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TEXT poetry

Daniel Lael Gough

Ink

And through stained glass
lead light recedes
toward the man
hunched over
his oaken desk,
of wood cut from a forest once
older than his great-great-grandparents,
to write with ink
words that mean something.

He does not know what the oak of his desk will never forget,
bound, as it is, to the atrocity
in the creation of this silent well containing *Atramentum Librarium*
that sits, still as black,
black but for the memory of trees,
upon his great-great grandfather's desk.

He is unaware that his ink is not of burnt ivory,
which would haunt a different species
notorious for its memory,
though surely not so long as the memory
passed through these ancient trees.

No, this particular ink, the source of which
he never knew to forget in the first place,
involves tannic acid extracted
from oak bark, which is then reacted
with iron salts, and has lain in vacuum
to be passed along the paternal generations.
Could it be that the oak of his desk
came from the same forest as the bark
processed to create this here black ink,
which now lays finally open, without quite knowing why?
He does not know to ask the oak, or even how, and so such questions linger in
the dark reflection; all absorbent
but for the lustrous sheen of linseed
that gives this particular ink its black depth.

He tries to think
back through his past,
past memory's
eternal link.

Remembers when,
in the boarding-school halls,
far from his father's home (who daily sat at this very desk),
the boys he knew
would turn on him
until they drew from him
the reddest of inks.

Remembers the day,
must have been
late September,
that day when Lucas,
whose father used to beat his mother in front of him (he was later told),
drew his blood well past consciousness
to the fading cheer of the growing crowd.

He remembers the day
the most popular boy
in the boarding school
had been so kind to him

in order only,
after years of beatings,
to be invited
to his birthday,
early September...
as acorns lay
littering the shadows,
in the ephemeral light of Spring...
dreaming of those towering trees' potentially
contained within each one of those little hatted seeds...
and what would become of all of them.

Daniel Gough graduated in 2003 with a Bachelor of Creative Arts, University of Melbourne/VCA, majoring in Creative Writing and Filmmaking.

TEXT

Vol 18 No 1 April 2014

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy & Enza Gandolfo
text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT prose**Lachlan Prior***The Use of the Imperative*

I believe that this barber means to murder me. I cannot be entirely certain, of course. Perhaps I am suffering from paranoia - an elaborate fantasy I have spun from plain cloth. But he and the small man certainly have some plan in the making, and I believe it to be more sinister than merely a haircut and shave.

The small man assumes that I can't understand the machine-gun Cuban spoken between him and the barber, and he's right. But I pick up more than he thinks I do. I have heard the verb *matar*, 'to kill', four times. Once in the future tense, twice in the infinitive, and once, most distressingly, in the imperative.

I do not know how they plan to do it. I assume it will be with the rusty straight razor that sits in a position of prominence on the dirty sink in front of me, but I have not heard the verb *tajear*, 'to slash', or *cortar*, 'to cut'. Perhaps they have a garrote, or something more prosaic: a knife. Perhaps a gun.

I'm not sure it would make sense to murder me. These streets are small and dense with neighbours. The barber, I think, doesn't consider it a good plan. He's used the verbs *manchar*, 'to stain', *desmembrar*, 'to dismember', and *ocultar*, 'to conceal (an object)' in tones that suggest these are all disadvantages to the small man's plan.

I believe the only reason to murder me would be financial. I am a man without enemies, a scholar of sorts, here to retrace the steps of Bernal Diaz's *La Conquista de las Americas*, and the coming of European civilization to the continent. But I am wealthy, it is true; and today I have taken less steps than usual to obscure this wealth. I assume this to be the reason for my hypothetical murder.

It does seem an extreme act, though. Why not simply rob me of my belongings and set me on the street? Perhaps they will. The barber, I think, wants this. But I am a foreigner, traveling alone, and nobody knows I am here. And perhaps they believe me to possess an excellent memory. To be able to lead the PNR here, retracing my steps.

I do not, however, possess an excellent memory. Though I try desperately to remember the series of turns which led me from the Plaza de Dolores to this dark room with the dirty sink and the cracked mirror and the curving wooden stairwell of fine Cuban mahogany, my recollections are distant and dim.

