway. They are down there in the belly eating and talking and plugging things in, while I ride the slick spine of my house. Sue has never set eyes on the unarranged data of living, and so she knows nothing about the true shapelessness of the world. She won’t have seen my benevolent editing. The bald confessions will go unrepented, sit in their bits of silicon like the bends in an undiscovered stream. She’s below now, warm but worried, with the fury of Antarctica on her mind. Ice floes and glaciers and the vast silver crevices that point to the past where all the human villainy seems so parochial.

In the darkness, the current of wind sets off a car alarm, and below me water has penetrated the shingle. By which I mean to say that nothing has changed: the radio is still playing, the grapevines are nourished, and the men stand weeping on all their broken streets. Ordinary, enigmatic, and haphazard – no shape in the blind dark, just as I thought. But I know what Sue would say. Here I am at the end of things, holding fast to the keel of my home with no plan for my return and not much time to consider what may be dominant or heartless after all. *How could I leave anyone up here?* And you’re asking the right question, dear Sue. Only help me find the way down, help me put the children to sleep and stoke the fire, help me to fix a drink, and sit with me and talk until the light comes pouring through the long grass and once again we can talk again about the shape of things.

Thom Conroy is an American fiction writer living in New Zealand and teaching creative writing at Massey University. His historical novel The Naturalist was published with Random House in 2014. His short fiction has appeared in a variety of journals in the United States and New Zealand, including New

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TEXT poetry

Aaron Chapman

Last Rites

Here I am: all yours and naked.
Carpet burns across my body
from the journey to a different person.

I keep my cold fire close,
and a packet of wandering Camels.[1]

I take a chainsaw to pleasures
in the pathless woods.[2] One tree
to make a poem, which makes Bukowski
guilty of deforestation. Perhaps I'm the same.

Months of drafts and white confetti
add years on lungs and liver.

Decades as the heart's interpreter
for a decent couplet, or tercet
in a page's corner, that easily fits
on fallen leaves, or biopsy samples
confirming my poet's death.

Compose a eulogy from a fugue of letters
that begin with the word *Unfortunately*...

1. Billy Collins – *Love in the Sahara* return to text
2. Lord Byron – *There is Pleasure in the Pathless Woods* return to text

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TEXT prose

Andrew Leggett

Kindness

Just before I pissed my pants outside the toilets at *Karlsruhe Hauptbahnhof*, I was thinking of her. The train from Strasbourg had run fifteen minutes late. Time was tight for my connection. Then she came into my mind, and I found myself dragging my suitcase at high speed on its castors to the opposite end of the station from *Gleis 11*, the platform that I wanted. I clenched my pelvic floor and ran, with the toilet door in sight. Then I encountered a turnstile operated by a machine demanding .50 euro admission. I fumbled for change, panicked, and on came my latchkey incontinence. Then. There. At the head of the queue. In full view of the station janitor, whose face registered disgust. *Ein Vieh aus der Fremde*. Filthy foreign animal.

I found a fifty euro cent coin, slipped it into the slot and attempted to drag my suitcase through the turnstile after me. The bag stuck. I was through. I had it by the handle, but it remained outside, and I was inside. The kind man behind me, glancing away from the urine dripping out of my trouser leg and into my lime green socks, deposited his coin and squeezed himself in behind my bag as the turnstile rotated. At last my bag and I were both in the toilet.

I retreated into the cubicle, removed my shoes, my saturated socks, my trousers and my underpants, wrapped the wet stuff up into an Aldi bag and shoved it into a front compartment of my suitcase. I rummaged in my suitcase for clean clothes, hurriedly dressed, left the cubicle, renegotiated the turnstile and returned to the entry to the concourse between the platforms. The sign showed my connecting train leaving at 18:58, right then. I ran, pulling my bag behind me, reached the stairs at platform 11. When I was halfway up the stairs the sign indicating Heidelberg as the destination of the next departure switched off, leaving a blank screen. The platform was empty. I had missed my connection.

Then the encounter flooded my mind. On the first day of the conference, Karen McLeod asked me, ‘Do you see much of Julie Stinson these days?’

‘I haven’t spoken to her for about four years.’

Julie chose that moment to appear in my peripheral vision. I turned to her, stretched out my hand and said, ‘Hi Julie. It’s nice to see you again.’

She took it. Shook it politely, smiled. ‘It’s nice to see you, too, Ian. How are you these days?’

I smiled back, and shrugged my shoulders. ‘Well, I’m still alive, Julie.’

‘Yes, you are, Ian! I’m off to the ladies now, before the session starts. We must catch up later.’

