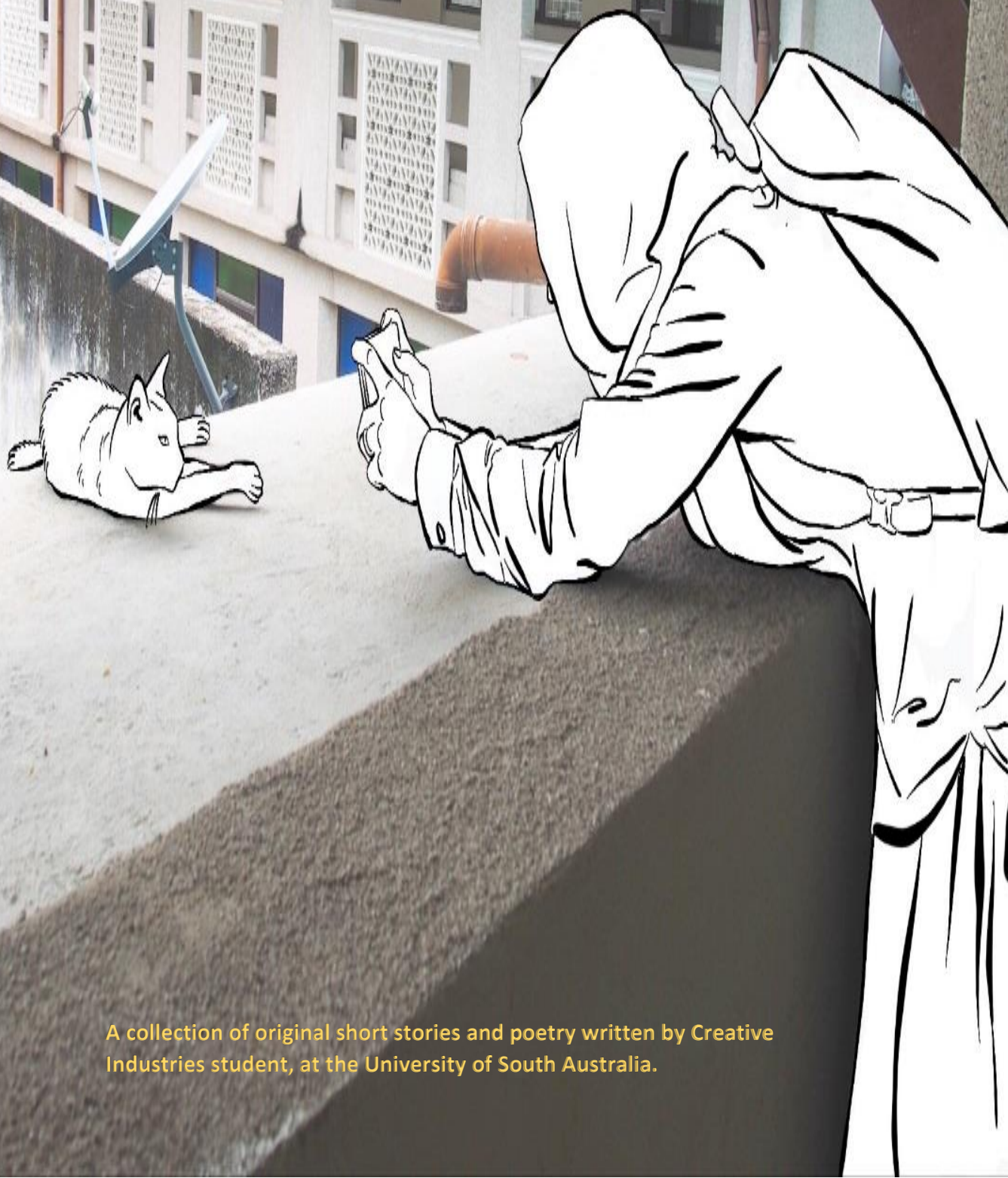


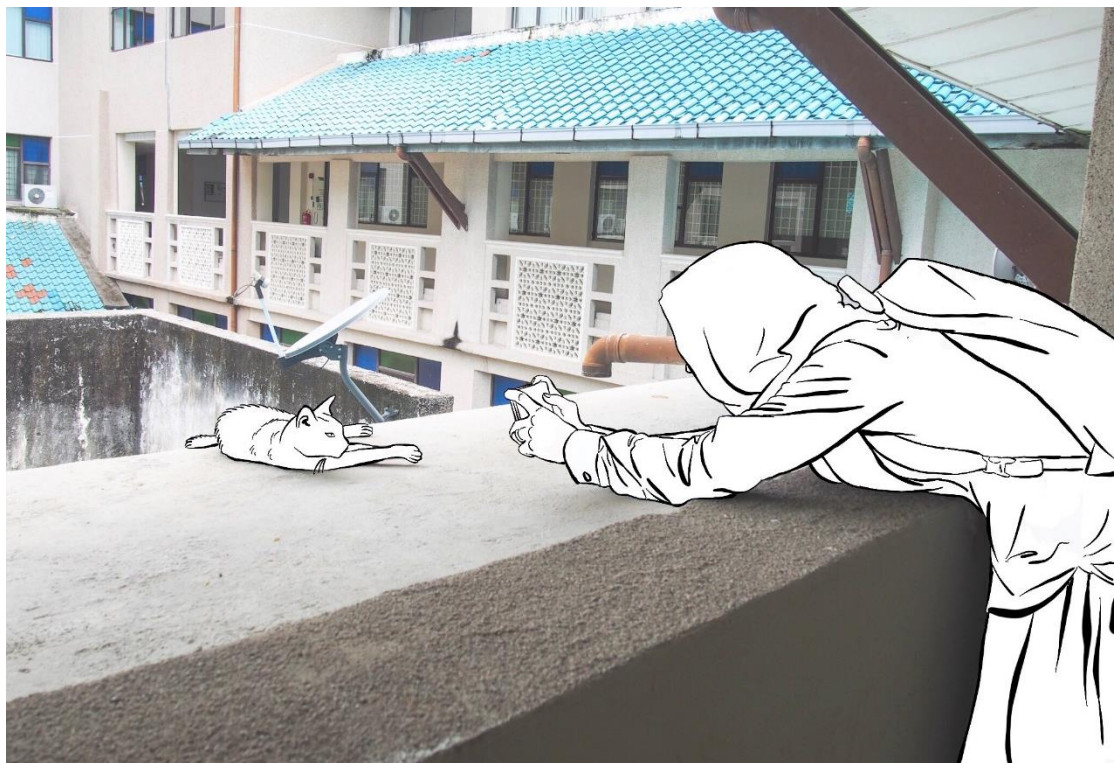
Piping Shrike Perspective



A collection of original short stories and poetry written by Creative Industries student, at the University of South Australia.



Piping Shrike 2018



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Editor's Notes

It has been my absolute pleasure to peruse the fine fruits of creativity farmed by the creative writing students of 2018.

Through different writing styles and forms of short stories and poetry, this collection, *Perspective*, is an exploration of daily life through many different lenses: Millennial pressures, family expectations, social constraints, feeling alone, and many more. Some pieces make mundane life extraordinary, while others have made the unreal become all too real. The poetry is more than vivid colours splashed between narratives. It explores the expression of different views. It has the potential to resonate differently within each of us.

Whatever your style, or preference, you are likely to find something that is great for you. Please, take your time and enjoy a change in *Perspective*.

<http://unisa.edu.au/education-arts-and-social-sciences/school-of-creative-industries/student-work/piping-shrike/>



Steven Pappin

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Content

<u>Anne Jackson</u>	<u>Down Any Street</u>
<u>Carli Stasinopoulos</u>	<u>Don't Look Through The Crack</u>
<u>Connor Foley</u>	<u>Road Trippin'</u>
<u>Dante DeBono</u>	<u>Millennial Iliad</u>
<u>Kimberley Betts-Smith</u>	<u>Breaking Free</u>
<u>Emily Spain</u>	<u>Flight After Death</u>
<u>Freya Jane Markwick-Smith</u>	<u>My Poems</u>
<u>Genevieve Hudson</u>	<u>Unpinned</u>
<u>Jack Tilley</u>	<u>Feeding the Shrike</u>
<u>Jacob Paul Horrock</u>	<u>5 poems</u>
<u>Jake Kempster Male</u>	<u>I thought I hated Poetry</u>
<u>Steven Pappin</u>	<u>Twisted and Thorny</u>
<u>Jamie Tyner</u>	<u>Poems: <i>The Walk & The Choice</i></u>
<u>Luke Sawford</u>	<u>Poetry</u>
<u>MADISON HART</u>	<u>For Publication</u>
<u>Aden Burg</u>	<u>No Return</u>
<u>Jordan Paige Irvine-Creaser</u>	<u>Do It Lik'e a Lady</u>
<u>Zoe Nash</u>	<u>Panthera Leo</u>
<u>Patricia Cheron Mang'ira</u>	<u>Poems: Rites, Mama & Wedding</u>
<u>Georgia Gustard</u>	<u>To the Beyond, Violet Orchid (et.al.)</u>
<u>R. Liu</u>	<u>Bittersweet Window Dressing (& poems)</u>
<u>Renee Jade Miller</u>	<u>The Price of Acquisition</u>
<u>Simone Lowe</u>	<u>The Road To Home</u>
<u>Jesse Neill</u>	<u>Speechless</u>
<u>Stephanie Minhoto</u>	<u>Evelyn</u>
<u>Nathan Walsh</u>	<u>The Cynic</u>
<u>Courtney Burke</u>	<u>Maybe in The Next Life</u>



Down Any Street: weaving suburban dreams

No. 27 – Boggat

No.15 – Ms Stimming and son Benjamin

No. 13 – The Death of Mrs Parson

No. 27 - Roger Bogart - known in the area as Boggat; he rarely leaves the house due to his Neurocutaneous porphyria, a disorder triggered by sunlight.

Boggat

Boggat fed the body through the window. Then he climbed out and gathered it up, linking his fingers together to gain a bit more strength. The girl was heavy and he was growing weaker, now that night was withering in the grey taint of morning. He didn't have much time till the sun spilled its ugly shade of pink across the clouds. He had to get safely under cover before the sunlight touched his skin, triggering the crawling itch that would quickly swell into blisters, crippling his muscles with pains that would spasm, forcing him to curl up into a tight ball, screaming inside his head. He had to get home. He hadn't been so close to the touch of morning for years. Boggat was usually very careful and stayed locked inside during the day, with the curtains tightly drawn. But over the last three weeks an overwhelming loneliness had filled his thoughts.

It had begun with the children outside his window. It sounded like they'd lost a ball. He'd just started working on a matchstick model of a Victorian terrace house and tried to ignore them. He often heard people outside, but he'd stopped looking out, watching, listening, wondering about their lives; they belonged to a different world, one he had no part in. He was just about to glue the end of a matchstick, when the sweetest small voice rose up like a bird startled in the bushes; it called in a lilting melody that reminded him of the



voice of his mother. Boggat dropped the stick in the glue and raced to the window.

His small telescope jutted through the edge of the heavy curtains. Boggat tilted it towards the footpath and caught a glint of afternoon sun shining in long golden hair. It splintered, beaming into the cold room and his heart skipped; it fluttered like a moth trapped behind a window pane. Quivering in haste his thin fingers fiddled with the small wheel that adjusted the lens, refocusing it, sharpening the view till it revealed each trace of delicate expression that played upon the face of the young girl who was climbing over his low brick fence. Her skin was soft and smooth like cream, with a touch of cherry wiped lightly over the cheek bones. Picking up the jacket she'd draped over the rough bricks, she laughed with a light tinkling rise that fell on Boggat's ears like petals blown off a blossom tree, then ran across the road into the house directly across from his.

As she vanished behind her front door the space around him grew a little darker. He looked around at the room. The wallpaper had begun curling away from the joins, leaving the wall behind coarsely mottled with flaking, crusty glue and a damp shadow stained the corner of the ceiling where the roof had leaked. There was a worn patch on the rug around the table that he'd placed in the centre of the room, directly under the light bulb. He sat there every day building his intricate models but he'd never noticed the worn flooring before, or the thick sheet of dust that covered all the other furniture in the room.

Boggat's stomach began to feel queasy. He felt ill and empty and his throat tightened; he swallowed but his mouth was dry. Strength drained from his arms till he could hardly hold the telescope still. He couldn't move, his legs felt dead beneath him; just useless struts, like rotten wood they barely held him up. The loneliness flowed through him like a gnawing hunger grinding in his stomach. He craved to go outside, touch the girl, hear her laugh and feel the sun's warmth glowing in her hair.

Boggat watched the house across the road every day for the next three weeks. Through the girl's bedroom window he saw her lying on the bed on her stomach, with her feet waving in the air; he laughed, thinking they were



waving at him. He saw that she always left her window open a bit. He got up early to watch her run down the street in the morning, her shiny black leather shoes tapping the pavement as her school bag bounced against her clean white shirt, and her short dark blue skirt frilled out, dancing around her long legs. On the weekends he watched her playing with her friends. He noted the tall hedge that grew along the side of her house, dividing it from the next and the thick, stumpy book-leaf pine that grew beside her window. He saw her parents go out each Tuesday night at 6pm and watched her wave them good-bye. He knew they were gone for three hours, no less, no more; the girl was always left alone.

On the Tuesday night that Boggat chose to cross the road, the street was quiet by 7. The moon had barely risen and only a few stars glittered like specks of silver in the slate black sky. He stepped out the side door of his house and stood with his back pressed against the cool bricks of the wall. The lights were sparse in this section of the street and a dark space filled the stretch of road between his house and hers. He looked down the street, first one way, then the other. Only a few fallen leaves were moving, they rustled in the warm breeze.

Boggat slipped quickly across the road, into the gloom of the hedge in the young girls front yard, then he crept along to the pine outside her window and slid behind it. Slipping his hands through the small gap under the window's edge he pushed it cautiously up. It slid easily in the frame, making no sound. Hoisting himself up onto the ledge, he slipped over the edge into the darkness.

Boggat's heart pounded in his ears. He crouched below the window holding his head till the rhythmic thumping quietened. As his eyes adjusted to the lack of light, the outline of the bedroom door emerged. He could hear music playing somewhere in the house. Boggat wove his way between the clothes and books that were scattered over the floor and turned the door handle. He poked his head out and saw a light at the end of the hallway. Digging in his pocket for the cloth bag he had made, he sauntered down the hall. He felt more confident now he was inside; inside with her.



The girl was sitting on a low couch with her back to the door and her phone in her hand, her hair shining in the electric light glowing above her. Pop music blared from the TV, that took up half the wall. Boggat crept up behind the couch and pulled the bag down over the girl's head, yanking the drawstring tight. Her phone hit the floor with a crack as she scrabbled at the bag, trying to grip and tug at it. Boggat leant over her holding tightly to the bag but she wouldn't stop fighting, her nails scratching his face as she struggled. A brass vase stood on a table nearby. Boggat grabbed it and hit it against her head till she slumped, still and quiet.

The song on the TV ended. In the moment's silence Boggat heard a car drive towards the house. He froze, hoping it would turn and go but the car doors slammed and he heard angry voices coming closer. On the TV a gentle ballad began. Boggat grabbed hold of the girl's arms and pulled her towards a door at the back of the room. It opened into a large sunroom with windows all along the back. There was nowhere to hide, but off to the side was a small room with a washing machine and large cupboards. Boggat pulled the girl across the floor and into the laundry room, pushed her into a cupboard and climbed in behind her. He pulled the door shut and held it tightly.

As they came through the front door her parents began calling, "Pearl, we're home. We're back early, where are you?" Their voices grew louder and then faded as they went through the house, opening and closing doors. A note of panic crept in and the calls grew shrill, finally the parents ran out, slamming the front door shut behind them.

Boggat liked the name Pearl, it rolled warmly through his mind; the name was perfect for the girl. As he opened the cupboard he realised he couldn't go out through the bedroom window. The parents might still be out front. He would have to take the girl along the laneway that ran behind the houses, on this side of the street, then cross the road and hurry home. He rattled the laundry door, it was locked but a small window beside it looked easy to break. Boggat pulled a t-shirt from the washing machine and wrapped it carefully around his hand. He drew his fist back, ready to swing it through the glass but then he heard the mother's voice as the front door opened again. Quickly he backed



into the cupboard and pulled the door shut. His hands were shaking and Pearl was wriggling and moaning, he leant back against her; he couldn't let go of the door so he forced his weight against her until she was still. He waited.

The parents' cries subsided, as a siren pulled up outside; there were more voices, pleading and tears then the police began searching the house. Boggat began to shake as heavy booted footsteps came towards the laundry; they filtered through the thin door that he held tightly closed. Just as he thought the door would be wrenched open someone shouted and the boots ran back through the house. Boggat heard the front door slam, and the sirens fade down the road. He crept out of the cupboard. His legs and arms still shook and they were stiff from holding the door for so long, but at least Pearl hadn't made another sound. He stared at the window. He couldn't smash the glass now, in case people were still in the house, but slightly protruding from the curtain that fell to the side of the window, he spied a little handle and as he cranked it the window wound out. Boggat quietly closed the laundry door then pulled Pearl's limp body out of the cupboard and pushed it through the opening. He scrambled out after her and picked her up. Cradling her in his arms, he pushed through the hedge separating the backyard from the laneway and hurried along, reeling a little as he struggled to hold her. Her dead weight was heavy but he was desperate to get home before the police returned and the sun came out, and he still had to get across the road.



No.15 - Ms Stimming and son Benjamin - Benjamin has been diagnosed as living with autism spectrum disorder, although considered high functioning he has difficulty with social interactions and word meanings

COOL-streaming: shadows on the spectrum

Cool she said. What did she really mean? Am I iced over, frozen stiff and unyielding? Just a trend, an image, no depth no warmth no feeling? It rolled though. O's rolling into an upright I that reaches tall as the branch at the top of the tree that spikes its way through the clustering leaves; rolled off her tongue and splashed upon me sending shivers through the lining of my stomach. Maybe she meant that it would soon rain, the day was cool not me at all. I felt the first drops form inside my mind, slowly trickle down the inside of my face; lucky they didn't leak out. I'd pasted a smile on the bottom half of my head. Cardboard glue that smelt thick like it had glugged up into lumpy gluepots of kindergarten when I'd been left behind; she said she'd be there on time to pick me up but even then I knew she never would be. She was paper-mache; easy to dissolve. Glue smelt white. Thickly it flowed, filling the spaces joining past and present. So you'll come then? Yeah sure, sounds like fun. Words fall in pearl white drops and bounce. She skipped lightly heels flip the world, nonchalant, the smile flung over her shoulder fell at my feet I picked it up, brushed off the slight trace of dust and put it in my pocket. Bright warmth flowed through the thin cotton tingled the tips of my fingers, as I tucked it tight to pull out later and see if it had faded. Pale pink. Why are mittens lying in a gutter stream? Crafty finger traps of woven woollen threads; they squelch. Cool sun slips, ringing the cloud edge in steely blue.



No. 13 - Mrs Parson is elderly but usually lives alone; her daughter is visiting to look after her as Mrs Parson refused to stay in hospital even though she is terminally ill.

The Death of Mrs Parson

Taking time

I let it fall

upon her open hand

traced the lines

on whispering skin

watched the life pulse within

taking time

I saw the wrinkling crease

fold beside her eyes

a slow smile spread

pleating parchment thin

ageing worrying skin

I took time

to stay hand in hand

hold her slender strength, in mine

watched memories flow

beneath fragile skin

her closing eyes clear, dim



Carli Stasinopoulos

Don't Look Through The Crack.



Sadie could sense that something wasn't quite right the moment the bus pulled up in front of the castle. The tires crackled on the gravel and came to a stop as the rain started to pelt down. She cut a peephole in the frosted window with her hand and her eyes met with the window of the tallest turret. On any other day, at any other location, Sadie would have thought it be gorgeous. She would spend time admiring the architecture of the buildings, finding it all too fascinating. Her and her friends would explore as much of the place as they could, taking as many photos as their memory cards would allow. In her free time, after dinner, when her other friends would be helping themselves to more food, she would find a secluded spot somewhere outside and read until it was time for bed. Sadie loved school camps because it was her biggest opportunity – at least until she was finished with high school – to explore old historical locations around her state and stay there overnight. This morning on the bus ride, however, after hearing a plethora of stories and rumours about this place, Sadie didn't want to contribute to any conversations like she normally would. Instead, she sat silently in the window seat, curling the pages of her book nervously between her fingers.

Residing in the countryside almost two hours from her house, there it sat, a relic of the Victorian era. With no light coming through the windows, they all sat black. The concrete stairs leading to the entrance were cracked and decrepit. The exterior stonework sat dark and dull under the density of the rain, the castle blending with the dark clouds.

Sadie didn't have any recollection of how long the figure with the red hair was staring back at her from the window. A nudge on the shoulder distracted her as her backpack was shoved into her chest. When she looked back at the window the figure was gone. Sadie inhaled a long breath and crawled out of the bus seat with the knowledge that she'd be on her way home in twenty-four hours.