Had the small man been the one to approach me in the plaza as I sketched the facade of the church in a notebook I carry for that purpose, I should have been more wary. I have, after all, dealt with my share of beggars and scam artists since I flew into Havana a week ago. But as it was I who approached him, asking in clumsy, broken Spanish if he knew where I could find a barber, I assumed the risk of his being some shady miscreant to be negligible. He made me repeat myself three times before he understood me. He seemed ashamed for me. I was ashamed for myself. Three decades of reading this language, becoming expert in its particulars, and here I was, unable to make a simple request.

And so, when I finally gained his understanding with elaborate gestures and he beckoned me to follow him, I did. Down Aguilera, right on to Calvario, and at that point my knowledge of the geography of Santiago de Cuba becomes less assured. A left, a right. Teenage boys, shirtless, playing some sort of ball game, bouncing it off the facades of the buildings on either side of the street. A vendor selling sticks of dough deep-fried in oil. A right, a left. An elderly couple in a horse-drawn cart, rolling along on car tyres. A living room in which a couple danced, their bodies touching at every conceivable point, a glass of rum in the man's hand. Left, right, the alleys becoming narrower and less populated. Only a paperboy, lifting the money for the paper from a wicker basket lowered by an elderly woman on the fourth floor of the building to my left. Then several more turns, the small man turning and smiling with his crooked teeth, urging me on until he guided me through an unassuming doorway into the dark room in which I am now seated.

Since I must sit with my back to the barber and the small man, I will not be certain that they intend to murder me until the act is already underway. The razor will be piercing my pharynx; the gun's barrel will be smoking behind the padded cushion of my chair before I have the relief of certainty. My only chance for escape, therefore, is to jump up now, while the barber is still in the act of cutting my hair. I could run for the door, and if they did not impede my progress, I could run down the street shouting *¡Asesinato!*. They would not be able to catch me before someone heard me.

But I am overreacting, surely; this is an old, entrenched habit of mine. What proof have I that they are to kill me? A couple of words, probably misheard. I could not even ask for a haircut in this language, and yet I have the temerity to condemn these men based on my knowledge of Spanish verb conjugations. I am being ridiculous.

Were I to run now, I would look the madman, and later, in days and weeks following, I would forget the terror that I feel now. I would never learn the true intentions of these two gentlemen, and it would seem to me, upon reflection, that I had simply panicked without reason. I would berate myself. I would convince myself that I have neither the requisite courage nor trust in my fellow man to travel as I must through these tropical nations.

When I entered, the barber had smiled and shaken my hand. He shouted, Hello, in English, but when I responded in the same it became obvious that this was one of only a handful of words he knew. He whistled to a boy who sat on the dark stairs at the back of the room. The boy disappeared upstairs and returned with a bottle of rum and three lowball glasses, dirty with the residue of previous drinks. The barber poured out a shot of rum for me and the small man, and we clinked our glasses together. I had smiled. I felt, then, that this was something of a breakthrough for me, an experience that would cross the cultural divide.

Then the boy left, and the barber began conversing with the small man in staccato murmurs. The rum, then, seemed to augur badly. The barber and the small man argued in their low voices quite fiercely, careful to keep the words flowing fast, beyond my comprehension. Twice, the barber had become angry and forced the small man to leave the room. It was on the second occasion that the small man had used the imperative, hissing *¡Matalo!* - Kill him - as his face disappeared through the doorway.

The barber snips away at the hair above my ears, then reaches his other hand around and pulls back the loose fringe of hair at the front of my head. He grins. His teeth, too, are crooked, and two are capped with gold. *Un secreto*, he says. A secret. He laughs. He is referring to my receding hairline beneath my fringe. I smile at him weakly and look away.

But his words rouse me. There is one other possibility of escape. I have not spoken in Spanish since my botched question to the small man; perhaps, if I now demonstrate some fluency, they will realize that that their plan is no secret and abandon it. I must compose a question carefully. But on what subject?

Martillo. I heard the small man with the crooked teeth say *martillo*. A hammer! They plan to crush my skull with a hammer. While the barber shaves me, the small man will approach quietly from behind and bring the blunt steel crashing down upon my upturned and open mouth.