Yes, we had to catch up. With the same degree of imperative I felt about catching Ebola. I'd as soon catch up with Julie Stinson as I would tango with a tarantula. The thought of it was enough to make me want to break out in buboes over my collar bones just so that I could ride the death cart as a means to a rapid exit. Just the thought of it was enough to make me puke and shit.

Fortunately a benign old French colleague came up to me then and after stammering out '*Je ne parles pas Anglais*,' told me kindly that my French wasn't so bad but he found it difficult to follow my Australian accent when I was speaking in the groups.

To which I replied, '*Je ne parles pas Francais. Un petit peu. Je n'existe pas. Je suis rien!*' I don't speak French. A little bit. I don't exist. I am nothing!

The old man was good natured enough to laugh at that, and overlook my provocation. But it was true enough. I'd sooner slip into a crack in a French culture in which I did not exist, rather than 'catch up' with Julie Stinson again. That snake!

Throughout the remainder of the conference I found myself ruminating on the betrayal, on the way in which I had been made to feel special – that somehow, although she said we were not going to have an affair, we should hang out together, run some groups together, have coffee every Friday and have a platonic 'thing'. Julie Stinson told me she had a crush on me, which provoked me to have a crush on her, and to trust her implicitly, while she pumped me for information. She was feeding Baron von Munchausen's version of my indiscretions into the gossip machine of our professional association, our personal circle and ultimately, the ear of my sulking wife. To Julie, I was as special as a hospital for the deranged or a school for the mentally retarded – Special Hospital, Special Education Unit. Special Agent Julie Stinson. I had become her special project, and she was on a special mission to ruin my life.

I avoided further contact with her. I hung out with the Germans and the French and avoided the Australian groups for all the social activities. So I managed to keep my guts inside my own abdomen and managed to have a good time by suppressing my conscious wish to disembowel Julie. But when they served up *foie gras* at the closing banquet, I couldn't stop myself from imagining grinding up her sweetbreads with garlic and chives in a mortar with a pestle, enjoying them spread with a butterknife on mini crostini.

To the very end, I kept my resolve not to speak to her, and even though she was in my vicinity at the end of the closing ceremony, I turned my back on her, dragged my suitcase out the door and began to walk resolutely to the Metz Ville railway station. When I lost my way, and asked directions of a young Frenchman, he answered me in very fair English, offering to escort me to my destination. I had enjoyed my conference, had a nice lunch and was now directly experiencing the better side of human nature. I boarded my train after belting out the first few paragraphs of this short story.

We made good time to Strasbourg. I had no trouble making my connection to cross the German border and journey on to Karlsruhe. Soon after the train pulled out of the station, I noted that we were running fifteen minutes late. I worried about missing my connection to Heidelberg. I was so weary after all the conference hype that in spite of my fears, I fell asleep. And dreamed.

I dreamed I was on a railway platform with Julie Stinson. She was wearing a prim black business suit, with the skirt reaching to just above the knee, pantyhose and black stilettos. She ran towards me, as best she could in

those heels, her arms outstretched towards me, her cherry red lips pouting, ready for the clinch. I took her in my arms and kissed her passionately, lifted her off the ground and swung her round through three hundred and sixty degrees.

I woke with a jolt as the train pulled into platform 10 of *Kahlsruhe Hauptbahnhof*. I noticed that I had a boner. Must've been the French girl sitting opposite me. She was wearing a red tartan skirt, torn black stockings and Doc Marten boots. Quite enough to send the blood of a healthy Australian male of Scottish heritage coursing. I scrabbled for my bags and stepped off the train onto the platform, then down the stairs to the concourse.

It was then the confusion hit me. First the confusion, and then the panic. Thoughts of Julie invaded my mind and, with them, the urge to piss myself. I think you know the rest.

Dejected, I dawdled down the stairs with my suitcase, travelled the concourse again, then rode the escalator up to the *Deutsche Bahnhof* office. I took my number and waited to be called. The clerk was sympathetic, and especially helpful, as I had bought a non-transferrable ticket. She gave me one for the next train, half an hour later, free of charge.

I made my way back to Platform 11, but it wasn't until I was safely seated on the train to Heidelberg, indeed, until it was pulling out of the station, that I looked back at the rails below Platform 9 and saw the broken body of a slight redhead in a black business suit, lying prostrate, limbs akimbo. I had dreamed of killing her with kindness.

Andrew Leggett is a Brisbane writer of poetry, fiction and academic papers who works clinically in mental health. He is a medical graduate and holds a research master's degree in creative writing from University of Queensland, is a Fellow of the Royal Australian College of Psychiatrists and a confirmed PhD candidate in creative writing at Griffith University. He is a former editor of the Australasian Journal of Psychotherapy.

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