His name was Allen, but he encouraged everyone to call him Al, and Sadie had only seen him twice the entire stay. Quite a stocky and seemingly athletic man, especially for someone in his late fifties, Al was the owner of the castle. He stood next to one of Sadie's teachers at the front of the dining hall as she and her classmates waited for their room assignments.

Jade leaned over the table and cocked an eyebrow at Sadie. 'As long as we don't get room seven we're fine. Do you believe this place used to be a mental asylum? I don't.'

The downpour of rain outside drowned out not only Jade's, but also everyone else's chatter. Sadie stared past Jade at the thick curtains covering all of the windows, wondering if it was a mix of the curtains and the dark wood furniture that made the dining hall seemed dim. She also wondered what the rain outside looked like. If she knew the direction it was falling she would be able to tell, not only how soon the thunderstorm would be hitting, but if, for any reason, she was in danger. She thought it a seemingly useless trick she learned in the Scouts, a few years back, until it saved her life on a class ski trip.

Fingers clicked in front of her face. 'Sadie!'

Sadie jumped, slightly startled, and locked eyes with Al who had materialised in front of them. He smiled at her and held up a black key. 'Room nine.'

#

'We got lucky', Alanah, who was behind the girls struggling to drag her heavy suitcase up the flight of stairs, whispered to Sadie. 'At least we're not staying in room seven. Do you think it's true that thirty people died in that one room?'

Room nine would keep five girls that night including Sadie, Jade, and Alanah. The girls followed Al up the staircase, and before they could catch up, he pointed at their door and shoved



the key into Jade's hands. Al dropped his smile and muttered 'if there's a problem talk to your teachers. I'm going home.'

Dumbfounded, watching Al as he pushed his way down the stairs, Jade asked 'but what about--?'

'—If *there's* a *problem*,' Al repeated, slowing. He kept his back turned to the girls, though Sadie caught his deadpan expression. '*Talk to your teachers.*' He shook his head and continued down.

A voice, belonging to Veronica, broke through the tension. She coughed 'asshole' under her breath while moving her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

The first thing Sadie noticed when she got to the top of the stairs was not the door to her room, which was directly in front of her. To the right of their door just before the hallway turned and continued left, was the last room. Lightning crackled loudly outside, reflecting off the metal of the padlock, knob lock, and sliding chain keeping the door to room seven shut. A chill ran down her back.

#

Jade groaned as she headed for the closed curtains concealing the only window of their room, sharing the corner with Sadie's bunk bed. 'Why is everything so dark in this castle?' she muttered as she threw the curtains open. The natural light barely made a difference.

With three sets of bunk beds, one bed remained free. Sadie scored the top bunk of the bed next to the window and parallel to the door. The bed below her's held as many bags as could possibly fit.



While on the top bunk, Sadie leaned over the side and bobbed her head down slightly to see out the window. Thunder grumbled overhead, but the rain was vertical. She breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Forget about the rain for a second,’ came Veronica from the wardrobe behind Sadie. Standing there with the doors open, she frowned. ‘Why does this wardrobe not have an inside?’

Jade and Alanah walked over to the wardrobe from their beds while Sadie and their other dorm mate, Leelah, peered down from the tops of their bunks. The wardrobe was nothing but a shell bolted into the wall with two blankets folded at the bottom. Scratches and graffiti lined the walls.

‘Creepy.’ Veronica murmured.

Jade ran her finger over *‘if you’re looking for a good blowjob, call Gemma’* and snickered. ‘I wonder if the number still works?’

Pulling out her phone, Alanah laughed. ‘Wanna find out?’

An unfamiliar voice came from the doorway. ‘I wouldn’t do that if I were you.’

Sadie turned to see whom the voice was coming from, but her dorm mates blocked her vision. She headed for the door as the voice continued.

‘There’s no phone reception in here. The walls are so thick that you can barely get any connection let alone make a phone call. But the numbers are also scam numbers you find from those stupid ‘do not call’ lists on the Internet. So if you’re lucky enough to have the call get through, your phone might get tapped,’

This girl’s demeanour led Sadie to believe she was older than everyone, if not a year twelve at least a first year university student. She leaned casually on the doorframe, twirling her necklace around her finger. Before anything else, Sadie recognised her red hair, and almost



as if the girl felt that realisation, she locked her gaze on Sadie and narrowed her eyes. ‘And we don’t want that to happen.’

She introduced herself as Peyton, Al’s daughter, while wandering around their room. ‘Yeah, I reckon I’ll stay in here. I always liked this room. It’s one of the bigger ones —’

‘—I-I’m sorry...?’ Sadie interrupted. ‘Stay in here?’

Peyton cocked an eyebrow and flashed Sadie a look that made it seem like she had just asked something she shouldn’t have. ‘Am I not allowed to?’

‘No, that’s not what I meant. It’s just...’

Peyton explained how she helps her dad when he’s hosting school camps, making sure people behave themselves and stay out of areas they shouldn’t go. She ended her statement with ‘what’s the harm in bunking wi—?’

‘Like staying out of room seven?’ Sadie muttered without thinking.

Lightning flashed through the curtain. Thunder crackled as Peyton’s replied. ‘Yes.’

‘What’s in there?’ Leelah asked.

Peyton opened her mouth to say something, but then changed her mind. ‘Nothing that concerns any of you.’

#

Sadie refused to follow the others to the activity hall for lunch. Her shoes squelched under her as she left the group and ran up the staircase towards her room, irritated about forgetting her umbrella at home. The activity hall was a three-minute walk off the grounds, past the boy’s dormitories, and close to the river where the teachers had planned the class meditation— of course before the weather turned sour. Lunch was being served in the activity hall rather than



the dining hall, which confused Sadie because they were informed *after* they trekked back through the storm. At this point she didn't care about food. She was freezing, her hair clung to her face, and her clothes were soaked. A chill ran down her back and she shivered before unlocking her door and slamming it behind her.

'I hate this weather.' Sadie muttered to herself, unzipping her bag. She pulled out a long-sleeved top to replace the one soaked under her hoodie, but her only spare pair of pants was her blue pyjama pants patterned with ducks. She held them in her hands and contemplated whether damp jeans were really that terrible at the same time a loud door slam echoed down the hallway and almost made her jump out of her skin.

She froze, listening intensively for any other noises, but the second floor was still. Silent. Too silent. It was deafening.

Damp jeans were no longer important. She quickly changed her top and grabbed a pair of socks from her bag, telling herself she'll sort her shoes out anywhere but here. Sadie headed for the door but the sound of slow, heavy footsteps in the hall broke through the silence. Up the staircase, the steps treaded slowly, creaking under the weight. The footsteps changed once treaded on carpeted floor, and the slow, almost robotic pace, convinced her they did not belong to someone familiar.

Paralysed with fear, her initial thought was she was going to be murdered with socks in her hands and damp jeans. She didn't want the police or classmates thinking she had peed herself when rain was the cause. This thought process was enough to convince her to leave the room. Sadie made a beeline for the door. She gripped the handle and went to open it, but the sound of the footsteps stopped outside the door. She froze, eyes locked on the doorknob in her hand. Something on the other side creaked under its own weight but didn't move. Sadie did not want to open the door and be confronted with whatever was out there. If it were one of her



dorm mates they would have barged in like normal. If it were Peyton she would have knocked. No one else had a reason to linger outside her room. Before she had time to even register what she was doing, Sadie dropped down to her hands and knees and gradually placed her head on the floor to peer out of the thin space between the carpet and bottom of the door.

To her shock, there was nothing there. She frowned and questioned the noise when loud knocks erupted. She jumped and scurried to her bed on her hands and knees. The knocks came in threes, paused, and knocked three times again. The rattling of the metal locks gave away that the knocks were for the room next door, not for her's. A surge of adrenaline pumped through her. With her legs shaking under her, Sadie threw her socks on the ground, ripped open the door, and locked eyes with nothing. In front of room seven was no one. The knocks ceased and all was silent again. There were no signs that any of the locks had been tampered with.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Jesus!’ clutching her chest, Sadie jumped and turned around. ‘What are you doing here?’

Peyton shrugged. ‘Checking up on you. You ran off from your class.’

Sadie’s voice trembled. ‘Were you up here just before?’

Confused, Peyton shook her head. ‘No, I just came up here now. Are you sure you’re—?’

‘—Someone was up here!’ Sadie shrieked. The adrenaline had taken over and she couldn’t control her shaking voice. ‘Someone tried to get into room seven, I heard it.’

‘Sadie, no one has been up here.’

‘I *heard* it.’ She repeated. ‘There were footsteps and knocking that came in threes and someone was trying to break through the locks.’



Peyton paused. ‘Really?’

‘Yes!’

Peyton inspected the locks in her hands. ‘Well thanks for telling me, but the locks don’t seem to be tampered with. I’ll talk to my dad and make sure others know not to touch them.’

She went to walk away but Sadie stopped her. ‘If you fancy remaining mysterious, feel free not to answer, but what’s in that room?’

‘Like I said, it doesn’t concern you.’

Sadie rubbed her temples. ‘You can’t keep a room locked with *three* different locks, tell everyone not to go near it, and expect us not to question what’s in there.’

Peyton sighed. ‘Look, I get it. But it’s better if you don’t know.’

She started heading down the stairs when Sadie called out ‘can’t you just—?’

‘*Trust me,*’ Peyton rasped. ‘Stop asking questions and get the hell downstairs.’

#

Graffiti scratched into the glass window read ‘*don’t - look - through - the - crack*’. The message was barely visible – between the raindrops that raced through – but it was there. The windows ran the length of the room with each word scraped into a separate panel of glass. Room eight – which was long and thin with a tall ceiling and the bunk beds against the wall opposite the windows – had the most natural source of light in the entire castle. The excessive graffiti lining the walls, the stained carpet, and the horrific odour, however, proved its lack of upkeep.

None of the girls assigned to the room knew which crack the message meant. Unlike the other graffiti, this one was not date stamped and was –

‘—Scratched into the window?’ Jade muttered.



For the first time so far in her stay, this had been the most natural light Sadie had seen inside the castle. Although the sky was dark, any source of light that wasn't from an overhead dim yellow bulb was blinding. When she went to draw the curtains closed, her hand slipped through thin air at where the curtains should have been. As she turned to question someone about the curtains, she noticed windows above the bunk beds that looked into the room behind them; the glass frosted and lined with scratch marks. It had taken Sadie quite a while to will herself to walk past room seven, especially after whatever happened before, let alone to enter the room that sat directly behind it, but it took nothing at all to race out.

#

Sadie peered around the dining hall, and when she noticed Peyton on the other side of the room, she leaned into Jade next to her and whispered. 'The windows.'

'Windows?'

'Yes the windows.' When Jade flashed a confused expression, Sadie squealed. 'How did you not see the windows?'

Jade uttered a 'ssh' of such significance that Sadie lowered her voice to a grumble.

'The windows that looked into room seven. You were in that room longer than I was, how did you miss them?'

Jade shrugged and stuffed mashed potato into her mouth. An 'I don't know' escaped her mouth.

'We need to look through them.'

'No we don't.'

'Yes we do.'



‘No the fuck we don’t.’

‘Yes we—’

‘—No, Sadie, we *don’t*.’ Her voice stern, Jade narrowed her eyes. ‘What we’re *going* to do is respect Peyton and Al’s rules before we get kicked out of this place and are on the next bus back home and banned from future camps.’

Sadie shifted in her seat and took a swig of her water.

‘Why is this bugging you so much?’ Jade asked. ‘You’ve been on edge this entire stay.’

‘Because,’ Sadie smacked her glass down on the table, ‘there is something at the pit of my stomach telling me that this place has a bad vibe. I sensed it when I first arrived and it’s only gotten worse. Don’t you want to know why the curtains are always closed?’

Jade frowned. ‘No.’

‘Doesn’t every fibre of your being want to know what’s in that room?’

‘No, Sadie.’ Jade replied. ‘No one does except for you.’

Sadie rubbed her fingers under her eyes and sighed, questioning why this bad feeling was only affecting her. She went to continue the conversation but noticed her fingertips were black. She rubbed her temple and noticed more black had smudged on her fingers. ‘Has my makeup run?’

Staring down at her plate, Jade scooped another forkful of mash potato into her mouth.

‘Yeah.’

‘Shit.’ Sadie jumped up from the bench, her first instinct to clean herself up in her room.

‘Why didn’t you tell me? I probably look like ass.’



Inside her room, Sadie fished inside her makeup bag for her makeup remover and a packet of tissues and stood in front of the wall where she swore a mirror was hung. Bare wall stared back at her. She looked around the room, opened the wardrobe doors, and peered behind the room's door, but there was no sign of a mirror anywhere. She threw the makeup remover back on the bottom bunk and pulled out a tissue from the packet. Folding the tissue around her finger, her hand paused mid-air as she swore a barely audible sound came from the other side of the wall. It sounded like a whisper but also like her name. A few seconds of silence passed before she brushed it off and started rubbing off the eyeliner from under her eye.

But then there *was* a sound. Like a fingernail tapping on brick, it came in threes, paused, and tapped thrice again. Her heart lurched in her chest. She wanted to jump back, wanted to drop the tissues and run, but her feet were stuck to the floor. Sadie waited for more sounds, more taps, more anything, but the room sat silent. Her panic turned to anger at the reminder that no one believed her about any of her experiences so far. She muttered profanities under her breath and exited.

Ignoring the smell of the bathroom's odour, Sadie rubbed the tissue under her eye and looked up to an empty wall in front of her once again. No mirror. She swivelled around inspecting all four walls but found nothing.

It took her a second, but when the realisation hit, it was like a ton of bricks.

#

Amanda chuckled loudly, relaxing into her bunk. 'Are you serious?' Sadie, standing in front of her dorm mates wide eyed with the blood drawn from her face, caused Amanda's smile to drop. 'Oh my God you are serious.' This caused her to laugh harder. 'Vampire? A *vampire*? Are you *insane*?'



In one fast breath, Sadie explained her realisation. The closed curtains, the lack of mirrors, the creepy castle itself, and especially whatever Peyton was guarding in room seven make complete sense to her.

‘She can’t be a vampire,’ Veronica said. ‘They burn in sunlight.’

As if on cue, thunder boomed outside. Sadie pointed to the closed curtains and shrieked ‘have you seen today’s weather? No sunlight can get through.’

With pleading eyes Sadie asked Jade. ‘You believe me don’t you?’ but Jade’s hesitation in the silent room was answer enough.

Sadie sighed, rubbing her temples trying to keep back tears she felt forming. As she left the room and closed the door behind her, someone in front of her grabbed her shoulders.

‘Sadie, I found it!’ a girl by the name of Lisa cried.

‘What?’

With a smile full of excitement, Lisa responded: ‘I found the crack.’

#

‘I noticed it when I was lying in bed before. Thought it was the sun’s reflection until I realised there was no sun.’ Pointing a finger at the frosted window, Lisa squinted. ‘See all the scratch marks? One of them scratched deeper than the others and actually cut through the glass. There’s a clear line of sight into the room.’

Sadie turned to Lisa. ‘Have you looked inside?’

‘I tried.’ She admitted. ‘But I’m too short.’

Sadie climbed onto the top bunk, gripped the wooden panel, and propped herself onto her toes. The crack was also just out of her sight. She stepped down and asked for something



to stand on. Lisa handed her the first suitcase she found. Sadie stepped one foot onto the suitcase and tested her weight. When it was safe, she gripped onto the panels again and hurled herself up, this time in line with the crack. It was too thin to see inside by staring at it directly. Her heart was beating fast. She closed one eye and slowly placed her other eye on the crack.

‘Sadie!’

The shock of Peyton’s scream caused her to jolt. The anger in her voice reverberated throughout the room. Sadie fell off the suitcase and almost off the bed completely. Peyton stood where Lisa once was, the room empty other than the two girls.

Peyton slammed the door closed and flashed a stare the devil himself would be terrified of. ‘I want to be a good person but you make it extremely hard to remember it’s a choice.’

Sadie climbed down the bunk bed, although she hesitated before doing so, and met with Peyton. ‘Look, I wasn’t...’

‘You’ve been a pain in my ass since the moment you arrived, Sadie.’ Peyton grumbled between clenched teeth. Her face blended with the red of her hair; the vein that poked out of her forehead pulsated with every breath. ‘Just remember you’re a guest in this place and it’s really easy to make it so you’re not.’

And with that, she ripped open the door and slammed it behind her.

#

The taps came in threes and the whispers shortly followed once the lights went out and the girls were in bed. With the blanket to her chin, although barely being able to see through the darkness, Sadie kept her eyes fixed on the ceiling. She covered the blanket over the ear closest to the wall and buried half her head in the thick blanket as if for protection. Her only saviour



was the distractive sound of the rumbling thunder and the rain smashing down hard on the roof above.

The body sharing the bed with her fidgeted slightly, pulled her red hair out from under her neck, and went back to being still. Without moving her head, Sadie fixed her gaze on the back of Peyton's head and wondered why she didn't accept the invitation of sleeping in the free bed below, but rather squish into the top bunk with her.

Peyton's breathing was calm and rhythmic. Sadie watched the silhouette of Peyton's shoulder raise and lower, and thought it best if she tried to get some sleep herself. Sadie squirmed lower into her blanket so it covered her nose and shut her eyes.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Right next to her ear and louder than the last, the tapping appeared in a faster pace than Sadie was familiar with. She kept her eyes shut and tried to ignore the sounds.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Tap.

And then, so clearly even though muffled, came a whisper from behind the wall.

'Sadie.'

Every hair on her body stood on end as she opened her eyes and, while still tucked into the blanket, searched as far as she could see for any disturbances. Every bed was occupied and no one had stirred. Peyton was still asleep on her side.

The voice repeated *'Sa - die...'*

Another voice arose from behind the wardrobe. *'Look through the crack Sadie...'*

Sadie sunk into her blanket and pulled it up to her eyes.



‘...Sadie...’

‘...Sa – die...’

The whispers multiplied and progressively became louder. They overlapped and fought with each other, appearing in licks and dancing in her ears.

‘Sadie...’

‘Look through the crack Sadie...’

Tap.

‘Do it Sadie.’

‘Do it!’

She squinted her eyes shut and blocked her ears but the whispers turned into screams.

‘...Come join us...’

‘...Come on Sadie!’

‘Take a look!’

‘The door is unlocked.’

‘...Look through the crack...’

Tap. Tap. Tap.

‘...Come join us...’

‘Do it.’

‘Do it Sadie.’

‘DO IT.’



When Sadie opened her eyes and rolled away from the wall, lightning flashed through the room and reflected off Peyton's white eyes directly in front of hers. The voices stopped. Peyton's lips quivered as she flashed a horrific smile, saliva dripping off her sharp fangs. Her voice broke through the silence.

'Come on Sadie. You know you want to.'

The blood-curling shriek that escaped Sadie's mouth was almost inhuman but was cut short by the claw slammed over her mouth. It all happened within a second. Sadie felt the first few claws scrape deeply through her back. Then more appeared, ripping through her arms, snapping her bones, and wringing the blood out of her like a damp cloth. She felt herself be flung from the bed and land with a hard thud on the carpeted floor. Sadie couldn't do anything else other than let her screams reverberate through the room.

The bedroom lights snapped on brightly and Alanah, in a tone that was both drowsy and irritated, yelled. 'Sadie what the *fuck!*'

The only thing Sadie saw when she opened her eyes were her dorm mates hovering over her. Some rubbed their eyes, others yawned, but the aggravated expressions on their faces were all the same. Sadie stopped screaming the moment she realised she wasn't in pain. She slowly sat herself up, and in disbelief, stared down at her unscathed body.

Jade asked if she was okay, but the resentment in her voice convinced Sadie Jade wouldn't care for the answer either way.

Sadie jumped up but staggered back, feeling the effects of the blow to her head. She sat down on the bottom bunk and placed her head in her hand while Veronica knelt in front of her.

'You rolled off the bed and hit your head.'



The bed. Sadie jumped up and looked around the room for any sign of Peyton, but she was gone.

‘I didn’t roll off the bed I was thrown by Peyton! She attacked me!’ she screamed. ‘S-she ripped me open with her claws and threw me off the bed! She tried to kill me!’

Jade walked over and started rubbing Sadie’s back trying to calm her down. ‘Look, I don’t know what it is about this place that has you freaked out, but I wish I knew so I could help you. You had a nightmare, that’s all. It’s two minutes to seven; Peyton is in the kitchen helping her dad make breakfast.’ Before continuing, Jade swapped glances with the other girls. ‘She never slept in this room, Sadie. Peyton isn’t here.’

Veronica slowly drew the curtains open, exposing the dark sky. The rain – although not calm – for the first time this trip sounded soothing. Jade rubbed Sadie’s back one more time and helped her off the bed. Sadie rubbed her temple and shot a brief glance outside at the horizontal rain.

#

Sadie lied and told her friends she forgot something in her room the moment the bus pulled up in front of the castle. She escaped the dining hall and checked her surroundings before running up the stairs one last time. Sadie had vowed to never return to this castle, to never come back to this part of town. Before she did, however, she needed to know the secrets.