But no: a hammer would be too loud, too messy. Teeth and blood and bone fragments. A tool far too clumsy for the neat traceless murder of a wealthy foreigner. Perhaps it was not *martillo* but *mi tío*. Trying to pluck the words I need from this viscid soup of nouns and prepositions is more difficult than ever I could have guessed.

The barber finishes my haircut and sweeps the clippings from under me with a small wooden broom missing most of its bristles. Then he takes the scissors and, pulling the edge of my nostril out with his left hand, trims my nose hair. His fingers are stubby, grubby and unwashed; it feels as though he has left a stain of grease on my nose. He trims my beard back to a more civilized length, and reaches for the straight razor.

Baseball. I will ask about baseball. Something simple, but colloquial. Who is going to win the World Series? Easy. Common words, familiar to me. A subject no doubt of interest to these men. A simple construction in the present future. Who is going to win the World Series? I don't even know who's playing.

The barber begins the shave on my cheeks. The blade is old and rough. It tugs at the stubble and makes me shudder. It will be tough to plunge that through my carotid artery. If it is to happen I want it to be quick and clean, not a series of botched slashes with a tool not fit for the job. The barber, noticing me flinch, whips the razor away, pulling a new blade from a drawer under the mirror. New, he says in English. New.

I turn in the chair and look back at him. No problems, I say in Spanish. So. Who is going to win the World Series?

The barber does not respond. He acts as if I have not said a word. The small man, smoking a cigarette at the back of the room, begins to murmur to him and they begin a conversation whose meaning is lost on me.

The barber places the razor to my cheek again and draws it down. On the second stroke, he places it too heavily. A thin line of blood beads along the top of my cheekbone.

Sorry, he says in English, searching for each word individually and waving his hands. I, am, sorry.

He wets his fingers under the tap and wipes the blood clear. He waits to see whether it will bead up again and when it does not, he continues with the shave, careful to use a lighter touch. The small man gazes at my reflection in the mirror, taking anxious puffs on his cigarette.

Ahora, he mumbles. Now.

My time to act is diminishing. The barber places his crooked forefinger beneath my chin, a silent cue to tilt my head back. I look up, fixing my eyes on a cluster of cobwebs on the musty ceiling. In a few moments this situation will be cleared up. Either I am a paranoiac who has concocted a morbid death-fantasy, or else I will be dead, my body dumped in some deserted concrete canal.

The barber is not satisfied. He nudges my chin further up. I roll my head back, my eyes registering only more cobwebs, more dust. I am wealthy, but I am not sure that I deserve death. The folds of my neck stretch and tighten. His finger is on my chin and I can feel the blood thick in my arteries. I breathe deeply. I am a scholar; a man with no enemies. Out of the corner of my left eye I can see that the razor is high above me. Perhaps this is the moment in which he swoops down, the avenging angel come to extinguish all life from me. Perhaps he is simply shaking the cream from the razor. It hangs there above me, dull and ungleaming. I cannot wait. I push my throat toward it, urge myself to it, my back arching, my blood pulsing, my stubbled skin suddenly impatient for the razor's kiss.

Lachlan Prior is a short story writer and essayist from the western suburbs of Sydney.

TEXT

Vol 18 No 1 April 2014

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy & Enza Gandolfo
text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT prose

Pemela Greet

Self-flagellating narrator

Never start with an apology. It is Friday. I won't tell you the date. My private plan indicated I would have the first draft of my exegesis completed yesterday. I haven't written one word yet.

I have spent the last five hours re-reading de Certeau, Carter, Modjeska and my notes on Lynch. I can't connect with any of those former thoughts. The neighbours have a crew working with jackhammers breaking up their concrete driveway to replace it with a nicer one.

My teenage daughter comes and stands behind me, sweating words at my screen, gives me a hug and asks 'How's the exit Jesus going?' Then she refuses to hang out the washing. I bang my fists on the door when she walks out smirking. She's been on holiday for two weeks now, watching movies on her lap-top, meeting friends in the city and other teenage business.

I feel like the top of my head is going to split open any moment now.

I go for a walk, leaving the dog at home.

I walk through the reserve and lie down under one of the trees planted as part of the Million Trees campaign when Campbell Newman was just the Lord Mayor of Brisbane. I look up through the leaves at the burning sun.