At the top of the stairs, Sadie went to race around the hallway and bust through the door of room eight but stopped, took a few steps backward, and noticed the locks to room seven were gone – all of them – and the door hung ajar. For a moment she questioned the authenticity, wondering if this was another hallucination she apparently had been having.



With her breath caught in her throat and her heart beating fast, Sadie took slow strides to the door. She placed her hand on the doorknob and cautiously poked her head inside the room. From behind her, a familiar voice arose.

‘Were you going to leave without saying goodbye?’

A hard push sent Sadie toppling into the room, and before she could make out the figure standing above her, the door shut and everything went black.

#

Peyton and Al waved the bus goodbye from the front door to the castle, beaming friendly smiles. They waited until the bus rounded the corner and left their line of sight before dropping their smiles and slamming the door closed.

Al sighed and wiped his brow. ‘It didn’t work.’

‘No, it did.’

Shocked, Al looked back at his daughter, beaming her fangs proudly. ‘I got her.’



Road Trippin'

Day 3

A lone tree sat completely still in the barren and fiery desert. There was not even the slightest gust to bristle its leaves or wipe the sand from its branches. The cruel January sun plagued the land and even the age-old tree was begging for shade. The desert came to life as a white wagon soared past, sending up clouds of dust and dirt into its rear-view.

*'...In the desert you can remember your name,
cause there ain't no one for to give you no pain,*

La, la, la, laaa, la, la, la, laaa...'

Rorey sang along to the stereo, guiding the car with one arm while drumming with his other on the outside of the door. The burning wind soared through his hair and under his pits. His chest was bare and he could feel drops of sweat trickling down his pale skin. Jimmy sat in the passenger seat with his head rested against the window, staring at the digital clock while his head bounced against the glass. His eyes stayed fix on the 2:13 above the dashboard, seeing if he could count in the same time as the clock to the next minute. He had oil stains on his West Perth footy shorts and his sunglasses were resting on top of his shaved blonde hair.

They were nearing the end of their journey to Karijini National Park, a paradise of mountains and waterfalls hidden among the red oblivion of the Great Sandy Desert. They had two hours left on their three-day journey and had just taken the shortcut that leads straight through to Juna Downs. Years ago the Aprico Oil & Gas Company, a Western Australia mining giant, carved the path to do seismic surveys and find oil but the path was now completely abandoned.



The Triton groaned as it moved between gears on the bends and slopes of the surface. The lifetime of annual road trips were finally beginning to take their toll. Jimmy reached into his pocket and lit a cigarette, struggling to spark it as the wind sailed through the car.

‘How many times do I have to tell you not to smoke in the car?’ Rorey said.

‘We’ve got another week in this hotbox for the smell to fade. This car’s nearly older than us anyway,’ Jimmy replied.

Rorey’s attention stayed on the road, trying not to get bogged as the all-terrain tyres veered through the sand. Suddenly the back wheels flew sideways and the car went hurtling off the path into a large ditch. They took a deep breath, relieved they weren’t bogged, and revved the car back up the hill, cheering her on like it was one of them. The tyres crawled up with all their might. They finally reached the top when the engine made a frantic squeal and thud. The car stopped. Both of them watched sadly as it rolled back down the ditch it had come up. After eyeballing each other, they rushed to lift the hood, which now had smoke surging from under it. Jimmy—the grease monkey of the pair—searched for the problem.

‘How is she?’ Rorey asked.

‘Something has pierced through the sump,’ Jimmy replied, shaking his head in disbelief.

‘What does that mean?’

‘Well to put it in simple terms...we’re screwed.’



Jimmy walked away with his hands on his head, gazing out across the endless plains of wasteland. There were no signs of life: no buildings, no cars, no road signs, nothing. The waves of heat rippled like fumes in the air and he swore it could have lit his cigarette on its own.

‘Head up, we can sort this out,’ Rorey said.

‘Do you not understand our situation?’ Jimmy screamed. ‘All alone in the desert with no service, we haven’t seen another human in two hours and have barely enough food to last the day. It must be forty degrees out here.’

Silence returned as they sat back down. The sun was low enough over the horizon that it gave them shade on one side of the car, but heat still radiated off the ground. Jimmy took a deep breath and let the grains of sand run through his fingers. He closed his eyes and his mind drifted far away, back to a home that seemed so far gone. He dreamt of the view of the park at work, the local oval and the smell of coffee when he walked past the café on Maylands Terrace.

‘So what can we do?’ Rorey said, heaving him back to reality.

‘We wait.’

It was soon nightfall and the air around them had cooled. They rested against the car door and watched the stars gradually appear. Rorey placed an arm around Jimmy’s shoulder, but had it brushed off a few moments later.

Day 4

Rorey was woken by a glowing shade of blue that emerged across the sky, devouring the nightfall like an army across the battlefield. His heart quickly sank when he saw no signs of rescue. It seemed even more desolate than the day before. Jimmy was still asleep by the wheel next to their last



remaining tub of water, which was half-empty. After hesitating to upset his dreams and drag him back to their unsettling truth, Rorey shook him awake.

‘What do we do?’ Rorey said. ‘I think if we can find our way back to the main road maybe someone will drive past.’ He spoke encouragingly but a shrill and desperate tone revealed itself in the back of his voice.

‘But what if we don’t find anything?’ Jimmy said. ‘People always say to stick with your car.’

A long argument followed and they agreed on their usual way of settling their differences. Jimmy rustled through the car for his wallet and pulled out a ten-cent coin.

‘Heads or tails?’ he said.

The coin spun through the air as the sunlight reflected off each side before burying itself in the sand. After accepting its result and realising time was critical, they made preparations and set off easterly.

A few hours of hiking later, they felt as if they hadn’t moved at all, still captives of the never-ending red sea. The only indicator of progress was their footprints stamped behind them. *I wonder if this is how Neil Armstrong felt*, Jimmy thought, *up there on his own surrounded by a great infinity of nothing*. He had read books on the Sahara Desert and wondered why this felt so different. *No camels, no pyramids, no ancient artefacts, just fucking sand*. With every thousand steps they walked, time seemed to vanish further from their experience. The only gauge of it was the sun climbing through the sky, yet still they marched on. Left, right, left, right.

They hadn’t spoken for what felt like years and the only sound was the ghost-like whispers whirring through the sand. The wind carved through the dunes, releasing grains into the air only to send them falling again to create other golden mountains elsewhere. The only disturbing of silence came from Rorey.



'Did you know that Australia is the driest continent in the world?'

'What?' Jimmy replied.

'Well...second after Antarctica but nobody lives there so I don't really count it.'

Jimmy was so anxious that he couldn't even bring himself to shut Rorey up. He could feel his mortality squirming in his gut and an overwhelming sense of hopelessness made putting one foot in front of the other an almost impossible task.

'HELP! HELP! SOMEONE HELP!' Jimmy shrieked frantically. The cries summed up the panic they were both feeling inside but had refused to show each other, trundling along like everything was fine.

The return trek quickly turned nightmarish. The sun leaked through the beach towels wrapped around their heads, and despite the volcanic heat, neither could muster a drop of sweat. The never-ending walk turned to delusional stumbling until they couldn't even remember what was happening. They eventually spotted the car up ahead, but just as they did, Rorey collapsed face first into the sand.

Jimmy struggled to lift Rorey from the dirt and threw him over his shoulders, fighting the existential dread in his every bone. As Jimmy stumbled on, he felt Rorey wrap his arms around his chest.

Once they reached the car Jimmy's legs gave out instantly, and they both went crashing down in exhaustion. He searched for the water bottle and crawled over to Rorey, nursing him the precious final drops that remained. Rorey moaned as he was stirred back to consciousness, feeling no better for it. The end seemed certain.

'I'm sorry we walked,' Rorey said. 'I thought we would find something.'



'Jim?' he repeated

Jimmy stayed silent.

'Well if we are going to die here together at least say something—' Rorey paused for another moment '—Fuck you then man! Why do you always do this?'

'Drop it,' Jimmy yelled.

'I won't drop it, we are about to die out here! You know we've never been the same since—'

'Don't go there Rorey.'

'Why not? What are you so afraid of?'

'I said don't fucking say it.'

'So you're just gonna pretend it never happened? That we didn't both say what we said?'

Jimmy kept his eyes lowered in the dirt. 'I couldn't care what I said, I was drunk, now drop it! Sorry if I'm not a little fag like you.'

'The fuck did you say?'

'You heard me,' Jimmy mumbled, turning to walk away.



Rorey exploded with rage. He threw himself at Jimmy and speared him into the side of the car. Jimmy countered with a right hook across his jaw. Back and forth they wrestled through the sand, using every final scrap of energy. Years of frustration, tension and secrecy poured out with every blow. Eventually, they stood pressed against each other in a stalemate, gasping for air and spluttering from the dust filling their lungs.

‘It doesn’t have to be this way you know,’ Rorey said through his bleeding gums. ‘Since when have you ever given a shit what anyone else thinks? When has it not been just you and me?’

‘Jimmy—I—’ Rorey hesitated. ‘I love yo—’

Jimmy screamed hysterically, refusing to hear the rest. He lifted Rorey and slammed him across the car bonnet. Rorey was left motionless, his spine indented in the boiling steel. Jimmy sobbed, but with no water left to fill his tear ducts. He whelped for the blood on his fists, for the ending of a brotherhood, and for what seemed the end of their lives.

Jimmy pulled Rorey from the bonnet, who was not moving, and rested him softly on the ground.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Jimmy said, though he knew Rorey couldn’t hear him.

He rubbed the sand from his face and rested against Rorey, brushing his hand across his bloody, sunburnt cheek. *What am I doing? You’re right*, he thought.

After faltering for a moment, Jimmy leaned in and kissed him. His lips were burnt raw from the sun and his mouth far too dry, but Jimmy felt the slightest of movement as Rorey’s lips wrapped around his, and for just a moment, his sense of hopelessness, his growling stomach and the regrets sealed deep in his heart vanished in a gush of happiness.



Day 5

Rorey woke up to Jimmy shaking him violently. He opened his eyes and removed his face from the dirt, but his body barely reacted as they both lay in agony.

‘Still nothing,’ Jimmy said. ‘Rorey I think this may be it.’

Jimmy laid back against the car and broke down again, burying his face in his hands. Rorey struggled to stay awake. He felt a deep sense of calm surge through him as he accepted the inevitable.

‘Jim, gimme a dart,’ Rorey said.

‘Ha! You bastard! Since when?’ Jimmy replied.

‘Now’s as good a time as any.’

He grabbed one but struggled to raise his arms enough to light it.

‘Here,’ Jimmy said, as he grimaced over and lit it for him.

‘Hey Jim,’ Rorey said, ‘remember that’—he stops to splutter for a moment—‘remember that time when—’ He starts coughing violently and sits back.

He smiled faintly, breathed out a big puff of smoke and closed his eyes. His head slowly leaned forward. The cigarette rolled down out of his mouth and branded his arm. He didn’t flinch.



Jimmy watched on, horrified, but his body unable to react. He just stared for minutes, trying to see Rorey through his blurry vision. He felt the length of his blinks stretch out more and more, until finally, his eyes didnt open again.

Day 10

Channel Nine News music plays:

‘Our top story tonight: two Perth men in their early twenties have been found dead near their vehicle in the Great Sandy Desert, just six kilometres from a bore of fresh water. Authorities say they suffered dehydration and severe heatstroke and had passed a few days earlier before being found. Their families remember them as lifelong best friends, talented footy players and loyal, free-spirited young men.’



Dante DeBono

[**Millennial Iliad**]

Synopsis

Troye is an average Australian millennial.

She is of the contentious generation that grew up with modern technology and a crowded job market, but her story isn't one about a childhood of participation ribbons and trying to afford avocado on toast.

Like so many of us, Troye is just a young woman trying to find her place in the world and facing her own series of struggles in the process.



[What's in a name?]

It's a chai latte day,
cutting back on caffeine.

Last week it was sugar
but she's moved on apparently.

"Troye," Mum asks me, "What do you want, honey?"
"Whatever you're having is fine."

'Troye' was her idea,
like Helen of Troy.

We're not even Greek.
I'm not even a boy.

Nobody told her Troy was the city,
not the woman.

Troye, of the ancient times,
but where is my armour?



[The evening news]

I'm frightened of the future
because I'm frightened of the world.

Each day it crops up,
an errant thought I can't avoid.

The bad news seems to spill,
endlessly, from a burst water main
like it's a slow news day with nothing else to cover.

But not all days pass like that
and not all stories are told

It's fake until it isn't.
It's fake until a mad man murders
some girl your age just because he can
on a road you've walked down before
a few blocks South from home.

"Why was she out there on her own?" they ask
while "Why was he?" is the real question.

Carrying around claws of keys in our pockets,
a fist tucked away, hidden
in case we can talk our way out.
Subservience is what we've always been taught.

Smile politely like it's a joke;
pretend you're fine.



Say you have a boyfriend;
hope it's enough.

Avoid the fight if you can;
perish if you can't.

I'm frightened of the future;
I'm frightened of now.

The reoccurring thought;
I'm frightened.



[Phone call]

Her name lights up the screen
as the vibrations shuffle my phone
along the bedside table.

“Hi, mum,” I greet her.
“Hi, love,” she replies.

She asks about this morning,
she asks about my job,
she asks about tomorrow.

“Meet me at the café on the corner?”
“Sure.”

She doesn’t ask about graduation.
She doesn’t ask about dad.
She doesn’t ask if I’m okay.



[11 o'clock meeting]

"I'm only here for my Mum,"
is how I start.

The counsellor nods as I tell her
how my decision wouldn't be accepted
unless I got a professional opinion.

"How does that make you feel?"
is the cliché she uses.

It feels like it always does when Mum
claims she knows best while ignoring the truth
in front of her because denial is a reflex.

"I'm still dropping out,"
is my conclusion.



[The Trojan Horse]

Sacked from within,
the horse is through the gates of
my city and its warriors
tear me apart.

The wood was stained with doubts,
seeping between the grains
and darkening its shade
moment to moment.

And my Trojans let it through.
Where were the defences?
The self-preservation? The protection?
Where was my army to meet them?

The good and innocent were slaughtered.
Hope shackled and enslaved.
I didn't fight back hard enough.
The threat was hidden inside.
I should have seen it coming.



[**Grown**]

I feel as though I've grown
and it's more than I can handle.

I'm no taller than I was before,
it's not a physical change.

It's more responsibilities at work
with no more power or pay.

It's more to pay back for an education
with no degree at the end.

It's the end of more and more
with no plans for what's next.

Head aching, breath stolen, chest beating fast.
Perhaps it is physical.



[Final day]

A year in makes it feel like such a waste
but I know it's for the best
—the only way I'll survive

"I'll miss seeing you so often."

Jack looks at me with knowing eyes and a smirk.
They understand why I need to leave,
they convinced me it was okay

"I'll miss you too."

There's a niggling sense of guilt, looking at Jack,
someone who's faced true adversity,
someone with a sob story to tell,
someone with good reason,
and here I am, the one leaving.

"You'll be okay,"
they say.

Will I?
"Will I?"

"Of course, Troye.
You'll be fine."

I want to believe you, Jack
But I'd rather have your strength.



[**Law of the land**]

Studying law was a stupid choice

My father made it for me,

he saw my final score and said
with no room for doubt
that I'd be the family lawyer
I'd be the first, I'd be the best
what else would such a smart girl do
but chase after the highest paying job she could?

Thank the gods I didn't have the stomach for medicine;
I'd almost certainly be the family doctor instead.



[Cowardice]

My dad answers after two rings with a short-clipped
“Hello.”

We meander through the usual topics,
while I try to build up the nerve.

I'm dropping out.

I'm a failure.

I'm sorry.

Instead I'm making small talk.

No, I haven't seen the news.

Yes, I was at work today.

No, I saw her last night.

Yes, I'll come visit soon.

“Bye, Dad.”



[**An admission**]

“Are you sure?”

My mum looks at me,
wide-eyed,
unfathomable.

I wouldn't put it past her to make a scene,
full restaurant be damned,
Dad isn't here to scold her for shouting.

“Yes.”

“Really?”

...

“Have you told your dad?”

“Not yet.”

“He'll be so disappointed.”

“Yes.”

She tuts softly, fiddling with the cutlery.

...

“Are you sure?”



[Des-troy]

Where is Aphrodite to offer me as a prize?

Where is Paris to claim it?

Where is my honoured guest to seduce,
to place me on his ship and sail us home?

Where is the war waged in my name?

Where is my title of destroyer?

Destroyer of ships.

Destroyer of men.

Destroyer of cities.

Helen of Troy.

But I am not Helen.

No, I am Troye.

I am the city to be ruined.

I am the bloodshed of Trojans.

I am the ten-year war.

I wear my title.

Destroy her.



Breaking Free

I slowly peel my eyes open, blinking a couple of times and assessing the damage to my body before warily moving to an upright position from the floor, leaning against my bed for support. I close my eyes once more and breathe deeply. Pain radiates through my chest, causing me to wince and grab the side of my ribs. *I'm not going anywhere tonight.* The taste of copper fills my mouth as I slowly try to swallow and my face feels sticky from either blood or tears, maybe both. Emotionally I feel numb, but my body aches with the twinges of lingering pain that shock me as I attempt to move. *More bruises to hide.* I know I need to get up, have a shower, clean up all the mess left from the fight and place my fake smile on my face. I suck the air around me back into my lungs, taking long and deep breaths. The pain is just bearable. I brace myself against the bed for the onslaught of agony before I push myself up off the floor and manage to stand. My head pounds slightly but not as bad as usual after an altercation with Bryce. I glance at the wooden floor covered in blood from where I had lain. Locating an old shirt, I retrieve it and kneel to wipe up the blood, noticing that drops of blood are falling from me as I wipe. Sighing, I make quick work of tidying and rearranging my room to some semblance of normalcy before gathering my towel and some fresh clothes to head to the bathroom.

The pain was starting to set in as I place my things on the counter next to the basin.

Glancing into the mirror I wince at the damage reflected in it. My dark brown hair is matted



with blood from a cut near my hair line. My dark grey eyes are red and swollen from crying. My left eye has a cut above it and purple shadowing forming as well as swelling. I flinch from the pain as my fingers caress the spot and fresh blood seeps from the cut. My bloodied nose is covered in fresh and dry blood, but doesn't look broken and my full bottom lip is split open and quite deep. My pale complexion is blooming with dark bruising along my jaw line and neck. Usually Bryce is more careful where he hits me to make sure no one suspects a thing, but tonight he didn't seem to care. Turning the shower on, I step into its hot spray and let out a deep breath. The shower feels as refreshing as ever, washing away the blood and tears of the fight. Giving me some warmth back into my cold, numb core. I wash my tender body slowly, taking my time to take inventory of where it hurts more and the bruises forming. It's summer but looks like I will be dressing as a nun for the next few weeks, just to hide the fading bruises and new ones starting to form. Turning off the shower, I slowly dry myself off and promise myself that tomorrow I would break the cycle. Tomorrow I will get a restraining order against Bryce and turn my life around. *Will you though?* I question myself. Bryce and I were expected to be together. For years our parents have pushed for us to date. I stupidly thought we would have the perfect life and relationship together, but I was a naïve sixteen-year-old then. Now at twenty-one, I find myself stuck in a relationship that I probably won't get out of alive. Something I had accepted years ago.

I dress and apply antiseptic cream to my cuts, flinching as it stings. I choose to leave my hair loose to fall in front of my face and apply some makeup, trying my best to hide the cuts and bruises. Emerging from the bathroom, I come face to face with my housemate Beth, leaning against the hallway wall.



'I see Bryce has visited again,' she notes softly, cautiously moving towards me. I half smile at her, feeling my lip split open again. I quickly place my fingers to my lip, pulling them away slightly to see fresh blood coating them.

'Here,' Beth says, handing me a tissue from the hallway table. I nod in appreciation as I head towards my room, Beth following behind me.

'How sore are you this time?' she questions as she crosses her arms over her chest, glancing around the room.

'Worse than last time,' I wince as I sit on the edge of my bed and stare at my feet. 'I won't be going anywhere tonight, as much as I wanted to.' I look up at Beth and lift the corner of my mouth. She nodded her understanding.

'What set him off this time?' she asked sitting on the bed next to me.

'I told him his blonde highlights reminded me of the Backstreet Boys,' I stated with a humorous smirk. She looked at me with a sad smile, knowing I was trying to show her I was okay with my humour. But who was I kidding. There was nothing humorous about your boyfriend beating the shit out of you because you confront him about a rumour.

'A rumour I heard about him and another girl.' I finally offer as an explanation. She nods.

'I'll order Chinese then? We can just hang out here – '

'No Beth. I'll be fine, it's New Year's Eve. Go out and celebrate. Don't stay in because of me.'

I pleaded with her, staring into her eyes. A few seconds passed before she conceded to my request.



‘Okay, but I’m just a phone call away. I only plan to go down the road to the harbour. I’ll be fifteen minutes away by car tops.’