Actually never apologise at all.

'Just how self-flagellating will this narrator get?' my supervisor's comment on an early story draft.

Hey, I was just getting started.

Maybe if I lie here with my eyes open staring directly at the sun for long enough, I'll go blind and I won't have to write my Jesus.

I see myself as a kind of suburban bowerbird creating stories from the scraps and fragments that make up the everyday lives of ordinary people. I was born in Home Hill, Queensland and grew up in Townsville where I completed

undergraduate studies at James Cook University. Starting out as a secondary school teacher, I worked most of my life in the not-for-profit sector with a significant period living in South Africa, the UK and Europe and travelling extensively in Africa. More recently employed as a public servant, my daily travel to and from work in Brisbane provided a fertile inspiration for years of (sub)urban story which remains largely to be recreated. After years of eavesdropping and scribbling, I recently completed an MA in Writing and Literature at Deakin University.

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Vol 18 No 1 April 2014

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TEXT prose**Eileen Herbert-Goodall***Journey*

Alice stood before the mirror and ran her hands down the front of her shirt, along the jeans hugging her legs. She saw the figure of a boy, straight up and down, flat-chested. Curves, voluptuous placements of flesh in just the right places, were something she'd once wanted. She'd also longed to conceive a child, and there were still days when the void inside her bloomed, pushing everything else out. She did her best to let such feelings rise and pass. Some things weren't meant to be.

Her hair was pulled back, revealing the lines stamped across her forehead. Alice looked into her own eyes; she was no beauty, but there was an intensity there, something running deep. She wondered what others saw. A woman past her prime? A lost soul? There was no way of knowing. Having held herself at a distance over the years, she had no real friends, no one to confide in; but she was well acquainted with solitude.

She heard the whine of a vehicle and knew John would be out distributing feed. Drought was taking its toll and the time had come to supplement, which was a relief. She'd seen enough animals go hungry; their country could be harsh, unforgiving. She walked to the window and looked out. The truck bounced across the top paddock, heading south, away from the house. Her husband remained unaware of things to come. It would be easier that way.

Alice glanced at the note on the dresser, then shifted her gaze to their wedding photo, taken two decades earlier. They were in front of the magnolia tree, its carpet of pink and white flowers in full trumpet. John stood behind her, his arms around her waist. Back then, they'd expected similar things from life. She turned away, grabbed her phone off the bedside table, and left the room.

Timber boards creaked beneath her step as she moved down the hall. Morning light struck glazed glass, shining green. Ace sat on the bench in the foyer, casting a slit-eyed stare. He turned to her, blinked, then leapt to the floor, his solid black form landing without a sound. Alice stopped as he rubbed against her, twisted round her ankles. She bent down and scratched under his chin. She'd thought about taking him, but being on the road with a cat was impractical. It would be three day's drive to the city, longer if she took her time. She hadn't yet told Suzie she was coming and blamed her procrastination on the fear of being judged: what would her sister think? She was a stay-at-home mother, married to a successful solicitor with whom she'd had three children. They were quite the family. And here she was, the older of the two, at a life-changing juncture with no plan to speak of.

Alice knew there was a story in it, somewhere. She'd experimented with writing when she and John first married, but then life on the farm had taken over. She could try again, see what came of things. Patting Ace, she searched for a word to capture how she felt: *Apprehensive. Daunted. Adrift.*

Adrift, would do.

Stepping away from the cat, she opened the front door and crossed the veranda. The sky was an expansive blue dome, cloudless. Giant gums swayed, their pale trunks stark against red earth. The windmill turned in silence, its metal blades catching the sun. Near the shed, the dual-cab stood waiting. She strode towards the vehicle, opened the driver's door and jumped behind the wheel. On the back seat there was a duffle bag, tent, and swag. The keys were already in the ignition. Alice turned over the engine, released the hand-brake, headed down the gravel drive. In the rear-vision mirror, she saw her husband's truck moving further away, clambering across brown hills.

Eight hours later, after two brief stops, she turned off the highway at a hand-painted sign that advised of bush camping ahead. The road was narrow and lined with eucalypts that cast long, quivering shadows. Alice hit dirt and slowed the vehicle. Peering through the windscreen, she saw a sickle moon shining in the fading light. The road deteriorated to a set of meandering tracks and she gripped the wheel more firmly. As she drove, snippets of the story she would later write began to take shape.