‘I’ll be fine, go get ready,’ I spoke softly, gently getting up and grabbing the bloodstained top to throw away. She left the room and I sighed in relief. I hated that she knew what was happening to me and I hated it even more that I felt like I kept letting her down or holding her back to look after me.

After she left, I found myself sitting in the lounge room watching TV and wishing I was a million miles away. I must have dozed off because the next thing I knew there was a knock on the door. I sit up and wince at the quick movement. *Slowly, I need to move slowly.* I make my way to the door and hesitate as I grasp the handle. *What if it’s Bryce?* I shudder at the thought, but I know keeping him waiting would only make things worse. Bracing myself I opened the door and find myself staring at a tall man with dark black hair styled messily and dark emerald green eyes.

‘Zavier?’ I feel my breath quicken and fresh tears pool in my eyes.

‘Hi gorgeous,’ he whispers moving closer. I rush into his arms and hug him tightly, flinching in pain as his arms wrap around me. Noticing my body tensing, Zavier quickly steps back and examines me closely. His eyes growing darker as he assesses me from head to toe.

‘Was this Bryce?’ he bites out, trying to control the anger radiating from him. All I could do is nod.

‘Come inside Zavier, there’s beer in the fridge,’ I try to coax as I grab his hand and gently pull at it. He concedes, but I can feel the tension within him as I close the door behind us. Zavier is my best friend, even after he moved to the country with his family when he was



seventeen. We had lived next to each other for years growing up. He was always there for me and meant the world to me. The day he left was the day my heart broke. Walking to the kitchen, I grab a beer and offer it to Xavier before taking some Panadol to take the edge off the pain. Xavier quickly downs the beer before grabbing another one and guiding me to the lounge room. As I sit down on the couch, he sits opposite me on the coffee table.

‘When did this start?’ he asks softly, ducking his head to make eye contact with me.

‘After you left.’ I whisper. Xavier exhales as if he’s been punched in the stomach.

‘Four years Chloe? Four years and not once have you thought to mention this to me?’ Anger seeped into his low voice. I nodded as tears welled in my eyes.

‘Why didn’t you tell me? Better yet, why haven’t you left him?’

‘He said no one would believe me. That now that you were gone, you wouldn’t come back for me.’ My voice shook as I spoke. ‘I’ve been too scared to leave.’ Tears run down my face just as quickly as the fear of Bryce coursed through my veins. Zave was beside me in an instant, pulling me into his arms and holding me close to him.

‘Shh, it’s okay Chloe. I’m here now and I’m not going anywhere.’ He whispered to me.

Always my protector.

‘Hey sweetheart, wake up,’ Zave’s soft voice lulls me out of my sleep. I open my eyes and grimace as pain soars through my body. Zave notices and helps me to sit up.

‘Do you have more Panadol in the kitchen?’ he asks softly. I shake my head. I had taken the last of them before. I glance at the clock and see it’s 11pm.



'I'll duck out and get you some from the corner store, where are your keys so I can get back in?'

'In the bowl on the entry table,' I rub my hands tenderly over my face to wake myself up further.

'I'll be right back, five minutes tops.' Zave whispers as he kisses my forehead. I nod and listen to the front door close and lock behind him. I get up and go to the kitchen for some water and hear the front door unlock and open again.

'Did you forget your wallet?' I call out, but no answer comes.

'Zave?' I call as I head back to the lounge room and freeze in my tracks as icy blue eyes connect with mine.

'Having fun there "gorgeous"?' Bryce asks with venom dripping from his voice. I start to back up instinctively as adrenaline floods my body in fear. *Run!* I turn and make a run for the back door but Bryce's arms capture my waist and slam me against the wall. His hands instantly at my throat. His eyes, filled with hate, bore into me.

'I asked you a question! Are you having fun you slut?!' he yells at me, throwing me across the kitchen bench with such force I land on the floor. I gasp as pain radiates through me. I get up to run for the front door but only make it a couple of steps before he captures me again and slams me against the wall. His fist connects with my face repeatedly until I slide to the floor, dazed from the impacts. I crawl towards the front door in a weak attempt. Bryce grabs my hair and pulls me up against the wall once more, his face filled with both anguish and anger.



‘You made me do this Chloe! Why couldn’t you just love me?!’ he yells before I feel a sharp pain in my abdomen followed swiftly by two more. He lets me go and I collapse, blood pooling around me as I catch a glimpse of the bloody knife in his hand.

‘This is your fault.’ He whispers before turning and leaving through the front door. I can taste the copper in my mouth as my breathing constricts. I stare absently at the TV as tears fall down my face and I surrender myself to the overwhelming darkness.



Flight After Death

I have always hated flying. I find the whole process to be unnatural and baffling. I mean, I understand how planes work but it doesn't make sense to me. A hunk of metal full of people and luggage soaring through the sky like a bird. It blows my mind. When I was young I flew a lot. My family wanted me to be educated on different cultures and thought the best way for me to learn about the world was to travel it. When I was a kid I loved flying, it was just like getting into a giant bus. Now, however, after watching countless plane crash investigation shows and *Snakes on a Plane*, I was a bit warier.

After I moved away from my parents and started my own life I swore that I would never set foot in one of those metal tubes again. I got myself a job writing for a local magazine, bought a dog, and all of my friends and family were less than twenty minutes away, just how I wanted it. Everything I needed was within walking or driving distance. For several years my plan had been going very smoothly. Until I met Jeremy.

He's tall, blonde and handsome and he caught my eye straight away. We met at a video game convention that was being hosted in Adelaide. I was there very much against my will to write a piece on "*The Life of a Gamer*" and he was there as a guest speaker. He had designed and produced the "Game of the Year" according to everyone that I grudgingly interviewed.

'He is *the* face of the new generation of gaming,' an overly enthusiastic young girl informed me.



‘Fascinating,’ I replied barely looking up from my notepad, ‘but can you actually tell me *why* anything that he does matters?’

‘I think I can answer that one,’ a deep voice said.

I spun around and was inches away from *the* face of gaming himself. My face grew hot as he smirked at me and assessed me head to toe.

‘Oh great.’ I choked out.

He took me to one of the green rooms and we chatted for hours about his new game, how he got into this career, and anything and everything that popped into our heads. It turned out we had a lot more in common than I anticipated. I left that convention with enough information to write a biographical piece and his number. Unfortunately, he had one fatal flaw: he lived in Brisbane.

So that’s what brings me, once again, to the freaking airport.

‘This information is for passengers travelling on flight TT314 to Brisbane,’ a crackly voice over loudspeaker announces, ‘your flight has been delayed thirty minutes.’

Great. Another half an hour of fretting and sweating. Jeremy messages me to inform me that he’s going to book movie tickets for us tonight and I let him know that I’ll be a bit later than anticipated. He replies saying that he already knew because an angry tropical storm has been lingering so dozens



of flights are delayed. *An angry tropical storm*. Fucking perfect. I glance around at the bustling terminal and the other unfortunate individuals to try to distract myself from the alarming news. Two rowdy children are play fighting nearby, much to the angst of those closest, while their exhausted parents watch on in dismay. An ancient woman slips in and out of consciousness and I wonder whether she'll make it onto the plane. A handsome, middle-aged man sits by himself, face buried in a paper. My eyes linger, and he glances up as if I've spoken his name. His eyes are dark yet piercing as though a bottle of ink has seeped from his irises. I hastily avert my gaze, feeling as though I've been shot by an arrow. I feel his eyes boring into me as I fumble for my phone and pretend to answer a message. Something about his eyes made my stomach flip uncomfortably.

After what feels like an eternity of being stuck waiting that crackly voice interrupts my thoughts and informs everyone that the plane is ready to go. I trudge along the walkway to the plane and flash a forced smile to the perky flight attendant that greets me. Ever since I started flying more recently, I always try to be nice to the flight attendants because if something goes wrong I would rather be on their good side. I make a sour face as the stuffy stench of the plane hits my nose. My fists clench as the line of slowly shuffling people get to their seats. They take their time shoving oversized bags into the already cramped lockers before sliding into their seats. Next to taking off, landing, turbulence, and the overall flying experience, this is my least favourite part.

I finally make it to my seat and, luckily for everyone on board, there's a space in the overhead for my bag. I shove my small handbag under the seat and sit down. I always pick the aisle seat, otherwise I feel too trapped. I turn to smile at the person sitting next to me and am greeted by a familiar pair of eyes. I get that sinking feeling in my stomach again, but I don't let it show. He smiles back at me with a crooked smirk and I quickly reach for my headphones. I hit shuffle on a playlist titled *Quakes on a Plane*¹ on my phone and settle in while everyone else takes their seat. I sit impatiently as the doors are

¹ Reference to the film *Snakes on a Plane*. Dir. David R. Ellis. New Line Cinema, 2006.



closed and the safety demonstration that I've grown so familiar with over the last few months is performed. I buckle my seatbelt tight and send one last "I love you" message to Jeremy who wishes me a safe and speedy flight before switching my phone to flight mode. The engine roars to life and I feel my body tense in response. My knuckles turn white as I grip the armrests and squeeze my eyes shut as I try to focus on my breathing. The plane slowly approaches the runway and the engines grow louder as we pause in front of the long stretch of grey tarmac. The plane jerks forward and we hurtle down the runway. I brace myself and feel my stomach drop as the ground disappears from beneath us. We wobble and soar upwards and I sneak a glance out the window and see the clouds greet us against the dusky horizon. Suddenly we're above the clouds and everything feels a bit more stable.

'First time flying?'

His voice pierces through the sound of the engine and my blaring music causing me to jump. I look at him, the corners of his mouth look as though they are being pulled back by pins and his eyes seem even darker. My eyes flicker back to my phone.

'Oh, no, no. I fly a lot,' I reply taking my headphones out.

'Not your favourite hobby?'

'Not really.'

'You know taking off is the easy part. Landing, however, not so simple.'



He turns his attention back to his newspaper as I smile and nod awkwardly and try to process his strange words. Despite this unnerving interaction, I decide to pop a couple of my sleeping pills I always use when I'm flying. They always make flying a little more bearable. I take a few deep breaths to calm me and I manage to let my eyes fall shut and drift off to sleep.

Sometime later, I am suddenly awoken by an announcement coming from above.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sure you've noticed the conditions outside.'

I look to my right and notice flashes of bright light illuminating the dark, dense sky. A pang of terror shoots through my spine.

'Due to the storm we've been unable to land but they've just given us the all clear, so we will begin our decent shortly.'

I feel my palms grow clammy as the plane dips and another flash of lightning reveals the thick, enveloping clouds. I grip my armrest tightly and take a deep breath. I focus on my breathing and try my hardest to keep my eyes on the seat in front of me. A *ding* indicates the landing gear is down and I prepare myself for a rocky landing.

'Don't worry, my dear, it'll all be over soon,' the man next to me says.



A chill runs down my spine, but I ignore it. The plane dips lower and turbulence starts to shake the cabin. I grip the armrest tighter as the plane continues to rattle and shake and my legs tense up in response. Somewhere at the front of the cabin a baby starts to cry and as the turbulence increases, the cry turns to a scream. Suddenly the plane drops, and I feel my stomach in my throat. People around me gasp and the plane drops a second time. A third. The nauseating turbulence becomes almost unbearable, people's belongings are thrown to the aisle, the baby's screams are piercing, and I can feel the seatbelt strain against the rocky motions. My legs are aching from tension and I realise I've been holding my breath. I squeeze my eyes shut as the plane drops sharply a fourth time and the plane shudders violently as the cabin lights flicker. I brace myself for the impact of wheels on tarmac, but it never comes.

I open my eyes and release my breath. The cabin is calm, and the shaking has stopped completely. Near the front of the cabin the baby's screams have turned to a quiet sob. I look around as a shot of panic runs through me, but everyone seems unfazed by what has just happened. The plane hasn't landed and seems to be gliding along smoothly. A few minutes pass but there is no announcement from the captain. Everything is eerily quiet and still, the only sounds are the engines smooth rumble and the baby's whimpers. The man next to me shuffles his newspaper and I flinch in shock. I look at him and he folds his newspaper onto his lap, a smirk plastered on his face.

'That was a rough one, huh?' He says.

'What just happened, are we landing? Are we being diverted?'

His dark, unnatural eyes pierce through me like a dagger but I hold his gaze. The corners of his mouth rise even further, and his face looks twisted and unreal.



‘I don’t think we’ll be landing anytime soon, my dear.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I believe you may be stuck.’

‘That... that doesn’t make any sense.’ My brow furrows and I can feel some of the colour drain from my face.

‘If you say so.’

He turns his attention to the window and goes silent. I follow his gaze, but the sky is too dark to make out anything. I look around again and try to grab anyone else’s attention, but their eyes seem glazed over and they are all staring ahead, unblinking. I reach up and press the call button for the flight attendants. I wait but no one reacts. I twist around in my seat to get a better look, but my seatbelt is restricting me, so I go to unbuckle it. Stuck. I pull as hard as I can, but the belt doesn’t budge. My throat tightens.

‘Hello? Can somebody please help me?’ I say pressing the call button vigorously, ‘My seatbelt is broken.’

‘Your efforts are in vain, my dear.’



‘Will you stop calling me that, please?’

His head turns towards me, moving as though he was a mannequin. I push myself as far away as I can as he looks at me with a cruel face.

‘Did you ever do anything meaningful in your life?’

I gape at him, my mouth unable to form words.

‘Not really. Nothing good, nothing bad, just consistently average. Not unlike the majority of the world, just living to get by. Well, there’s a place for people like you.’

I feel my stomach flip and my mouth becomes dry.

‘You want to know a secret?’ He says dropping his voice to a whisper, ‘There is no heaven. Just hell and...’

He trails off and gestures around the cabin. I stare at him. I am confused, and my head feels light.

Dizziness is setting in and I want to pass out, but my body isn’t responding. I feel my phone buzz and I see a voicemail from Jeremy.



‘Hey, babe, where are you? I heard something happened with the plane but they’re not telling me anything? Are you okay? I’m waiting by the gate. I love you.’

My eyes are full of tears and I try to replay the message. It’s gone. My phone turns off and I can’t turn it back on.

‘Well, my job is done here, this is farewell, my dear.’

I whip around to look at the man, but he has disappeared. The engines continue to rumble and the baby whimpers in the distance. I feel like I can no longer catch my breath, as though I’m choking on smoke. I look down at the seat where the man was and pick up the newspaper. The headline reads *Tropical storm brings down plane. No survivors.*



Freya Jane Markwick-Smith

My poems:

My Sister

The Cranes of Wisdom

15 minute walk Freeverse

The Crow's Lament

Observations of a Painting

My Sister

At a desk in her office she sits and she plans
and many ideas come to mind
She works hard and it inspires I feel
she has done her best, after all her designs
fly her out into the world and
the places she goes are glamorous meanwhile
I sit and I wish that I could do what she does
but it's harder than I realise and yet
I still try
I try and keep up with
the older sister that reaches new heights.
Maybe one day I'll be out there
like her
I'm still trying.



The Cranes of Wisdom

It was believed that if one folded

1000 origami cranes

one's wish would come true.

Now we see your paper cranes and hope for peace.

Sadako Sasaki – I didn't know you,

but I fold my paper crane over and over

Will I reach 1000?

My paper is sky blue.

15 minute walk Freeverse

In an afternoon not so different from others

the sky flies over me and the grass under

my foot bends with the weight

sinking, sinking deeper underfoot as I stride

farther and farther... winding down

a street not so far from my own.

The wind quickens and so does the dog at my

heels, and with a yap he darts forward and we go faster

Faster

FASTER

The sun finally peeks out and there we both stand

facing it with our eyes and minds wide open to the elements.



The Crow's Lament

Cloaked in the feathers of darkness,

the being stares forward with its beady little eyes that reflect the empty night.

Its' reputation is known as scary as it prowls majestically

in the shadows of the evening and the alleyways of the city

where the shadows cannot trap it.

Lonely, it cries in the quiet of each day.



Observations of a Painting

The sound of people walking over roads and horses pulling carriages

paints the air with an ambience that carries on the wind, and the neutral dye

ingrained in the clothes of this time period dance in the flow of spring.

In this time of the past the atmosphere bustles and people chat

exchanging the pleasantries that are passed around from person to person, never ceasing in volume.

At this point of day, the subdued sun watches over the city and breathes

echoes of golden shadows on the buildings that are scattered in the vicinity.

But as everyone goes around with their business in this semblance of community,

no one notices the sigh that travels throughout the breeze,

the secret wont to fit in.



Unpinned

Thick, pearly fog masked the ghostly Yorkshire moor. The crisp days of autumn had disappeared, allowing the bitter onset of winter. The once green pasture had faded to a drab grey, now moist and boggy, blending in with the similarly muted colours on the horizon of the early hour.

If one was to venture down to the moor that Sunday morning, they might've noticed a tall figure unfurling from their kneeling position. Dressed warmly in muddied boots and a thick dark coat, the billowing high collar framed the pale, impassive face of a woman in her mid-twenties. Her thin pink mouth was chapped from the biting winds with long strands of pale hair escaping a once-neat bun, whipping over her sparsely freckled nose. Narrow, cobalt blue eyes betrayed her seemingly apathetic attitude, revealing a manic satisfaction despite appearing red-rimmed and watery.

Her skin was chilled from the sporadic morning drizzle, yet she took no notice. Before slipping her favoured implement into one of her deep coat pockets, she wiped the dark, sticky residue onto an embroidered handkerchief, taking care to avoid staining her knitted gloves as well. She paused, tilting her head, and silently regarded the newly ruined handkerchief with subdued exasperation.

She had liked that one.

Sighing, she pocketed it and turned her gaze down toward the figure, sprawled and unmoving. They were cool to the touch. Dark beads welled from the wound in their neck, steadily trickling into the cold ground beneath them, the rain gradually diluting the thick red stains on the grey marsh. The woman gazed in fascination. She hadn't realised quite how sharp it was.

Allowing her curious eyes to wander across the body, they came across a bag which had been haphazardly thrown aside in haste, the contents spilling out. Blue eyes lit up in recognition of a familiar shape, identifying what she had come for. Lips lifting into a small smile, she bent down to retrieve it. Cradling it carefully with both hands, she gently brushed off her prized possession, reclaiming it as her own. She stroked her long, pin-pricked fingers over the smooth, dark blue material of the felt hat, slowly and with great reverence.

Mine.

As the brisk morning winds began to pick up, damp strands of hair swirling around her face, she straightened and carefully positioned the hat on her head, angled low over her forehead. She imagined how she looked, remembering her reflection in the mirrors at work, exhaling in satisfaction. She knew it looked good. Her eyes danced feverishly like a flickering blue gas flame, a hint of a smirk curling at her lips.

Deliberately stepping over the prone form at her feet, she leisurely strode through the cool, pale mist which decorated the damp ground. The first rays of daybreak peaked through the fog, illuminating her dark silhouette as her form grew smaller, coat billowing and boots squelching. Her hat, jauntily angled, shone darkly in the early sunlight. The tear stains on her cheeks lay forgotten.



A firm hand grasped it tightly, while the other, poised with the sharp instrument, readied to plunge into its next victim. Hitting the target, the needle poked into the silky material and was pulled through, cinching the lacy band above the curved brim of the hat.

Shadows stretched up the bare, cold walls of the small room, with candle light the only illumination. Bent over at a workbench covered in bolts of fabrics, rolls of ribbon, bobbins of thread, and various haberdashery, a young woman was intent in her task. Dark shadows decorated the skin below her blue eyes, in front of which bright wisps of hair fell. She swept them behind her ears in irritation and rubbed her eyes in tiredness. It was past supper time.

It was silent but for indistinct sound of thread being pulled through fabric and her slow, deep breathing. The rhythmic repetition of the action allowed her thoughts to wander as she sat alone in the back room of the shop.

Between looking after her father and working late hours to complete commissions for the wealthy, she barely had time for a cup of tea. His name above the shop was the only reason it still existed at all, and he wasn't in any condition help.

Long before her father had taken ill, she had taken over sole responsibility in the running of their small millinery business. It had started with the shaking and the constant fatigue. His hands had always shaken somewhat, which was why he had passed the art of hat-making onto her. He thought that it would pass, but it had only grown worse. Violent mood swings ensued after she suggested that he rest, however, the following ague meant he'd had no choice. Eating anything became impossible due to his inflamed mouth and gums and the loosening of his teeth. They couldn't afford a doctor, so he remained in bed, unresponsive.

A slight tremor in her fingers caused her to pause. Her roughly calloused hands were pin-pricked from the constant stitching and the moulding of felt. The skin underneath her fingernails was stained silver from the mercury salts. When she wasn't decorating hats, she constantly had her hands in the salts, making and moulding the hat felt into shape. It seemed as if she'd never get the mercury off her.

She shook her head and resumed her work. At least she had a job.

The soft rustling of delicate fabric echoed loudly in the still workspace. The large cluster of decorative flowers were stitched deftly with small, practised hands having done this many a time before. Such was her concentration and skill that the thread used would be all but invisible to the eye. As she continued in her familiar rhythm, her mind began to wander to more pleasant things.

To William. *Her* William.

The corners of her lips twitched upwards in wistful remembrance.

Many months ago, he had given her quite the fright having caught her unawares when she had sneakily decided to try on a hat while her father was in the back.

In the front of the shop, one of her father's creations had caught her eye and she had felt inexplicably drawn to it. When she was certain she was alone, she had reached for the hat within its box and placed it on her head. Facing the mirror, she adjusted the angle until she was satisfied with the fit and stopped to admire it.



It was of a deep blue beaver felt and embellished with tiny flowers of lighter shades above the brim. While was nothing fancy she found it to be perfectly understated. Just like her. She was unable to understand why no one had bought it when it stood out so very clearly to her. Why would her father have hidden it away?

As her gaze wandered past her own reflection in the mirror, her narrow blue eyes met a pair of bright hazel. She jumped, turning to her right to discover that her daydreaming had caused her to completely miss someone entering the shop. Tearing the hat from her head and brushing down her skirts, she attempted to ignore her racing heart as she gave the owner of the hazel eyes her full attention.

Thick waves of dark hair threatened to fall into the hazel eyes, which were now simultaneously amused and apologetic, belonged to a young man of mid to late twenties. His face appeared kind yet mischievous, as he valiantly attempted to school his twitching mouth into a polite smile. His tall stature meant that he was looking down at her, making her feel markedly smaller than usual. The well-tailored jacket and trousers suggested a much higher social standing than hers, the pale colour contrasting with her worn, brown working dress.

Her father would not be pleased with this lapse of mindfulness and indulgence of frivolity. Drawing herself up to her full height, she reigned in her nerves and chose her next words carefully.

"I apologise for my unawareness, sir. Might I help you find a new hat?"

As she spoke, she slowly began to slide the hat behind her back, hiding it from his view.

The man's thick eyebrows rose in surprise, possibly not expecting this polite response to his stealthy intrusion. They quickly fell back into place as he looked down, bashfully grinning, his hands fiddling with the brim of his brown bowler.

"I only... I noticed you through the window with the hat and I-"

Her breath hitched in panic and her grip on the brim of the hat grew tighter in anticipation.

Oh, Dear Lord! Was he going to report her for misconduct?

"- Wished to say how well it compliments your eyes," he finished earnestly.

Her fingers slackened in surprise, almost dropping the hat.

"My... eyes?" she stammered tentatively, disbelief colouring both her tone and face.

A small smile played upon his lips as he ducked his head sheepishly.

"I had no desire to startle you, miss, only that you looked so bereft of company on such a fine day."

As he spoke, his posture straightened ever so slightly as he grew in confidence. The gentle twinkle in his eyes revealed the playfulness of his honest intentions, which set her at ease. Schooling her own face into one of feigned sincerity, she attempted to reciprocate his jovial attitude.

"I am hardly bereft of company, sir. Indeed, one has all the company one requires when one works in a room full of such unique and marvellous creations!"

As she indicated the surrounding hats mounted on displays, his eyes crinkled in amusement.

"I fear I must concede," he sighed, inclining his head towards her. "However, should one find oneself in need of more animated company, I humbly offer myself instead. William, at your service."



William gave a small exaggerated bow, at which she struggled to contain her vocal amusement. Eyes shining with repressed laughter, she responded in kind with her own mock curtsy.

“And should one find oneself in search of more quiet company, I offer the silent companionship of my hats.”

She paused before realising that he had wanted her name and hurried to rectify her mistake.

“Or my-self, if you’d prefer. Edith, at your service.”

Her eyes widened at her admission, surprised at her own boldness and was unsure of how it would be received. To her relief, a low chuckle escaped William, clearly as amused by their odd exchange as she was.

His face becoming thoughtful, he gently extricated from her grasp the dark blue hat of which he had complimented her on. Turning it reverently the correct way around, he placed it on her head as it had been before his interruption. In the comfortable silence that followed, hazel and blue eyes met once again, the latter more bashful than the other.

Since then, William had often visited her shop, always interested in new hats that she had made. Yet he would always ask after the blue hat, his eyes bright with curiosity. It was ever so sweet of him, constantly referring to the item which had brought them together. She had made a point to bring it out whenever he came to call, regarded as a prized possession.

She had always hoped that William would eventually take her away from this lonely life of millinery. While she didn’t like the thought of leaving her ailing father alone, she was itching – literally, her fingertips bore the brunt of her agitation – to make a life for herself. William had burst into her life unexpectedly and now she couldn’t imagine it without him in it. He was hers. And nothing could come between them.

A sharp pain brought Edith out of her fond reverie. Bringing her hand closer to her face she identified that her lapse in concentration had resulted in pricking her finger with the incredibly sharp needle. Rather than recoiling at the sight of blood, she gazed in fascination as a bead of dark blood welled on her finger, growing larger and larger until it trickled down the side of her hand. Sighing in frustration, she placed her nearly completed hat on the cluttered workbench to attend to her mishap. Having done this many a time before, she reached for her handkerchief from the pocket of her apron to press against the wound, attempting to stem the flow of blood.

As soon as she had pressed the handkerchief onto her finger, she registered the familiar embroidery along the edges. She closed her eyes and rested her elbows on the bench, allowing her head to drop into her arms with fatigue and regret. The handkerchief had belonged to her mother before she had succumbed to what they called consumption. Edith had only been a child, yet she still had the mind to salvage her mother’s handkerchiefs before all everything else was burned. Each one was beautifully hand-stitched in a variety of floral patterns, surrounded by a faded cream lace. She hadn’t meant to ruin this one. But it was now too late; a small circle of red began spreading through the pale fabric, contrasting against the pale blues, pinks and greens.

A gentle tinkling woke Edith from her tired stupor. Raising her head in confusion, she sat upright again and swept her wayward hair out of her face. She paused, waiting. There it was again. Tinkling, followed a sharp crunch, was faintly audible. Silently getting up from her stool, she scanned the room for evidence of the noise. Upon hearing more crunching, she moved towards the general direction of the source, leading her to the door. It was a worn, darkened wood which connected the



back workshop and the front of the shop, the handle chipped and rusting from age and continuous use.

As she edged closer to the door, the crunching stopped, and a soft rustling began. Her brow furrowed as she considered the possibilities of the source of the noise. The shop had been closed for hours now, so it couldn't be a customer. An animal, perhaps? Not her father, surely; she had ascertained that he had fallen asleep hours ago. Cautiously grasping the handle, she pulled it downwards and towards her slowly, attempting to bypass the door's horrendous squeaking.

The first thing she was greeted by was darkness. Leaving the door slightly ajar, she quickly tiptoed back to her workbench for the candle, the wick having already melted down halfway. Before she could think too much on it, she also picked up her ribbon scissors as a precaution. Poised, carrying both implements towards the door, she trod carefully to avoid alerting whoever, or indeed whatever, was still shuffling around her shop.

Gently nudging the door open fully, the dim candle-light illuminated glittering shards of glass which decorating the floor, having been displaced from a display window. The lock on the front door had also been smashed, leaving it misshapen and brittle where the lock had been, swinging idly in the cool breeze. Piles of smaller shards dotted the floor like diamonds in a footpath towards the lacquered registrar desk, where boxes upon boxes of hats had been torn open and rummaged through with abandon, shreds of tissue paper littered like crumpled ribbons.

Her hands shook, causing the candle's flame to flicker from side to side and the scissors to clack gently. Her heartrate increased dramatically as she realised that shuffling sound hadn't stopped. There was a soft *thud* as, yet another box was being upended and discarded in their search for something. In her fear, her fingers around the scissors loosened, allowing them to drop to the hard wood floor with a deafening clatter. The shuffling abruptly stopped. She felt as if her heart had almost stopped working.

Now armed with only a dwindling candle, whose flame barely cut through her dark, ransacked shop front, she was frozen in apprehension. An agonisingly long moment stretched on in which the only sound was the harsh breaths of the intruder from behind the registrar desk.

Suddenly, a dark figure darted around it, knocking into Edith in an attempt to escape without confrontation. Their momentum caused both of them to lose balance, with her letting the candlestick fall from her grasp as she stumbled. A sharp cry of alarm from the figure was heard as the candle's flame had caught the bottom of their long coat during its' fall and was trying to stamp it out.

Edith took this opportunity to hurry over behind the desk to identify what they had been looking for. Wading through the remains of hat boxes, she spared a thought for much of her hard work which would now have to be re-done. Crouching down in the dim light, she shakily reached for the box which was still largely intact, yet not untouched. Her hands traced over the very familiar box which showed signs of being hastily shut; the lid was slightly askew.

She paid little attention to the brightening light behind her.

This floral-patterned box housed her blue hat. With trembling fingers, she quickly pulled off the lid. Scrabbling desperately through the disturbed tissue paper, the only thing her hands found purchase on was the long, slender hat pin. No hat. Feverishly turning to the other upturned boxes, she confirmed the presence of their hats still within them. Hands tearing through the remaining tissue paper on the floor, she yielded nothing.



Standing and turning towards where she had left the intruder, she was greeted with the figure having shed his coat due to the climbing flames. It had created a burning pile on the wooden floor, from which had spread to the stray pieces of tissue paper and beyond. Blistering tongues of flame grew in size and, crackling, reached outwards, finally free after being confined to the candlestick for so long. Edith glimpsed the figure, face distorted from the flickering heat, turn toward her before they ran through her misshapen door, a small bulging bag trailing from their shoulder.

Shock and incredulity turned to mindless rage, and she only had the sense to grab her coat from behind the door before racing after them, heedless of her burning shop front.

That is mine. Mine.

Clearly not having expected to be followed, the figure had paused across the street, checking their bag of stolen bounty. From the door, she could easily discern their male physicality, the grey tailored suit and matching hat enhancing their already great height. At the door's slam, he looked over in alarm to see Edith glaring with fists clenched. The growing fire behind her escalated in size and sound, casting her figure into silhouette as her shop front was consumed in bright heat. Her blue eyes blazed with fury, competing with the building inferno behind her.

At this point, the shop, her hats, and even her ailing father perishing had been dismissed as unimportant. The only thing that mattered was *her* hat; the only thing she had ever felt special in. Despite feeling tired earlier, she now felt wide awake. She was energised, fuelled by her determination to retrieve what was hers, even if it took all night. It was as if the fire had been set ablaze inside her as well.

The man took a step back in trepidation, his body language betraying his intention despite his face still hidden in shadow. Grasping the bag securely, he hurried down the cobbled street with only the dim light of the evening moon to guide him. Determined not to lose him, Edith followed suit, slightly impeded by her attempts to button her coat at the same time.

They had been the only people out at this time of night, yet the rapidly rising fire which consumed her home and livelihood had caught the attention of others who lived and worked in the street. Friendly Mr and Mrs Harrison of the grocer ran out in their nightclothes with coats wrapped loosely around them, holding each other and watching on in horror. The gruff Mr Moule of the butcher emerged indignantly, brandishing a meat cleaver and looking around for the perpetrators in a pair of worn slippers. The pleasantly plump Mrs Duncan of the bakery, still in her floury apron, pressed her callused hands to her mouth, eyes shining with disbelief and sadness. Edith had heard their exclamations of fright behind her, yet she put them out of mind as she was determined not to lose her thief.

By the time she had reached the outskirts of the town, she was gasping for breath, internally cursing the necessity of corsets. Ahead of her, the man was similarly slowing from the rigorous pace he had set. His stolen load was beginning to slow him down, having to re-adjust and hitch it periodically over his shoulder. Despite the gradually increasing gap between them, Edith's determination had not abated and her desire to reclaim what was rightfully hers was the only reason she was still pursuing. The biting breeze cut through her coat and whipped at her hair wildly, briefly blinding her.

It was well past midnight, yet neither appeared inclined to falter out of either sheer stubbornness, or foolishness. While their pace had slowed, in no way had their determination wavered as they stumbled over the hard cobblestones. Ragged breathing filled the otherwise silent atmosphere. Their desperation appearing in clouds of vapour as they exhaled into the biting air.



The cold rocky ground soon made way for soggy pasture which squelched underfoot. Up ahead, the muddy terrain caused the man to take tentative steps, his progress slowing as his shoes sank and slipped. However, Edith was accustomed to such moist conditions from morning walks, particularly early spring. As she stepped quickly and lightly across the familiar path of damp grass, almost hopping, she steadily closed the distance between the two.

As they approached the looming slopes of the cold moor, the dark sky showed signs of lightening as the moon gradually lowered towards the lapping water. The wind picked up, knocking the man's hat from his head. The pale light revealed dark hair but couldn't distinguish facial features due to distance and persistent shadow. Glancing behind him to check her proximity, he misjudged his next step, resulting in him tumbling down the slippery hill. A startled yelp escaped him as he fell.

Edith picked up the pace to peer down the small slope, eyes widening as the man rolled to the base. Taking more care in where she placed her feet, she slowly trekked her way down. As her right hand steadied herself as she slid down, a sharp prick belatedly reminded her that she was still carrying the hat pin from her box. Its long and slender point surprisingly sharp, ending in a glossy white bead. She clenched it in her hand tighter, heedless of the pain, to spur herself onwards.

Her feet eventually reached the bottom with a soft squelch. She brought a hand to her head as she fought off a sudden wave of dizziness. She swayed as her vision swam, the slowly lightening sky hazy and distorted. Blinking rapidly, she noticed the trembling in her hands had increased in vigour as she pressed them against her eyes. She wasn't shivering. In fact, she didn't feel cold at all.

Edith gazed down at her hands in fascination. There was something beautiful about the silver stains which decorated her finger-tips. The dull light illuminated the odourless substance, reminding her of its toxic permanence.

At the sound of frenzied squelching ahead, her head snapped upwards. Her focus now back on her thief, she stalked in the direction of the man who was trying to run ungainly across the boggy marsh. His muddied jacket and trousers weighed him down, causing him to stumble ungainly.

Reaching the end of the moor, where the land met water, he finally stopped. With shoulders tensed in trepidation and defeat, he began to slowly turn to face her. She slowed her advance in anticipation, feeling slightly nauseous. As his face came into view, she was hit with another dizzy spell. Vision clearing again, Edith halted immediately.

It couldn't be.

Whether by a trick of the light or someone's idea of a cruel joke, the man in front of her looked to be—

"William."

A strangled gasp escaped her.

The man in question didn't defend himself and began raising his hands in an attempt to placate or reassure her. He presumably believed that she would suddenly accept his explanation and let him go quietly.

Not a bloody chance.

Instead of feeling upset or crying, she felt enraged. Betrayed. She had trusted him. She had allowed him to barge unannounced into her shop, her home, her life and her heart. And he had responded in kind by stealing her prized possession and breaking that trust. Had she meant so little to him? The



fire which burned within her grew into a blazing inferno, scalding her insides. Her blue eyes flickered dangerously.

As her fingers clenched in a single-minded anger, she felt the cool metal of the hat pin. She was almost surprised she hadn't dropped it. Rolling it in her hand, she considered once again how deceptively sharp it was. Eyes searching the... *thief*... in front of her, she lingered on the cleanly shaven expanse of his neck. Smooth. Very exposed. She tilted her head.

No one would look for a hat pin.

Her breathing slowed comfortably. But the fire continued to rage.

Grasping the pin by the tiny handle, she stepped forward confidently. He appeared visibly startled by this response and attempted to back up. However, there wasn't anywhere to go. He was cornered. What he had done was unforgivable. And she wanted *her* hat back. The only emotion left was the determination and desire burning in her eyes.

She lunged.

The townsfolk gossiped as they attempted to clean up the blackened ruins of the Hat Makers shop. The Harrisons and Mrs Duncan were similarly appalled and sympathetic, while Mr Moule predictably grumbled unhappily at having more work to do.

"How did this happen?"

"They must 'ave been trapped in there, the poor dears. There was nothin' left of either of 'em."

"I liked their hats. Beautiful craftsmanship."

"'Bit mad, though, weren't they? Mad 'atters, the both of 'em."

Mad Hatter? The corners of Edith's lips twitched. She quite liked that.

Mad as a Hatter.

A small giggle escaped her.

She tugged her hat lower over her twinkling eyes, her hand gently tweaking the handle of her hat pin. Again, she marvelled at the deceptive sharpness of it as it scratched her scalp through her coiled hair.

She pushed away from the wall she had been eavesdropping behind and turned to leave the smouldering town. There was nothing left for her here. She could go anywhere and start anew. She could be anyone she liked. Do what she liked. A rare grin spread across her face, her blue eyes alight with the possibilities. There was almost a spring in her step as she turned her back on the destruction she had wrought.

She was free.



Feeding the Shrike

Bucolia

Nature forms a mote in the eye of a manufactured paradise
Man and beast subtly beats on the pavement on the horizon
There's a strong breeze amidst the eucalypts growing freely
Above, white and grey upon the blue field escaping man's demesne
And below, the regimented fields of green and molting yellow
An affront to sprawling grids of black and grey in geometric order
The sun shines on Earth and man alike, rendering two worlds equal
Nature forms a paradise in the eye and flows from man's mind.

The Bitter, Angry Verses.

How do you become a modern man, with produced food and a data plan
You can the comfy life, not toil away in a world in strife
You don't have want or fear, keep comfort close and near

There is no ill here and near, I am to finally become man
A TV with news that placates fear, days of self-medication that is the plan
Fast food and slow living no strife, my phone, my games but no life

Dietary contradictions extend your life, medication killing all body and fear
Salaryman science has minimized strife, and your memes now make a man
A nice big car and a daily plan, keep a GPS and your UBER near

Keep your horizons small and near, have nothing real fill your life
A metal/plastic cage and a suburban plan, you'll have a paradise free of fear
Everyday you're becoming a hollow man, witless of other's impotent strife

White pickets turn away all strife, all that is normal is to fear
Movies and shows for moron man, dead art works never given life
Your phone and social media near, work on your narrowing perception a vacation plan

You are a CEO's fiscal plan, spend more don't give them strife
Have your computers and couches near, simplicity and culture to fear
Dead man walking bereft of life, but you are now a modern man



Rays of the Rising Sun: The Akihabara and Asukusa Verses

What happens when you light up a black market?
When the karaoke and pachinko machines spark uproar?
Where an iPad and a smartphone is worth a night on the town
Where you buy a man's weight of manga for a large meal
Where the tuners drift off into a starless sky
And cosplayers and otaku roam amongst the arcades

A large tree grows in the centre of Tokyo
Branches of steel and leaves of glass
In its shadow is a heart, red and wooden
Asakusa warps space and makes time stand still
They did it! They found Nirvana, a world within worlds
Nirvana has a scent, incense and fried rice
Nirvana is stung together with prayer notes and market revenue
Nirvana echoes tales of divine mercy and Bodhisattvas
Nirvana is a creation of the faithful, they make it whole
I let it absorb me, far more so than the tourist crowd

Verse of the County

The Limerick Irish are rowdy and randy crowd
For every pint they drink they grow thrice as loud
They are prophets, bibles on a bathroom stall
They are perverse geniuses one and all
The Limericks thrill the Boston crowd



Plastic Surgery
For Margot Kidder
A Pirouette Smooth
A Spider Named Barton
In Milk and Lambs

Plastic Surgery

I've seen flowers rust, vices to quick dust
So, beneath this bed is a vacant space
No plastic dolls or scary monster sounds
No paper boats pulled, or folded stars found.

With five fingers closed, I extinguish suns
Frightened child, now brave woman aflame
I'll stay here naked, while all burns in shame
Tracing my private thoughts in chalk plumes faint.

Saved from the world, this little preserved room
Still surely surrounds my widening womb;
My compass is cracked and red rivers loom
Set upon by branches, dancing for doom.

There are crooked twigs beneath my skin now
Angels graze my throat while the fallen rise
But my made-up friends are still here with me
Violent and nude, fixed to fantasy.

So, save my reflection in bedlam glean
A fickle formed please, an Oedipus tease;
Whispering to the wall, "do come back soon"
They do reply, "you'll inherit this noon."



For Margot Kidder

In hushed screams tell, was it a life?
Such a stargazer you, the lonely one too
It must be frightening to have breasts
To be remade in clay, everlasting in stone
Reducing cities to provocative chills.
With your eyes like woods, as dark and deep
And your moxie with the lips to match
Men of greater esteem fell to your waist
While you brought the rain, with a sullen twist.
I wish to chase you through those yards still
To fend off all your others, asking,
“Who split you down the middle, darling?”

Did the banshees seek your company?
In the white room, where there is no fame
I’ll come look for you in the underground
Where the hollow snow tickles your nose
Beside rows of faces that you have outgrown
With your pockets full of stardust and hands
Finding company, with madness and glee
With the mild men who fell to earth in bloom
And must we be mad men to live, truly?
The circus is empty, the rides have stopped
Let’s turn this place round, our places have swapped.



A Pirouette Smooth

And you will displace me, the hypocrite
The revolution sent to bed, since dead
Please, please remain my gutter god misfit
Weaved through my fickle fist, the pink pulled thread.