Speeding along the highway, the woman had been surrounded by darkness when she noticed it – a light by the side of the road, a shimmering golden orb. She hadn't passed another vehicle for at least an hour. She leant forward, squinting in an effort to see, and realised it was someone waving a torch. Easing her foot off the accelerator, she deliberated whether to stop...

The track widened, spilling out into a clearing that Alice guessed spanned two acres. Rimmed by shimmering trees, the area was drenched in twilight. To the left she spotted a campervan; a man and woman, both older-looking, were seated out front. She turned right. Trundling across the grass, she pulled up near a towering tree, killed the engine and rested against the vinyl seat. She let her hands slip into her lap, felt fatigue closing in. Crickets chirped. The sound pressed against the windows, its familiarity bringing comfort. *Summer days. Plump, ripe fruit.*

In her mind, John's face appeared, weathered yet handsome; grey eyes, tanned skin. She imagined him standing in their room reading the note, brow furrowed, lips pursed. He wouldn't have seen it coming. Hijacked by guilt, she sucked in a breath, then slowly let it out.

She checked her phone before slipping it into her pocket. No one had called. She thought of her sister and her insides turned. Suzie would want her to explain, to fill in the gaps, but Alice couldn't identify a single, definitive reason behind the decision to leave. She knew it was an accumulation of things. The past few years had seen her stalked by a feeling of entrapment, a sense of being in the wrong place at the wrong time; but then, she'd always struggled to fit in. A quiet and solitary girl, she'd spent much of her childhood alone while growing up on her parents' orchard. Occasionally she and her sister played together, but mostly they did their own thing. School was undertaken via radio and opportunities to socialise were limited. For company, she would dream up fictional characters, along with scenarios of sorrow, unrequited love, and misplaced loyalties. Or else she spent countless hours reading, falling in and out of imaginary worlds.

The years passed; then, at a local dance, she'd met John McKenzie, an ambitious young farmer who'd purchased property adjoining his parents' cattle station. Coming from a long line of graziers, John was pure salt of the earth, nothing if not an outback man. That night, long ago, he'd paid attention to her, asked questions, made her laugh. The experience was a revelation. Within a year, they'd married. Alice was nineteen; John, three years older. They were

hardly more than kids, yet it had seemed right; his presence had grounded her.

Now, strangely detached from everything, she pictured herself floating amongst the stars, drifting further and further from the sun.

The stranger grabbed a handful of hair and dragged the woman from her car, ignoring her screams. Why had she pulled over? Stupid. Stupid. She caught the flash of his knife, and panic became a fist rammed down her windpipe...

Someone knocked on the window, making her start. A man stood looking in, shoulders hunched. He spoke through the glass: 'You alright?'

It was the guy from the campervan; she slid down the window, forcing a smile. 'Yeah, I'm fine.'

'Good to hear,' the man said. 'I'm Ray Dawson.'

'Alice McKenzie.' She held his gaze and saw kindness there.

'You wanna hand with somethin'?' he said.

'That'd be great, thanks.' She stepped from the dual-cab, opened the rear door and started pulling things out. Looking across at the van, she noticed the woman had gone.

The tent was a small canvas dome with two bent rods that conspired to hold the structure upright. It had been in the shed for years, gathering dust. They assembled it within minutes, then stood back to admire their handiwork.

'I appreciate your help,' she said.

'No problem.' He pointed a thumb over his shoulder. 'You got time to come meet my wife?'

She felt obliged to make an effort. 'Of course.'

Alice grabbed a torch, then followed Ray. Tall strands of grass dipped before their feet as they crossed the clearing. Reaching the van, they headed beneath its awning. There was a fold-out table with a couple of chairs, a burning kerosene lamp, a pack of cards, an esky. The scene radiated simplicity and peace. She hovered near the table as Ray stuck his head in the van's doorway.

'We got company, love,' he said.

A woman emerged from the van. She had long grey hair and walked as if moving against a strong wind, a hand on her midriff, back bowed. 'Hello, I'm Lois.'

'Alice.' She shook the woman's hand and smiled.

'Let's sit a while. You want tea?'

'That'd be lovely.'

'Tea comin' up,' Ray said. 'Sugar and milk, Alice?'

'Just milk, thanks.'

Ray appeared with another chair and placed it near the table. 'Be back in a tic.'

'Where you from?' Lois asked.

'Manderfield, out west. You?'

'No fixed address at present. We're originally from the Southeast, Brightwell. Gorgeous place on the eastern seaboard.'

Alice hadn't seen the ocean in years. Commitments with the farm had afforded few opportunities to travel. Her lack of worldly experience left her feeling naive and a little staid.

Ray came back and handed the women their tea.

Lois smiled at her husband, who bent to kiss her cheek. Alice looked away.

Ray sat in the spare chair. 'You on the move, Alice?'

'Yeah.'

'Got far to go?' he asked.

‘Another day or so.’ Alice shifted in her seat; she didn’t want to be quizzed.

‘We’ve been travelling almost six months,’ Lois said. ‘The kids are grown, so we figured it was time to do our own thing.’

Alice wrapped both hands around her cup, soaking up its warmth. ‘How much longer will you be on the road?’

The couple exchanged a glance.

‘We’re just going with the flow,’ Lois answered.

‘I can relate,’ Alice said.

Lois put down her cup and leant forward.

Ray placed a hand on her back. ‘You right, love?’

‘I’ll be fine.’ Lois’ voice sounded cracked and bruised.

‘You wanna go to bed?’

‘Yeah.’

He helped his wife to her feet and steered her towards the van’s door.

Lois glanced at Alice and tried to smile. ‘Night,’ she said.

Alice raised a hand. ‘Good night.’

The pair went inside and Alice sat down, distracted by concern. She heard a rustling sound and shone her torch into the scrub, wondering what was there. She’d never slept in the bush without John.

Moments later Ray reappeared. Lowering himself into his seat, he dipped into the esky, pulled out a beer, cracked it open.

‘Everything okay?’ she asked.

He looked at the stars and said, ‘Lois has bowel cancer. The doctors gave her three years, at best. Half that’s already gone.’

Alice searched for something to say. ‘That must be tough.’ *Torturous.*

Ray sipped his beer. ‘Yeah.’

Crickets drilled at the quiet.

She was struck by the strength of the couple’s commitment. How had she and John managed to drift so far apart?

‘You got someone special?’

Her breath came out in a rush.

‘Sorry, I don’t mean to pry.’

‘It’s okay.’ Words crouched in her mouth; she swallowed. ‘Yeah, I’ve got someone.’

‘Tough times?’

‘You could say that.’

Ray nodded.

A groan drifted through the night; it was deep and guttural, steeped in suffering.

‘I should probably let you go,’ she said.

He got to his feet. ‘Alright.’

Walking back to camp, Alice thought about death. Would it be easier to know it was on the way, slowly sneaking up, or for it to snatch a person away? She didn’t know.

She stepped into the tent, zipped it up, crawled onto the swag. Loneliness swelled inside her. She checked her phone, then placed it on the floor. She wished John would get in touch, yet dreaded hearing his voice. Exploring her ambivalence, prodding its sides, she sensed it was studded with shame. She should have given him some warning.

Flicking off her torch, she listened to the night. Crickets sang on. Then, as if someone had hit a switch, they fell silent. A hollow space remained, and she was left to tumble through it. *Alone. Untethered. Afraid.*

The woman observed the stranger, who sat cross-legged on the ground,

sharpening a butcher's knife. The blade glinted. He'd overpowered her, tied her hands behind her back, then taken her to a nearby cave. Once there, he'd started a fire. The place was set up with a selection of tools, his torch, cooking implements, plates, cups. Everything was neatly arranged along a wall.

She bumped her legs against the stone floor, trying to ward off numbness. As she watched him, details seared themselves into her brain. The man was young – mid-twenties – with dark eyes, a square jaw, an after-five shadow. He wore a singlet, cargo pants and trainers. He looked fit and lean, like a long-distance runner.

It was raining; she envisaged rivulets of water streaming across the ground outside, running free. The woman cleared her throat. 'Are you going to kill me?'