Placed in plenty, I painted the skies pale
To match our bloom through these little locked rooms;
A balcony dance, beneath a ripped sail
I breathed you in, as forest fire fumes.

Quivers quietly quake our borrowed bones
As rhizomes collide on this projector
Hear the piano, hum traumatic tones
Past the puddle, hiding the spilt spectre.

We will run, race beyond these tired trees;
Find my hand, traced by the tempered rain
Steady the panic, put upon your knees;
This will be spoiled by your perfect pain.

In nicotine nooks, each enquired squeeze,
Under tin stars, tore at your moonlit skin;
I am your final need, caught in the breeze
A fevered fling pressed to glass leaning in

The doorframe, in hues of candlelight blue
Like vagrant fires, in conflated noon
Tethered to never now, and always too
Dripped in dust darling, flung around the moon.

In love in a world intent on ending
Like possessing birds or hardy waves through,
In boiling dreams and the current's bending
Leave the planet, in this solar flare coup.



In this tiny town too, Time's black lips loom
I am the face that will not, will not lose
Over ponies, the pretty lights that plume
In cosmic chaos, it's your life to choose.

You return again, to the crowds you keep
We will meet first, as strangers in sleep.

A Spider Named Barton

Hold these pretty details, this sleeted veil
Still cleverly caught on the clouds' conceit
The early sky erasing the starred braille;
Know all that I know, that fleet is not fleet.

Humble warfare between us two singers
In pop and pulp, in the doing of things;
A separate peace, we leave in lingers
Clinching confetti, in your room of strings.

Hold these proud details, this familiar waltz
Tracing time in leaks, and those tender weeks
Humming odes to melody, still in clothed valse,
To the songs of lunar swings and field speaks.

A walk around with you, a strumpet seen
We're bound below by your violent needs,
An appetite for flesh, bleeding me mean:
A superman from parochial weeds.



Hold these picked details, this licked devotion
Remade these retreats kind for present sight
Grief has your hands, pressing breaths through plosion
Devouring your sun, our blanketing night.

I am the fastidious friend to serve
The vestigial from valentine faint
The empathic must, the atomic verve
The pathetic squeeze, the since suffered saint.

Diminished to fats and cells, should you leave
A marriage remaining, saved on my sleeve.

In Milk and Lambs

In the dead of day, I saw black eyes
Stayed alert until the coming of night
And the week's cycle was strangely repeated
To what end did these trials serve a purpose?
I sought a cheer from the carnival, always joyous
Yet those darkly fiends, seen in bright, still affect...

On a new dawn, I rise again with purpose
On sloping meadows, towards the horizon repeated
I shall seek out the merchants of affect
May they reassure me and help me again be joyous.
I look again for the comfort in strangers' eyes
Fleeing to a cutter in the bay at night

And if I were to die in the coming of night



I would surely be poised for some purpose.
The ocean, vast, breaking on the hull, is joyous
Still, in standard sky above, I see those eyes
How hopeless I must be to know they still affect!
On naked stars sprinkled like snow repeated

My cosmic thoughts too, are doomed and repeated
I put a candle in the window, but the flame has eyes
This dead warm oblivion spent in night;
For company may yet truly affect
This traveller's taste for orphaned purpose
A friend for the horrors, for views more joyous.

Back on land now, down damp streets that still affect
I am nothing more than screaming atoms, how joyous.
Must I atone for my private obsessions, in young eyes
In the ordinary world, in my infinite travels repeated
In blackened rooms and naked wonder, in night
In milk and lambs, in their tenured purpose?

All my threats are anonymous, never joyous
Towards hollow monsters and my bitter affect
I retreat into the world unknown without purpose
Shivering, shivering in the cold of night
With my soul divided, I hear old songs repeated
Beginning all, with those vacant eyes.

And the week's cycle was strangely repeated
Stayed alert until the coming of night
In the dead of day, I saw black eyes.



Jake Kempster Male

What is a Haiku?

This is a haiku

And now for a nature word

How about acorn?

It comes from a tree

So surely it counts for now

Haikus frustrate me

A summer breeze next

Are the seasons too cliché?

I couldn't resist

A proper haiku

Takes nature to the limit

Always overstuffed

So, lots of nature

Cherry blossom hibiscus

Roses and lilies

Maybe I should quit

Before I take things too far

Orchid, sunflower, daisy

Now here's an idea

One better than a haiku

Procrastination



Why? - Portrait

How do I begin to describe you? From our moment of birth, we adore you. Through childhood, we idolise you. Through our teenage years we're supposed to look up to you. So where did you go wrong?

You made mistakes, but who hasn't? It isn't about the mistakes we make, it's about how we fix them. Apologising was never enough, because saying I'm sorry means you'll never do it again. But you always did.

I wanted to believe in you for the longest time, even when I knew I shouldn't. I wanted to believe you cared about me, more than you cared about yourself. So why didn't you fight for me?

I tried to bite my tongue for the longest time, because I thought I was too young. Yet, all along, I was the adult and you were the child. Why did you force me to mature too soon?

You had one last chance to prove yourself, to prove I was important. After you put people you barely knew above me. After you failed to fight for those before me. When it mattered most, why did you give up?

Rejection is one of the hardest things a person will ever have to deal with in their life. You might believe there are worse things to go through, and I can agree. But until I go through the worst things in life, rejection will always be on the top of my list. Why did you have to make me fear rejection?



Reflection - Ekphrastic

I look down in the water and see my reflection.
But can't see past the darkness hiding below,
And fail to feel any true connection.

I try to feel some sort of affection,
There are so many words to you I owe.
I look down in the water and see my reflection.

I stare down with a strong feeling of rejection,
For someone I still don't think I know,
And fail to feel any true connection.

It can be hard not to strive for pure perfection,
When it comes to reaching my goals, I'm slow.
I look down in the water and see my reflection,

And he stares back up at me with eyes full of dejection.
I always struggle to keep a hold of my inner glow,
And fail to feel any true connection,

But I'll never stop voicing my objection,
For I still have a lot of growing to do. Though
I look down in the water and see my reflection,
And fail to feel any true connection.

Inspired by Winter morning after rain, the old bridge, Gardiners Creek by Tom Roberts



Sestina – Don't Fall Into Silence

I move down the dark hallway in a rush,
Not having even a moment to hesitate,
For fear of losing what is left of my confidence.
I'm moving so fast that I barely notice the rain.
A missed step causes me to stumble,
And I fall. Yet all I hear is silence.

It isn't what you would expect, but the silence
Is almost deafening. The ground comes at me in a rush,
And it takes all of my strength to stop another stumble.
When I stop moving, for a brief moment I hesitate.
My eyes slowly open to the sight of rain
Sliding down my face. I lose my confidence,

It just drains out of my body, as if I had no confidence
To begin with. All I can hear is the silence,
The all-consuming silence taking a hold of me, as rain
Washes away my mistake. I always try to rush
Through life without a second thought, trying to never hesitate.
But when I do, I always stumble.

Forgive me if I happen to stumble
Over my words. You see, confidence
Has never been one of my strong suits. Don't hesitate
When you hear nothing but silence,
It's all a part of my plan. If I rush
Through my words, they tumble out like heavy rain.

Even when there is rain
Outside, I always try my best to never stumble.



I get by with a little positivity, and never rush
Through the day ahead. I find confidence
I never knew I had, even when I'm trapped in silence.
I wish this could happen every day, but I hesitate

Sometimes. The only reason it can make me hesitate,
Is because it can be hard to see the light in the rain.
Nevertheless, I promise to avoid the silence
That follows me around like a dark cloud. I won't stumble
When it comes time to speak. I will show confidence
In my life and work, because where else will I find a rush?

If you stumble, don't fall into silence,
Confidence is what you really need. Don't ignore the rain,
Rush into it at full speed, and never hesitate.



There's So Much in this World I Don't Understand - Villanelle:

There's so much in this world I don't understand,
I wish I could figure out what it is I need,
But time slips through my fingers like falling sand.

I've heard of strangers that will lend a hand,
But all I see is hearts full of greed.
There's so much in this world I don't understand.

We're told from an early age where our feet should land,
That we must make our bounty with great speed,
But time slips through my fingers like falling sand.

Once upon a time I had my future all planned,
But being a teacher isn't the life I want to lead.
There's so much in this world I don't understand.

I want to write stories of adventures so grand,
With valiant knights riding atop a noble steed.
But time slips through my fingers like falling sand.

If I want to fulfil my dreams, I need to make a stand,
To write ambitious tales everyone will want to read.
There's so much in this world I don't understand,
But time slips through my fingers like falling sand.



(Why I Am a Little) **Twisted and Thorny**

I do not come from a family tree. I fell out of a rosebush. It was an interwoven hedge containing some rare and beautiful flowers, sounded by pricks.

John Thomas Pappin and Lucy Harris - my paternal great great grandparents (on the white side) – had 10 children. One of them was Albert E Pappin. Albert, My paternal great grandfather, married Mary Dunn, one of 12 children to Peter Dunn and Margret M McKerral – my paternal great grandparents.

Albert and Mary had 6 children including **Alexander Hugh Pappin**, my paternal grandfather. He married **Jessie Grace Lawson**, my paternal grandmother (an Aboriginal/Barkindji woman). The Lawson family history was not recorded in town because during her father Henry's time, the family was taken from their traditional homes and given the name of the man that bought their land from the government (**Lawson**) that they lived on, when they were moved to the **Namatjira Aboriginal Mission at Dareton**. I can not remember my paternal great grandmother's name – just Nana Lawson. I am not sure where to look for their names. I guess it was within a generation or two that our mob from Barkindji country moved from traditional names to white-fellas names ... but I still do not know much about that. Our Aboriginal Names were not written down ... or, so I have always assumed.

My father, **Jessie Pappin**, was one of 6 siblings raised at the mission – and around the Mildura area. My father and his high-school girlfriend, my mother (**Caroline Grenfell**), had me, her first child. But while I was less than 1 year old things happened and my parents were separated. My mother was thrown out by her parents. She was one of their 14 children and better off for it. She never spoke well of them. I met her brothers Tommy and Stanley and sister Valerie, maybe three or four of her other sisters; but, we never associated with her family much. Our (side of the) family is confusing enough.

My mother is one of a few women who 're-married' back into the family. After several years of living with my paternal grandfather, who was at the time single and living alone, my mother and my dad's father became an item and married. I was so young when this began that I had no idea and no memories of things being any different. I was 7 when I discovered that my father was actually my grandfather. They went on to have 7 more children. So now I am the oldest of my mother's 8 children. The other 7 being both my half-brothers and half-sisters but at the same time genetically my uncles and aunties (although we are not interbred): My father, Jess, also had another 5 children, between a few other women, who are also my half-brothers and half-sister; but, because my



grandfather is my legal father, they are also my nephews and nieces, legally. I am both legally the brother of my father and his brothers and sister: Lee, Daniel, Alex, (Jess), Hugh and Mary-Rose; who are all my genetic uncles and aunt. My father (I mean my grandfather) was married 3 times. In total he had more than a dozen legitimate children and twice as many illegitimate children (who he stayed in contact with) when he was the moderately famous rodeo-rider called Whip-Lash. Add to that my father's 6 and I have nearly 50 half brothers and sisters that are also my uncles and aunties or my nephews and nieces depending which side they came from. My uncle Acky (my great uncle actually - Grandad's brother Albert) had 12 or 14 children, I think. My mother was also one of 14 or 16 children and a few of her sisters had 8 to 10 children each.

I am just happy that television came to Australia when it did!

That is probably not a joke my mother would have understood. She wasn't good at understanding me, in general.

I had no illegitimate children, when I was 16, so my mother had suspicions that I was gay. When I turned 18 – and still no children – it was the confirmation she had been preparing herself for. The more I tried to convince her otherwise the deeper I dug myself, into the closet.

I told her: "I am too shy to be gay. Don't you have to be flamboyant to be one of those?" I stared into her blank face awaiting a response but, let's face it, all the baby making had either drained the energy from her brain, or at some stage, during the act, she might have damaged her brain, somehow. So, I explained: "Don't they dance about and Sing in public places? I am too shy for that. I don't even have the confidence to wear bright colours or put products in my hair!"

To which she retorted: "You seem to know an awful lot about it, Steven!"

Steven!? Like accentuating my name was adding some point to her argument! ...I didn't discover until nearly a decade later that **Steven** really is the most common name among Male Nurses and Male Flight Attendants; but, SHE chose that name for me. I never chose it!

Thanks for giving me a lot to aspire to Mother!

If it was my choice, I would have been called **Peter** - like Spiderman. That is right I was a closed comic-book geek. I was quiet, introverted and physically weak. I liked to sit under trees and watch the clouds waft by. I liked to read (non-fiction, or) fantasy stories. I did not like sports because I hated when the other boys touch me – which apparently made me look 'gay' {I am still confused by social gender rolls}. But, add to this that I was incredibly hormonal, short, hairy and horny. I was a nerd. I did NOT 'not like girls.' Girls did not like me!



I had quite the reputation as being Agro (always angry and too aggressive) at high school. But that wasn't true. Yes, I have very strong emotions, but all of my emotions are like that. I am a love it or hate it guy. I was a lovely and loving child. Most of the time I was happy and care-free; when I wasn't stressed out. I have always had anxiety issues, but the truth was that, because I was so quiet, I only raised my voice when I was upset and that was the only time the other children noticed me – except for the ones that bullied me. Is it any wonder I never had a big family of my own? I am lucky I lost my virginity at all before I turned 30! Socially awkward does not begin to describe it. Although I have graduated from socially dysfunctional. I don't know what is more disturbing: that all of this social anxiety really does come from my parents and more specifically my sexual anxiety comes from my mother; or, that after reading that last line Sigmund Freud would have licked his lips.



Poems: **The Walk**

The Choice

The Walk

The chilly air stings my face
The galahs talk amongst themselves
And my dusty sneakers talk their talk
A dog dances without a care
Dance, dance and play your song
Run, run and run along
I wished I danced like that dog

The choice

A blank page and a ball-point pen
Some inspiration and a glass of sin
A tortured mind and a leaky tap
The loneliness of the artist trapped

A drained bottle and a full glass
An empty soul and a celebrity past
Hundred followers for a Twitter post
Hundred rejections for a manuscript wrote

A penniless writer or
A click-bait troll



Poetry:

Caryard

Aunty Glen

Cardboard Doll

Choice

Youth to Yesterday

Caryard

Black metal beam fencing, razor sharp tip
Krispy Kreme's sugared to 20,000 leagues under the sea
Americana 50's street machines rumble in a blue-tongue dusk,
Towards the drive-in for a Hollywood dime
Nails are lost the longer the wait, wrapped around a cigarette holder
Summer, ocean, travel, swim
Where is the caryard owner?
Where are the other customers?
No one there to answer the call at the office of Arthur Daly
A magic carpet ride up the walls of the Winchester Club to the Gaffer,
Will find a car boot sale.

Aunty Glen

First vision is a rolling flame
Time to nap, no seatbelt worn
Years on, I tend my Auntie's grave
Rooms hers, now mine

Cardboard Doll

Do you want to be a doll in the snow?
Or, sun bleached highlights, picture perfect tan
If you come to life, will you be exposed?
Step back in time to a French foreign land
Drawing a line, from what does not appear
Are you my Marie de Hautefort sign?
Your seventeenth-century grenadier



Riding the waves of a King Louis tide
Upon my eyes a butterfly effect
Your wings give a hint to your pink colour
From your heart, or until my next collect
This moment, my daily double lover
I'm awake now; the dream has lost her shine
Armor off and pin is pulled, it is time

Choice

Degree versus work
Repetition bite my teeth
University

Youth to Yesterday

Born via a police escort in your HQ Holden
The doctor told you I'd play full-back for the Magpies
Teacher's payday in a Birdwood pub
Dad, can I please have a raspberry?
Erased memory, a once-off whip of hate
The mantelpiece coin taken, I'm crying in my room

Every payday I woke early in my room
A new matchbox car to play with in the HQ Holden
Glenelg, the team I grew to love, you hate
Premiers...Breaking a 12-year drought... the Port Adelaide Magpies!
I'm unaware, behind the school picking a raspberry
You're celebrating at the Mt Pleasant Pub

Steak sandwiches pre-match in a pub
Playing eight-ball with Painters & Dockers, in the Saloon Room
Hey son, you're too young to drink, but would you like a raspberry
Clare races in the HQ Holden
In my sister's room, no mistakes this time, it's full of magpies
The team I grew to hate

A Benson & Hedges cough I grew to hate
Sunday 11 Am in the Osborne Pub
Watching Granger & Knight pass out from the Magpies
Packet of chips love? The barmaid calls across the room
Heading home for the final time in the HQ Holden
Dad, thanks for the second raspberry.

No more raspberry
Entry into a world of political hate
The final private family night, we're in the Holden
Delaying the cameras of election night at the Colac Pub
The first and last journo of trust in the room
The start of arrogance of political Magpies



Sluggo asked me 20 years later, what you think of the Magpies
The barmaid said what will it be? Slade replied.....a raspberry!
Laughter filled the room
We laughed so much we love, parts of Fathers that we hate
Our world in a pub
We drove home in his Holden

There is no room anymore in this world for the Magpies
The plant manufacturing Holden cars disappeared, along with a young thirst for raspberry
I've grown too, I no longer hate. Dad let's go for a drink down the pub.



Change of weather.

- A. Bed
- B. Cold
- C. Floor
- D. Mother
- E. Cry
- F. Blue

Sitting up amongst the bed
The air around me feels cold
As my feet touch the floor,
I hear the calls of my mother
Begging me to no longer cry
While watching the sky fade out of its blue

Nothing can lift me out of my blue
When the pain in my heart makes me cry
The words echoing in my head are cold
But the warmth of her Mother
Brings life to my feet on the floor

The feeling doesn't last when my knees touch the floor
And the pink in my face changes to blue
Mimicking the words spewing out of my mother
Crawling away from the comfort of my bed
The earth around me brings a new wave of cold
And I tell myself that its okay to cry

Whenever I cry
I used to sit on her floor
She never made me feel so cold
As I do when I feel this blue
I want to be in her bed
And I call her mother, my mother.

Alas, I will never call her my mother
Instead I will remember how I cry
Alone in my bed
And Ill never cry on her floor
For my face is too blue



And her heart is too cold

Wait! Why am I so cold?

I have my own mother

And nothing is stronger than blue.

A brave person will cry

And stand tall above the floor

And leave sleep to the bed.

Bed will protect me from the cold

Floor will stand me and my mother

Cry? Never! As long as the sky remains blue



Monty

Silent sobs muffled by the embrace
Of a family member I don't know,
Become absorbed within white walls
Jarring against black clothes from the people inside.
Familiarity of those who share a common denominator
Reminiscing in the old times.
Old men speak of condolences
While young women weep into my dress,
They project their forms of sorrow
Against glass windows.

The aroma of musky flowers
Of my mums 'nice perfume'
Mime the floating smell of the lavender
From the deceased's garden.
Sitting in silence,
They read memories I never shared
But I'm grateful to hear recalled.

Nothing is quite as powerful
Seeing red puffy eyes smile
Through the pain of weeping
At a joke her uncle made
Clutching onto his arms
Remembering that her mother
Was no longer there
To hear her laugh.



Expensive Taste in Children.

I saw her cry a number of times.
But never at my expense.
Watching late night movies,
A sad tale told, seeing a baby being born,
Would make tears flow as if she is immersed herself.
But never at my expense.

She lived her life of hell
Birthing girls with problems planned ahead of time.
Her first, a girl with constant sadness,
Blooming in a world on her own riddled with fungus.
Her second, a perfect girl with a dent in her brain
Aged 16 going on 2.

I am her first.
I look at her cry at the heavens
Calling to explain her mistakes she created
Trying to ignore the screams of her husband
And the gloom above her daughter's head.
I look at the gloom above my head
I see her turn away
And look at the list my sister provides
Ticking each task done
Like she is doing something right

Whenever I cry I cry alone.
I wish I could cry like I would as a baby
But even as a baby I was told to be quiet
"I don't have time for you to cry
She needs to be fed
She needs to be cleaned
She needs to be held and loved."

I saw her cry a number of times
About a child she wished was better.
But it was never at my expense.



Womanhood

Inspired by Duane Hanson - Woman with a laundry basket

Fifteen.

She met the love of her life the other day.

A dream come true.

They talk of marriage, and kids.

She wanted to have a baby.

Eighteen.

She finished high school the other day.

She finished with a ring on her finger.

She would get married to a boy

And have the family she desired.

Twenty.

She got married the other day.

She was trying to have a baby already.

He doesn't seem too interested.

She couldn't care either way.

Twenty-five.

She lost her job the other day.

At least she has her husband,

Who was stuck up at work.

She never had her baby.

Twenty-seven.

She took a pregnancy test the other day.

It came back positive.

Finally! After all this time

She could complete her dream.

Twenty-nine.

She got a divorce the other day.

He slept with his friend

Who he nicknamed 'work'.

She was all alone with his child.



Thirty-three.

She got a job the other day.

Leaving her child at day care

So she can afford to keep her flat.

She wished she had a house.

Forty-three.

She met a man the other day.

He was just like her, he was alone.

She wish her child could feel loved.

She just wanted to feel loved..

Fifty.

She bought a house the other day.

For the first time in her life,

She was alone,

But not lonely.



No return

'I would never kill a Japanese person, my pride as a servant of this nation would never allow me to,' those words are stuck in my thoughts, haunting me. Something seems wrong about them and yet whatever it is that I find wrong with them is eluding me, as though they're just beyond my grasp and yet also so far away. That is all I can think about as my sky blue 1964 Ford Mustang glides across the quiet road. The wind is softly brushing against my cheek as it leads my red hair in a gentle back and forth dance. These seemingly serene sensations fail to bring me any peace, instead I'm stuck in a trance between my thoughts and reality. Until I smell cigarette smoke, which causes the words to bury themselves deep into the back of my mind.

'Old man you better put out that stink, or I swear to God I will drive this heap straight to the other side of the River fucking Sanzu,' I threaten Tomu Nobuchika, the old man smoking in the passenger seat, as I return to reality and try focus on driving.

Old Tomu sighs, throws his cigarette out the window and stares at the recently polished dashboard.

'You should give your elders some respect Missy,' he grumbles. I try to focus on the road, but I'm distracted by the image of his disciplined greyish-brown suit, smooth red tie and neat rusty hair conflicting with the messy scowl occupying his sandpaper face.

'Shut up! It's for your own good Old man, cigarettes are seriously dangerous,' I irritably reply as Old Tomu's scowl continues to occupy my mental space.

'Where did you hear that Missy? Everyone knows that cigarettes are good for cleaning out dirty lungs,' he calmly replies as his hard, annoyed scowl changes to a soft, amused smile, almost as though he's talking to a pouting child.

'I'm not ten anymore Old man, Jesus fucking Christ! Are you trying to piss me off?'

'A doctor friend of mine told me cigarettes can damage internal organs and lead to cancer,' I say with a cocky smile while reflecting on the doctor, Miyuki, who I met during the autopsies from this case. We clicked quite well and now we see each other every few nights.

'Is that so? Yeah whatever you say Missy,' he concedes with a dismissing sigh.



We reach our destination, which I confirm by double checking the address written in my police book. It's a drab old house, coloured brown by dilapidated bricks of misery. Old Tomu pushes the door bell and we are received by grieving parents. The father looks tired, which makes him appear ten years older when paired with his thinning hair and pot belly. The mother attempts to act calm and controlled, but the thick red rings under her eyes and a sniffle every so often betrays her. The parents invite us in, we take off our shoes, sit down at the living room table and the mother pours us some tea. I allow Old Tomu to take the lead while I revise the details of the case by checking the relevant notes in my police book.

This was all set in motion on the fourth of March, 1965, when the parents of Kiki Ashuhara, aged seventeen, reported her missing. The Community Safety Department of the Tokyo MPD launched a city-wide search for the girl and she was found dead two days later in an alleyway of the Nagatacho government district. The girl had been raped, stabbed a dozen times and "death to the impure," was written in her own blood between her breasts. That was when those of us in the Criminal Investigation Bureau stepped in. Our investigation had no leads and after two months it seemed to be a cold case. Then on the twenty second of May, 1965, Yumi Yunahara, aged sixteen, was also found dead in Nagatacho and her corpse had all the same traits as the first victim.

'Damn, that was depressing,' I internally remark with a sigh. I know its good practice and I'm glad that Old Tomu hammered it into me to re-read case details during questioning. Still, every time I am painfully reminded of all the people I couldn't save.

'Is there anything she mentioned to you before she went missing?' Old Tomu asks softly, trying not to hurt those already in great pain.

'No... we got along like always,' Mr Yunahara replies quietly.

'Was there any family conflict at any point?'

'No, despite me being Yumi's step father we were like a real father and daughter,' Mr Yunahara whispers as he attempts to suppress a sob.

'You're her step father?'

'Yes, her biological father was an American soldier. I needed money and there wasn't many ways for a young girl to earn money during the occupation,' Mrs Yunahara answers sombrely with a tint of shame mixed into her voice.

Suddenly those words return to the surface of my mind with a sharp bang, their meaning and why they were bothering me finally fall within my grasp.

'I see "Japanese person", so that's why the meaning of impure is so important...I should confirm this with her.'

'Excuse me, may I borrow your phone?' I politely ask the Yunahara's, they reply with sombre nods.



I walk out of the room, enter the grimy kitchen that houses the sad yellow phone, pull out my police notebook from my back pocket and scroll through it until I find the page with her number. I dial it in and wait.

'Hello, Doctor Miyuki Haze speaking. What I can do for you?' a familiar voice beams.

'This is senior detective Minami Kinshara of the Tokyo MPD, Criminal Investigation Bureau. I need to confirm one thing in regards to the autopsy you performed on Kiki Ashuhara,' I reply in a purposely rigid voice in order to convey the professional nature of my call.

'Of course, what do you need?' She asks professionally, though still in her cheerful voice. She seems to have taken my hint, in her own way.

'I need to know if the victim had any biological traits that are uncommon in Japanese people.'

'She actually did, blue eyes.'

'Blue eyes? But I saw the body and her eyes were definitely black.'

'She wore some ultra-high end contact lenses that must have cost a fair penny. Her father also used his political influence to keep her eye colour under wraps, which is why not even you criminal investigation guys know. I'm only telling you because you're worth more to me than my job,' she replies overly casually and with a wink I imagine.

'My beloved Goddess you're far too good to me'.

'Thank you Miyuki,' I excitedly say as I hang up the phone. I feel a wave of excitement and determination flow over me. The culprit becomes clear in my mind. I start to walk out of the room and decide to share my findings with Old Tomu. I stop.

'Would we even be able to arrest someone as powerful as him? Will arresting him truly be justice anyway? Maybe doing "that" again is my only option.'

I'm hesitant about doing "that" again, but I know it is my only choice. I commit myself to doing it again as I walk back.

After a few hours of questioning the Yunahara family we leave the house.

'Old Tomu please use this and take the train home, I have to take care of some personal business alone,' I calmly say as I hand Old Tomu a thousand yen.

'No fucking way. I know you're about to do something foolish Missy and I'm not going to let it happen,' he replies sternly as he looks into my eyes. It feels like he's peering into my soul, as though he understands my inner conflict my being and he's trying to resolve it. My emotions almost burst open, but a part of me manages to hold everything back behind an icy door.



'Fine, if you want to stop me just shoot me,' I coldly reply as I turn away and walk to my car.

'Stop missy.'

I open the door.

'Don't do it.'

I sit down in the driver's seat and shut the door.

'Please stop!'

I start the car and drive off.

'Damn it!' is the heart wrenching sound that accompanies me as I leave, but I have no time to stop. I have to continue my hunt in Nagatacho.

'So what do you want with me Detective Kinshara?' the man in the million yen suit asks with a smooth voice unbefitting a killer, but the slicked back hair makes him look rather crooked. This is made worse by the snow tinted clinical office, only occupied by a single desk and two chairs on both sides of it. A creepy place like this would send chills down most people's spines.

'I'll be frank. Yasuhiro Amano, leader of the Japanese Pride Party, I believe you murdered Kiki Ashuhara and Yumi Yunahara,' I confidently reply in a calm voice, despite my mind being a torrent of excitement and dread.

'Oh? What gives you that idea?' Amano arrogantly asks with a cocky chuckle. I just need to push him a bit more and then he should reveal himself.

'When we spoke last you said you would never kill a Japanese person. You said "person" as opposed to "citizen", as if people who are not purely Japanese are excluded from that list. Both Kiki Ashuhara and Yumi Yunahara were not pure blooded Japanese people,' I state coldly as I stare at him with a perfect poker face, which even manages to deceive my fear. A long few seconds of silence follow until Amano breaks the silence with hauntingly hearty laughter.

'You're surprisingly sharp for a woman, especially since you're a dirty half breed. So how about I give you a generous donation and you leave things be?' he asks casually with an acidic empathises on half-breed. Amano opens a draw and throws three thick stacks of money at my feet. My emotions finally burst out all out once, twisting together until they form a single distorted nonsensical emotion.

'A bribe? Mr Amano I think you will find that I am a proper Police Officer. I do not heed the voices of the wicked. I merely punish them,' I reply with an inhuman laugh. Nothing makes sense anymore, except me killing this man painfully. My smile beams widely as I unfurl my custom made razor, Amano's despair covered face seems to indicate he realizes my intent.



'Oh God no! Please just let me live!' He pathetically begs, his confident demeanour breaks apart. I feel sick to my stomach, I try to scream. Instead laughter falls out of my mouth.

'Kiki Ashuhara and Yumi Yunahara must have gone through agony before they died, so it's only right you experience your share of agony before you die too,' I cackle as I hover a centimetre from his face.

'NO! I don't want to die!'

'Hey Minami, have a look here,' Miyuki calls out. I groan and force myself out of bed to find Miyuki sitting on the milky smooth carpet, in a tantalisingly undone dressing gown as she reads the newspaper intently.

'The criminal killer has claimed his fifteenth victim,' she says with concern.

'You don't need to worry, he only kills criminals,' I reply with a reassuring smile.

'But those killings...they're so brutal...'

'Miyuki, a kind person like you has no business feeling guilty for scum,' I softly reply as I stroke her cheek. Miyuki smiles back and embraces me.

A wave of shame rises within me, but then I feel a hint of pride. I feel sick, a part of me is proud of killing people. Even so, I know that pride is not entirely misplaced. I must continue to bring justice to those who the law cannot touch, even if I can never return to a normal life.



Do It Lik'e a Lady

Synopsis

Thirty-something year old Alex is a supportive husband and loving, stay-at-home super dad. Despite having found a system that works for them, he and his young family are still trying to adjust to life in the new world. Until recently, Alex has been happy playing the more domestic role while his wife, Liv, boasts a terrific job as a successful architect – but there's always been one thing missing for him: his own passion. Though Liv continues to encourage Alex to pursue his ambitions, the odds are stacked against him, operating within the confines of this new society. But when Alex does land the job of his dreams, he has more to worry about than just learning the ropes in his new position. He must win the respect of his new boss, Grace, and prove himself as both a capable employee and, later, friend. But will he, in turn, be able to maintain the same close relationship he has always had with his family? And more uncertainly, will Alex be able to overcome the prejudice he now faces as a man in a woman's world?



Do It Like a Lady

Chapter 1

“Amber! Come downstairs and have your breakfast. We have to be gone in 15 minutes.”

“I’ll literally be down in one minute Dad!”

“Bella, sweetie, eat your cornflakes, we still have to do your hair.”

“I’m chewing as fast as I can.”

“Good girl. Sam, buddy, are you nearly done in the bathroom?”

No response.

“Sorry I can’t help you out this morning babe, I’ve got to fly. I have a meeting that I’m already running late for.”

“No worries, we’ve got this, don’t we, Bells? I love you. Let me know how you get on with the meeting. Amber!”

A typical morning routine in the Baker household.

I’m Alex. Thirty-five years old, father to three incredible children and husband to the most intelligent and beautiful woman I know. Liv and I got married young when we found out she was pregnant with the twins, Amber and Sam. It was a shotgun wedding to appease her mother but we were madly in love so we didn’t mind the haste.

After the twins were born, Liv encouraged me to submit one of my manuscripts to some publishing companies. I’d always loved writing but had put it on hold when I upped my shifts during the pregnancy. After only a few knock backs, my book was picked up by a publisher on the east coast and at just twenty-one, I had my very own novel lining Barnes & Noble shelves across the state. Then it was time for me to support Liv and her dreams. She’d always wanted to study architecture so I continued my job at the bank and took care of the kids while she finished assignments and crammed for exams. Things were chaotic, but we found our own rhythm and we were happy.

It was somewhere during this time that the world changed. Or ours at least. Rallies in the streets became almost everyday occurrences, amendments were filing through government quicker than ever and all that we saw in the media were devoted activists and demands for equality. The day of the twins’ second birthday, the first female president was elected into office – supported by what now was a female dominant congress. We continued living our lives more or less the same as we had been, but the attitude of society shifted.

In the final year of her degree, Liv was approached by many radical groups claiming that “her career needed her more than her family” and that “raising children and mundane household errands should be left to the men who aren’t reliable in elevated positions anyway”. I know these are things that still play on her mind now.



But that's just how it worked out for us. I've always supported Liv's dreams and she's always supported mine, no matter what society was telling us was acceptable at the time. When it became clear her career was taking her places, I took a step back and assumed my role as stay-at-home dad. Liv loves our kids and is still very hands-on but we had a family to consider and it just made the most sense.

Then, into this new world, came our Bella. Obviously Liv was able to work right up until not even she could justify design plans needing more attention than her aching back or swollen feet. The maternity leave payments she received trumped anything I could bring in from my job at the bank so for a few short months it was just the five of us, without any interference from the bustling outside world.

Now seven years down the track, Liv has just been promoted to Head Planning and Development Surveyor and I am a full-time minivan driver, school uniform mender and fairy-princess make-up applier.

And I couldn't be happier.

◆ ◆ ◆

"Except you could be happier." Liv plonks a sudsy coffee mug on the sink beside me and I pick it up with the dish towel. "I know you love being here for the kids all the time but you're too clever just to be couped up here all day. I think this job could be the best thing for you, just to get out of the house a couple of times a week."

"Yeah that's if I get it. And what happens if Bella has a bad day at school and I'm not around to pick her up?" I wander over to the cupboard to find a home for the mug.

"We can get Bridget or someone to pick her up. Alex, I'm telling you, we will survive without you being here 24/7. I don't mean that to sound harsh but –"

"Yeah I know what you mean. Well, we'll just see how it goes tomorrow and take it from there. All this stress is probably for nothing anyway. I'm up against two women for the job and I doubt anyone would pick a guy over them for a book agency job."

"You know, I remember saying something very similar a few years ago and I distinctly recall that you wouldn't have a bar of it" She reminds me with a little snicker in her voice. I roll my eyes playfully and then spill into a reluctant chuckle as she flicks sudsy water towards my face.

◆ ◆ ◆

Crap, crap, crap! I launch myself into the elevator before the doors close and readjust the bag strap sliding off my left shoulder. I glance at my watch – three minutes late already. The wet section of shirt stuck to my chest where Sam's cereal decided to land is a reminder of the muddle I am leaving behind. Now, despite the generously warm spring morning, I am sporting a woollen sweater, in an effort to hide the soaking shirt underneath.

"Mister Baker, decided to show up have we?" This is the greeting I receive from a small framed woman of roughly the same age as myself, as the elevator doors open to the fourteenth floor.



"I'm so sorry, my youngest was having a meltdown..."

"I think we've wasted enough time already, don't you Mister Baker? If you would kindly follow me to the boardroom."

I take my measure, shut up and follow her to a large room at the end of a long hall. She gestures for me to sit down opposite a small panel, consisting of herself, one dismissive middle-aged woman with her hair pulled into the tightest possible bun and a snooty looking man parading his designer glasses so low on his nose that they look like they may slip off at any second.

"Since we're already running late now, we'll have to make this brief." The lady, who showed me in, jabs again. Judging by the silence, I gather that's my cue to start.

"Right well, I'm Alex, it's nice to meet you all. Firstly, thank you for having me."

"Yes, yes, sorry to be blunt Alex but can we jump straight into... what makes you better than the other two candidates that we've just had in here? Both very capable and come from marketing backgrounds. What sets you apart?" This is the first time I hear the man speak.

I begin again, "Ah yes, of course. Well I do have my own experience with publishing companies. I actually represented myself and my own book which ended up –"

"That's great. Do you have any references we could contact to confirm your experience?"

"I'm sorry?"

"References. Agencies you've previously worked for, an author you've represented. Other than yourself of course." The middle-aged woman mocks and they all join in a snicker.

After what feels like barely two minutes, the interview is over.

I don't even make it home before my phone buzzes. An email. Application unsuccessful.



Panthera Leo

The gum trees stand tall and proud in the clearing, rain drops clinging to the branches in the aftermath of the downpour. The occasional drip can be heard amongst the trills and chirps of the crickets in the crisp morning air. Vapor expels from the two warm bodies in the clearing, dissipating in the early morning light as they lean against one another. A mop of brown hair conceals one of them as they tuck their face into their companion's shoulder, eyes closed, and breathing light as they wait for their new arrival. A few more minutes pass in the still clearing before the crunching of gravel underfoot breaks the silence as someone begins to shift in impatience.

'They should have been here by now,' she states, moving her head away from her companion's shoulder, dislodging her relaxed stance. Brows furrowed, and eyes narrowed as she begins to wiggle her feet from side to side in an effort to keep warm.

'Remember, they are transporting live cargo. Cargo that isn't exactly on friendly terms with the rest of the world at the moment. Be patient Rose.' Her companion tells her, a gentle smile gracing her lips as she shakes her head at Rose's bouncing.

A frown settles on her face as she shakes her head and comes to a stop, 'I still don't understand why management would take this case, Lily. If she's as dangerous as they say she is, we may not be able to incorporate her into the pride without her harming one of our lions. Especially one of the cubs.'

'I know it's a dangerous situation, but she deserves a chance to live in relative normality. Being forced to live in a small cage, barely fed, and paraded around for druggies to show off their wealth and power is no way to live,' Lily says, watching as Rose's features relax, giving her a sympathetic nod. 'Besides, we'll keep her separated at first, so she can get accustomed to being here, and being safe. Then we'll introduce her to the pride through a fence and go from there.'

'Yeah, you're right. I just have a bad feeling, and I would hate for anything to happen to our new cubs. I've gotten so attached,' Rose replies, wrapping her arms around Lily's figure, leaning her head on her shoulder once again.

'I do too, and I promise nothing will happen to them. We're the head lion keepers here, and we'll introduce her at our own pace. No matter what management says. If we can introduce her, who knows, maybe she'll have her own cubs in a few years,' Lily says smiling.



Rose is about to reply when the rumble of a truck is heard coming down the worn track, metal clinking as the box on the back tilts with the uneven surface. Both keeper's attention snaps to the metal crate on the back, and the previously relaxed atmosphere begins to vibrate as their new, dangerous, lioness gets closer to her new home.

'Here we go,' Rose mutters.

The truck grounds to a stop with a screech a few metres to their left, and a man dressed in matching light brown khakis, a button up shirt, and work boots jumps out of the cab. Waving his hand at us, we exchange greetings with Carl Bedivere, Monarto Zoo's resident animal behavioural specialist.

'How was she on the trip?' Lily asks, looking at the crate, but not hearing any sounds from within.

Carl's shoulders slump, a sigh escaping his lips as he runs a hand through his dirty blonde locks. Shaking his head, he tilts his hand and motions them to follow him closer to the box on the back of the truck.

'It's been difficult. The past month I've been with her, she hasn't shown any signs of calming down when a human is close to her. Not even her feeder. Listen and watch.' He gestures to the back of the crate.

Watching closely, you can see the lioness through the air holes stalking around the boundary of the crate, emitting low rasping growls. Her head is low to the ground, shoulders hunched up, and tail swishing from side to side as she gets more agitated. Pacing up and down the crate, peering at us through the holes. Concerned looks cover both Lily and Roses' faces as they know this lioness is warning them to move away before she attacks.

Carl continues, 'Can you smell that?'

Both keepers nod their head, waving hands back and forth under their noses as they register the pungent, musty smell emitting from the crate, beginning to make their eyes water.

'As nobody can get close to her, we can't clean out her crate. From what I know of where she was kept and how she was raised, the drug cartel members used to urinate around her enclosure. As you know, lions are social creatures. She may have picked up on that behavioural trait and began marking her area to keep others out. Especially, as her natural instincts would have told her it would keep unwanted members away from her territory,' Carl explains.



‘Do you think she’ll be able to handle the transfer from her crate to the quarantine enclosure?’ Rose asks, motioning to the building not far behind them, a section of wire fencing surrounding a part of it.

‘Umm, normally I would suggest leaving the crate in the enclosure for a brief period so that she still has something familiar, but the condition it’s in right now is not healthy for her. From her behaviour, she should want to go into the larger enclosure and away from us,’ Carl suggests, nodding his head towards the crate that low growls still permeated from.

Lily nods her head along with him. ‘If you back up to the enclosure gate, Mack is ready with the crane to lift the crate away from the truck, and position it next to the gate, ready to be locked into place along the fence line, and the doors to be opened.’

‘Alright, ladies and gentlemen, let’s get this lioness settled,’ Rose says, rubbing her hands together.

6 Weeks Later

Lily rubs the palm of her hands against her eyes, trying to relieve the headache she can feel building up, making her eyes strain in the afternoon light blaring down atop her. Dropping her hands to her sides as another guttural roar sounds in front of her, fence rattling and producing an eerie creek as the lionesses’ claws rake across the chain links after she jumps on it. Angrily hissing as she can’t get to the keeper standing just a few feet away.