The stranger ran his knife along the steel, turning the blade with each stroke. 'That depends.'

His voice was like a slap. She blinked and said, 'On what?'

He stopped what he was doing and met her gaze. 'The Lord told me to find you. Now we wait for further instructions.'

She bit her lip, fighting back tears. It was supposed to have been the start of a holiday on her parents' farm, a break from the city. How many times had she made the trip previously? Five? Six? It didn't matter. This was the end of the road...

Sinking into the mattress, Alice surrendered to sleep. She dreamt she was sitting on a narrow rock shelf part way down a cliff, stranded. Night cradled her. She rocked back and forth, a hand resting below her ribs, her tears falling into the dark sea that rolled and heaved far below.

Alice woke to daylight's warmth and the incessant trill of crickets. She checked her phone, slipped it into her pocket, dragged herself off the swag. Her back ached and she rubbed it as she stretched. Stepping out of the tent, she noticed the weather was overcast. She glanced across at the van, registered stillness, and turned a half circle. A dense line of trees stood in the distance and she knew the river was there. She crossed the clearing, then followed a rough path through the bush. Paperbarks raised their branches towards the sky, seemingly in supplication. Whip birds called to one another as the scent of damp earth reached up to meet her.

The vegetation peeled back, revealing a grassy slope; it led down to a wide, brown river that cut through the earth like a monstrous vein. Alice stopped to listen. Trees whispered in the wind. She walked towards the water, which moved slowly, throwing shafts of light as it went.

He had untied her so she could relieve herself. She stared towards the rear of the cave, into the darkness. There was nothing to wipe herself with and she pulled up her underpants, then her jeans, rising quietly. He stood watching the fire, his back turned to her, the knife in his hand. Crouching, she picked up a hammer, stepped forward, lifted it above her head, then slammed it against his skull. The shock of the impact reverberated up her arm as the man slumped to the ground. She dropped the hammer, grabbed his knife and torch, then ran...

Down along the bank, the grass was knee-high. Alice hoped there weren't snakes and bent to pick up a long, gnarled stick. The river hissed and sighed, pushing its way east. Reaching the water's edge, she looked up-stream and saw

Ray. He was standing in waist-deep water, rod in hand, immersed in his task. It was a snapshot of happiness stripped bare.

Ray spotted her; Alice waved, then watched as he approached.

'Hey there.' He climbed from the water, his cheeks flushed, eyes bright.

'Hey. Catch anything?'

'Not yet,' he said, laying down his rod, 'but I'm in no rush.'

They sat on the bank. On the water light danced.

'How's Lois?' she asked.

'A little better this morning.'

Alice pulled a blade of grass from the ground. 'And how are you?'

He shrugged. 'Truth is, I can't picture life without her, but it's gonna happen. Soon she'll go some place where I can't follow.'

'I'm sorry,' she said.

'No need.'

She realised John and Ray were the same type of men. *Loyal. Steadfast.* Was it right to have thrown that away? She pushed the question aside, fearing the answer.

The water ran on as leaves shivered above. Ray touched her shoulder and pointed to something across the river. Alice followed his gaze, freezing when she saw it; a deer stood at the water's edge, its head bent to drink, legs spread apart. Its antlers were sprawling, powerful. *Bewitching.* The creature sensed their presence and looked up. Startled, it stepped back, staring with wet, round eyes, then ran into the bush.

'First time I've seen a deer in the wild,' Alice said. 'There's none where I come from.'

'Same here.' Silence sidled up between them, then Ray said, 'Maybe seeing that creature's a sign of things to come.'

'Like what?'

'Could be good, could be bad. Depends on how you want to look at it.'

'I guess so.'

Alice had decided to take a walk. Giant grey boulders lined the way, reminding her somehow of silent old men. To the west, jagged mountains reached for the sky. She stepped carefully, from one rock to another, conscious of her own breathing. Here the water seemed to be moving faster, rushing for the sea. Alice stopped, closed her eyes and listened to the whip birds.

It was no longer raining and a full moon slid out from behind the clouds. The woman raced towards the sound of gushing water, her lungs burning. She scrambled over logs and pushed through dense scrub, one hand gripping the knife, the other holding the torch. Bursting into the open, she found herself by a swollen river. Out beyond the water, pressing against the night, stood a mountain with sides that gleamed silver. She felt as if it were watching her, urging her on. She looked around, her gaze skittish, but saw only shadows and glistening leaves. Before her, the torchlight trembled...

She sat on a flat section of rock, paddling her feet in the water. Bloated clouds hung low. Glancing down, she caught her reflection and was surprised at how well she looked. She seemed to glow from the inside, or maybe it was a trick of the light. In the quiet, clarity came to her: she'd head to her sister's and get a job in a cafe. Suzie was a real estate agent with plenty of contacts – she'd know someone needing help. At night, Alice could put together a few stories. Turning to the sky, she watched clouds drift.

Birds erupted into song as day broke. The woman staggered forward, her limbs heavy. Lifting her gaze, she saw a cabin in amongst the trees. Its tin roof shone with morning light and a trail of smoke escaped its chimney. Awash with relief, she leant against a rock. She caught a flicker of movement and turned to scan the bushland, her heart thumping. Then she spotted it, a deer. The creature stood metres away on the river bank, watching her. She could see its chest muscles twitching. The deer sniffed the air before turning to flee, its step light and quick.

Drawing in a breath, she looked out at the mountain, which was aglow with the soft hues of dawn. Streaks of white streamed down its flanks, disappearing into the earth. The woman took a step, then another...

Alice's mobile rang, making her jump. She took the phone from her pocket and saw it was Bob Sullivan calling, a police officer stationed at Manderfield. She guessed he was checking on her. 'Bob, how are you?'

'Could be better, Alice.' His tone was sombre. 'I've got bad news.'

'What is it?'

'There's been a fire.'

She felt the breeze tugging at her hair. 'Where?'

'At the homestead – it's burnt down.'

The moment seemed to expand, to stretch before her in all directions.

She waited.

'They still don't know what caused the blaze,' he said. 'The place was an inferno by the time we got there.'

Her thoughts were losing tread, sliding across her mind.

'You there?'

'Yeah. Is John okay?' She heard him take a breath.

'He's dead. I'm real sorry.'

Silence, white and bare, swam down the line. She imagined John lying on a bed of ashes, his body scorched black. *Twisted. Grotesque.* He would have died alone.

'I found your cat,' Bob said. 'He's okay.'

The world seemed to tilt and her vision blurred.

'Alice?'

She nodded, hunting for words. 'Thanks for calling. I'll be back in town early this evening.'

'Drive safe.'

'Yeah.' She hung up, lay back and closed her eyes. So that was it – John was gone. She let her cheek rest against smooth rock as the despair that had glutted her dream the night before returned fully blown. Grief, deep and wet, sloshed through her veins, weighing her down. The sky growled and split open. Raindrops peppered her skin, thrummed against her clothes.

If she'd been there, he might still be alive. *Stomach-stitching regret.*

She watched as the river swept past, forever restless. Finally, she stood and began the long walk back to camp.

Alice drove past Ray and Lois, knowing she'd never see them again. Earlier, she'd packed up and headed over to tell them the news.

Lois had taken her by the hand. 'That's terrible for you, love. Just terrible.'

'It doesn't seem real,' Alice said.

'Is there anything we can do?' Ray asked.

'No, thanks. You two take care.' Alice embraced each of them, then got into the vehicle.

The ute's engine growled as she accelerated. In the rear-view mirror,

she saw the couple holding on to one other and wondered how much time they had left.

The woman knocked on the door, pitched to one side, and leant against the cabin's wall. When the door opened, an elderly man appeared. He looked at her, his face etched with lines. 'Hello there. You okay?'

The woman opened her mouth, then closed it, unable to speak.

The man led her inside. 'Love,' he called, 'come quick.'

As Alice endured the return journey, the highway stretched into the distance, an unyielding, black plane. *Desolate.*

Eileen Herbert-Goodall holds a Doctorate of Creative Arts which she attained from the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC), Queensland. She presently teaches high school students through the university's Creative Writing Excellence Program. She also works with adults who wish to improve their reading and writing skills.

TEXT

Vol 18 No 1 April 2014

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy & Enza Gandolfo
text@textjournal.com.au