Wrapping her hands around the back of her neck, Lily remembers the frustration of the past few weeks. Every technique they’ve tried to calm Nia hasn’t worked. After settling her into her new enclosure they tried to build a bond with her by only having them, and Carl feeding her. They tried giving her toys and hanging meat up scratching posts so that she could get out some frustration. They tried introducing her to another member of the pride, but she wouldn’t stop attacking the fence. They even tried sleeping near her enclosure over night for a week to see if their constant presence would reassure her that they were there to look after her, not harm her. But nothing has worked.

‘No luck?’ Rose asks, coming to stand next to Lily, passing her a blue travel mug.

Lily takes a sip of the coffee before answering, wincing slightly as it burns her mouth. ‘Nothing. Six weeks of trying to stand next to her enclosure and trying to feed her, and she still tries to attack us.’



Rose replies, watching Nia stalk around the boundary of her territory, 'Carl said that he's never seen a lion so aggressive to their keepers before, and after this much time. He's at a loss of what to do.' She hesitates before speaking again. 'The director and some of the other keepers are wondering if it's time to put her to sleep because she's too dangerous.'

'What!' Lily shouts, spinning around to look at her co-worker head on. 'She's only been with us for a few weeks, we're nowhere near making a decision like that.'

'...and that's why I wished to speak to you both personally, before any decisions were made,' a deep, baritone voice cut in before Rose could reply.

Lily and Rose both spin around to look behind them. Standing there in a navy suit, holding a folder under one arm, was the director of Monarto Zoo. At an impressive height of six foot five, dark unruly hair and a five o'clock shadow, he intimidated most people.

'This is ridiculous,' Lily says spinning back around to watch Nia, heart beginning to beat faster. 'You can't put her to sleep when we've practically only just begun helping her.'

'I know it's only been a few weeks, but we have to look at both sides. Some of the other keepers believe she is too dangerous to remain here, and that she will never mentally heal from how she was raised,' the director replies, coming to stand next to Lily.

'We can't put an innocent animal to sleep, and besides, as we are her keepers, Lily and I should be the ones to decide when it's time to give up,' Rose states, crossing her arms as best she can, eyes narrowed.

The director goes to reply when Lily speaks up next, 'I agree with Rose. We have been the ones caring for Nia, and we will continue to be the ones who care for her. No one else has too, so why everybody gets a vote is confusing and illogical.'

'I know you are both upset, but we have to consider the fact that she is dangerous to everybody, no matter who the keeper. I've read your reports stating that she isn't getting any less aggressive, and we may have to accept that she won't get any better,' the director says calmly, raising a hand to stop any further protestations from Lily and Rose. 'We also have to consider the cost of keeping her here if she can't have any visitors, and if she can't be incorporated into the pride, she can't participate in the breeding program.' The director lets out a sigh and adds on, 'keeper Jones is worried that she'll escape and attack someone.'



‘How does a human life hold more value than that of a critically endangered species?’ Rose rebuts. ‘We are all equal, and as she hasn’t harmed anyone yet, nor will she in the future if we take the right preventative measures. I say she stays. Jones just doesn’t like the fact that he isn’t in charge of the pride.’

The director nods in agreement but replies, ‘We also have to keep in mind that she would be suffering if she stays here with no pride. And we must consider whether it is of benefit to continue to kill other animals to feed her if she’s just going to remain isolated and not able to contribute to the betterment of the species, or to her zoo.’

‘And where do we stop if we kill her? Will we just kill all the animals that don’t jump to our commands? She has spent her entire life suffering at human hands, she should get the chance to experience what life can offer. I agree with Rose; how does her life weigh any less than ours?’ Lily states, connecting her eyes with the director, willing him to see her point.

‘We could also do a school program, showing them how to look after animals, and what the cause could be if they don’t?’ Rose adds in, crossing her fingers behind her back.

The director lets out a sigh, running his hand through his beard as he watches Nia in silence for a minute, weighing all the options in his mind. Dropping his hand, he turns to face Lily and Rose directly, ‘I’ll give you two weeks to prove that she can be an asset to this zoo, otherwise, I’m sorry, but we won’t be able to keep her.’

‘Of course, we’ll do anything to keep her.’ Lily says, a smile widening on her face as she clasps hands with Rose. ‘Don’t worry. We’ll make sure everything is perfect, and one day everybody else will see that this was the right course of action. We promise.’

Lily and Rose lean their heads together, watching Nia finally lie down on the other side of her enclosure. If they can just save this one lioness, then they’ll know their doing their job of protecting species correctly.

‘If only others could see her worth,’ Rose says.

‘They will one day,’ Lily replies, feeling at peace for the first time in weeks.



rites of passage of an African man

BIRTH

A womb was opened
Her new son scared of the world
His life has begun

INITIATION

Flesh has been cut off
A sense of pride fills his veins
He is now of age

MARRIAGE

Cattle were given
The man gained a bride to love
Two then become one

DEATH

Grey haired and sickly
His family mourned his death
To dust he returned



MAMA

Mama, my first homeland

Locked away in a nine-month darkness

I am the child she awaits to hold my hand

Life expands within her that only she can understand

One with whom she shares complete oneness

Mama, my first homeland

Her belly swells until she cannot stand

She is constantly overwhelmed by weariness

I am the child she awaits to hold my hand

Sometimes as she walked upon the sand

She'd prophesy and pray for my greatness

Mama, my first homeland

Even though I would kick and demand

She waits for me with love and kindness

I am the child she awaits to hold my hand



Mama, oh how far your heart did expand
You will always be my home regardless
Mama, my first homeland
I am the child she awaits to hold my hand

WEDDING CEREMONY

At the crack of dawn our women assemble
And at half past seven, they have begun to welcome
Their jubilations and ululations fill the air
'A new daughter is here today'

At nine am the men have assembled
Inspecting the meat and the tent pitched grounds
They share joyous laughter and exaggerated hugs
'Our son gains a helper today'

At noon the church bells are rung
And the wooden pews are filled with excited guests



Once they have quieted down, Pastor begins his sermon

'He who finds a wife...'

It is three pm and the guests are assembled

Under the shade watching the young enjoy themselves

They are dancing to the ceremonious music

'Our friends begin a new journey'

The sun is falling and the children are sleepy

Parents say their goodbyes and best wishes are received

Presents are piled in a corner and speeches come to an end

'Remember that she is always right'

Night is here and all but the sleepers have assembled

They are dancing the night away and drinking to their fill

Tears have been shed but none is sad

'Today is for happiness, two have become one'



Georgia Gustard

To the Beyond

Violet, Orchid

The Orchid and The Dandelion

To the Beyond

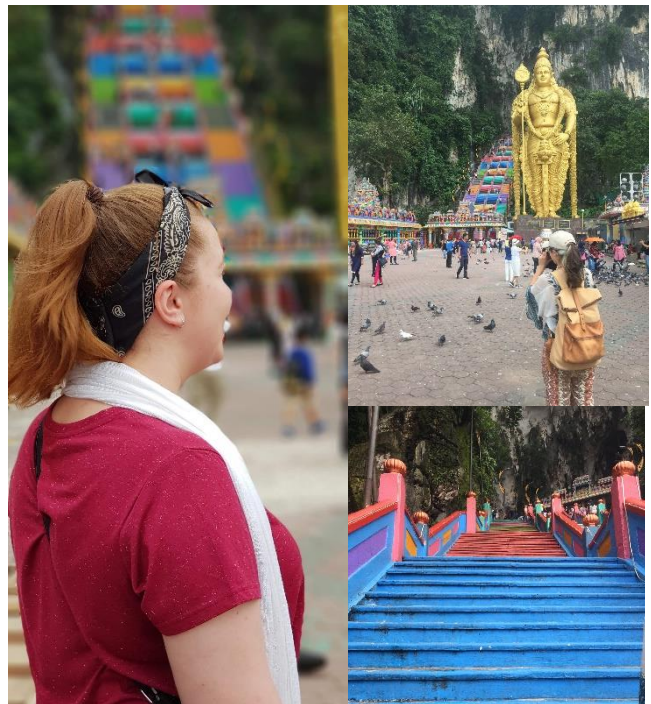
High in the mountains,
A place of worship awaits;
A place of wonder.

Climb the rainbow steps,
One foot after the other,
To reach the temple.

Monkeys racing by,
Cheeky grins on their faces,
As they cause mischief.

People climbing high,
Ascending to the heavens;
To the holy place.

To the Batu Caves.
To a place of wonderment,
Into the beyond.



Violet, Orchid

Within the garden

The elegant orchid lives

Joyful, violet hues



The Orchid and The Dandelion

In this world there are two kinds of people. There are those who are orchids, and those who are dandelions. Orchids are beautiful. They are sensitive souls, who if allowed to grow properly, will flourish and thrive. But orchids are dependent on their environment. If their environment isn't safe, if it's not secure, then they will wilt and die. All their potential wasted. But dandelions; Dandelions are strong. No matter where they are, they will survive. No matter what environment they are put in, they will survive. The dandelion will prosper.

But if I were to pick a flower, make a beautiful bouquet, I wouldn't pick the dandelion. The one who only survives. I would pick the orchid, the fighter. The one who must fight through life every day. The one who must overcome battles time and time again. I would pick the orchid, because in the fight comes strength. And in strength comes beauty.



Bittersweet Window Dressing

Greyness paints the sky in gales of wind, droplets of rain forming and cascading down at a steady, yet quiet pace as I walk upon the dampening pavement. Water drools out of the cracks, oozing into my view as my feet begin to squelch, my pace hurried, but not too much so, as I do not want to provoke a sweat, and ruin my appearance. The rain is thereby of no bother, for it adds a natural look, and increases the chances of small talk. Yes, in fact, such a thing is a wonderful blessing, for it opens many windows to many topics, making it more likely that she will speak first. This is rather gratifying, as it will rid me of the awkwardness of a possible misstep in my attempted conversational upbringings. I think this with a caramelised passion as I walk, my recollection of her skin's colour tinting my pupils, glazing my vision of the street. I almost cannot subdue this bustling feeling of excitement and fear, tingles of her subtle touch flickering through my body in reverberations with my thoughts.

The pace that I walk with is quick, and a well-versed façade of normality that provides a disguise to my trembling heartbeats of frenzied passion. As the convenience store comes into view, my walk ends. It is positioned among a shopping block, which is clustered inside a small indent upon the main road of this suburb, complete with a miniscule parking lot. I breathe nervously before composing myself as I step onto the sidewalk beside the neighbouring store. I glance at myself through the window, checking my appearance as decent, but not too neat as to ruin the rain's built up narrative. As I stare into the store from here, I see her at the checkout. She is unfathomable, her soft, black hair falling loosely in suede-like textures upon her defined shoulders, flowing into her delicate, yet



toned back that curves subtly and graciously. Although, I shall not look so indecently at her, and so I glance away from such details.

I examine her white and black working outfit, her blouse neatly ironed and tucked into the black pants that employees must wear. I couldn't imagine her in more womanly clothing, as her work requires her to wear such gender-neutral attire, but the thought alone of trying to imagine her in a skirt with black, sleek leggings, revealing the warm curves of her thighs is scandalous. Seeing her legs bare would be pornographic, and highly inappropriate, making me despise myself for thinking so indecently of her. At the mere thought, my mouth becomes dry and parched, causing me to swallow deeply before breathing once again and walking forth. As I pass through the door, I scrutinise my steps with tentative unsureness, trying desperately to be normal. Walking neither too loudly nor quickly, I immediately move down an aisle as to assess the situation. There appear to be three customers, one being served and two browsing, which brings me to the realisation that I have terribly miscalculated, as I do not know what to purchase.

Panic suddenly rushes through me, the sheer terror of the possibility of my normality being questioned sending jolts of shock through my veins. I look frantically around me as I retain a casual pace up the aisle. I cannot buy bread, as that is what I bought the other day, and she may take notice of this and subsequently question me, or even worse, grow suspicious. Vegetables would seem stupid, as nobody would go through the effort of walking through the rain just to obtain a few vegetables. It must be essential, and as I walk past some refrigerators on the back-wall, I catch a glimpse of my face in the glass, my slight stubble from the day visible on my upper-lip. The thought of buying some razors instantly strikes me, and a wash of relaxing, hormonal tones calms me. I find the razors, glance at her after having resisted all this time, and find that she is free. Taking my opportunity, I hastily make it to the counter. She looks at me, her perfume wafting through me in concurrence, inducing my cheeks to burn heavily.



‘Must have been a long day,’ she comments quietly, her tender, brown eyes washing over me, examining the dampness of my clothing and hair, perhaps making the conclusion I had hoped for.

My pent-up anticipation breaks upon her words, the unexpected nature of her speaking first hurtling through me and throwing me into the moment. I stand still, feverishly thinking of every possible thing that I could say. In this brief second, I flicker through maybe twenty sentences all of differing nature, evaluating their validity and use. I must appear casual, but my affection for her should slide through the cracks, hinting at my love in a decipherable but not inherently obvious way.

‘Yeah,’ I say, perhaps too loudly and abruptly, before my moment in time is up. ‘I ran out of razors and I need to be clean shaven for work,’ I say quieter and more reformed, gentleness tingeing my voice.

She examines the package of razors, and as she does this, her silence proclaims quivers of winter shades through my heart. I wonder to myself towards whether I have said something wrong and made myself look stupid, and so, I must determine how she interpreted my words. A mix of uncountable questions and theoretical outcomes hurtle through my mind, futility reaping me.

‘Ah, I see. You’re always very presentable...’ she trails off.

Her voice is syrup-like in texture, her colour thickly-layered and elegant, through the somewhat deeper and lower tones of her voice, which though not common in women, is especially attractive when heard. However, her tonal rising at the end of her sentence brings forth the possibility of question. Is she asking something? I blurt out my name in the wake of a few ahs and ums. She smiles, and says hers, though I know it from having politely stared at her nametag many times without giving the impression of looking at her chest indecently. She moves to hand me the razors after I give her the money, both times our hands touching, though not on purpose, as I wouldn’t want to do such indecent things to her. She looks outside, the rain falling heavy now, and worry strikes her face like a blemish upon perfection, but even then, it is so artistically refined and luxurious that every moment appears a framed photo.



‘Oh... I hope you can get home fine,’ she frets, looking back towards me with endearingly concerned eyes.

Warmth lusciously swims through me, pastures of rousing snugness wrapping me like a hug from heaven, flourishing red upon my cheeks while my lips dry from nervous jilts and angelic, metaphorical kisses. My pupils expand into a rapid wash of brightness that sends me so lightheaded that I blink in startled comprehension. She’s worrying for me... oh my, she’s worrying for me. At this realisation I force my smile to be polite and not hysterically ecstatic.

‘Thank you. You, too,’ I say.

I politely nod my head and raise a hand, signalling my departure smoothly and precisely, her ensuing smile and gently parting of her lips, leading me out as I glance back at her, but not for too long. I walk just away from the view of the shopping area and begin to furiously smile, laughter from my happiness fluttering out of me.

I remember that day so clearly. That’s what led up to now, but now that I am here, I cannot deny my unintended filth any longer. To imply that I am good-natured is true, but to say that I am acting morally is not. I am sorry. I wish I could apologise to her for all my deeds... Watching, listening and following. I can only imagine her tender face curling in horror, recoiling in fear, and the subsequent disgust that she’d feel, if she knew. As I sit here, the image of this face perturbingly contorts in my consciousness, forcing me to stamp it out as I look to the many writings of her upon my cluttered desk. The brisk, evening air flutters through the window, rippling the pages of these notes, flickering thoughts of all my failed love letters. I wrote so many, and as I think this, a weary smile stretches tiresomely across my face, the lovely nostalgia of nothingness corporally radiating within me. The letters are prim, and neatly folded before I open them, the realisation of what I should do striking me with the ferocity of a heart string tearing.



I begin writing on a pink, floral-decorated postcard that I know she'd like. I feel a peculiar sense of justice, as I understand that this is the right thing to do, or perhaps the only moral thing I can do. My writing is neat and delicate, but as I pen the words, I realise I need not say much.

To you,

An apology is but crumbling sand in the hands of the sender. It does not hold, but it was still pulled from somewhere. As you receive this, much of what I want to say will be lost just the same. I am sorry. Let it be known that I'll never follow again. I'll never show myself again. I think you know who, and that smile was genuine, for it never meant to harm. A swan song sets a thousand doves free.

A lover.

I follow the path to her house. She lives on the end of a quiet street with a riverbank beside the garden. I arrive just as the sun has set, and am about to place the card in her letterbox, when I notice that a light is on. I notice it out of the corner of my eye, the dim, yet warm and eloquent presence oozing out of the window and upon the riverbank. My lips parch, my heart trembles, and my tongue reflexes in illusions of her taste. A fervent shear of scalding passion burns through me with animalistic desire, and before I know it, I find myself prowling towards the riverbank. Just another look, that is all I need. I promise I'll stop, and I'm sorry, but let me see her creamy textures and velvet hair one last time.

Clustered with disgust towards sick perversion but craving a quench to this appetite, I crouch behind a wet bush, watching the window slyly. The curtains are open, perhaps because she faces a riverbank and nobody can see, but I can, and I squirm with delight. She comes into view, and my heart shudders endearingly. She's wearing her uniform, the contours of her fine figure salaciously



touching my vision. I swallow deeply as she moves in front of a mirror, to which I cannot clearly see through her back covering my view. The realisation that this must be her room sends me guiltily jittery. Slowly, she peels off her blouse, her evocative and delicate skin curving from atop her buttocks, flowing lewdly with her spinal line up her back. I've tried not to think so long about her in such an indecent way, but as I see her now, I cannot resist any longer, the shake of her head waving her loose, black hair down and upon her defined shoulders. I wish I could see her from the front, my mind racing at the mere thought of her prim breasts. Her back is creamily toned, and as she slips off her working pants, I watch as the sculpting of her buttocks present themselves. My thirst surges through me, my crazed lust pulsing through a stiffening crotch, and my hands clenching at the thought of squeezing her delicate hips. As she turns, my body trembles in excitement, not even a breath drawn at the sight. My eyes dart towards her inner-hips, yearning to see her cushioning pubic hair, and it's parting scent by which I'd so hungrily kiss, but... it's different... it's something else. Untucking himself, he pulls up a fresh pair of pants.

I leave his letter in the letterbox.



Adelaide to Melbourne, Beijing to Hunan

Nothing to do but walk along the river
We couldn't say - it just began someday
Spent so much time writing dumb words
Read them as we felt alone
There was a smile that I wish I could rewind
Just to hear: 'You're a marshmallow'

'No, you're a marshmallow'
As we walked beside another river
A journey over. We wished we could rewind
There'll be new stars someday
But for now, we sit alone
Clinging to each other's words

But there are so few words
So few, you stole 'marshmallow'
Reminded, I smile alone
Walking beside the river
Thinking, I'll be there someday
How I wish we could rewind

Pulled the key, and watched it rewind
The lock engraved with our words
They'll be rusted someday
Forgotten beside my marshmallow
Washed with the tide of the river
Let them be alone

They want to be alone
There is no need to rewind



The tide flows through the river
Weaving a new path of words
But we'll never forget, 'marshmallow'
Though we'll grow old, someday

We'll be there someday
And we'll never be alone
But I'll still call you 'marshmallow'
As not only memories will rewind
They're woven amongst our many words
Just like the ones by the river

I do not want to rewind my foolish words
I call you my marshmallow, even alone
And we'll walk by a new river someday

Passionfruit

'Hi' said Strawberry
Welcoming wisps of worry
Begin a story

The brash Raspberry
A joyful discovery
Rash effrontery

Bitter Blueberry
Powerless apology
Recall the merry?

Wistful, waxy Plum



Wipe away - re-embrace fun

Smiling a new sun

A stained Apricot

Happy – the colours of taut

Forward with a trot

Fresh, passionate Mint

Tender flowing stars with glint

Love was not a stint

Sweet Whiskers

The spring hare frolicked with sweet ease

Amiss to care past the red breeze

Hopped too fair and kissed its knees

Fell upon a mare to see the leaves

Tumbling and tumbling

Drumming and drumming

Hop on, hop on

Not long, not long

Hare's grow grey

Dare snow today?

Rare to flow away

Stay still - unswept away

Never to be a fox



To Shoot a Tearless Dove

If a tear could stain
Retain a plea
They need not feign

It would be the same
No rain on sea
If a tear could stain

They need not strain
Unable to see
They need not feign

Torn through maim
Stands a tree
If a tear could stain

Grow old as a cane
Finally set free
They need not feign

Whisper the same
'Wǒ ài nǐ'
If a tear could stain
They need not feign



But a Concubine's Jewel

Among the wilt lay the fěicui
Upon the ray of summer day
A long for the new way's fey

Wrong till' the hey of May
A song not gay to say
Was it truly a day of fěicui?

The city clothed in golden armour
Was cursed by the golden flower
So lay a dusty traveller's fěicui



The Price of Acquisition

60 Days till Eviction

To any passer-by Chris's house appeared unremarkable. It was a carbon copy off all its neighbours. The only apparent, obscurity was how closed off it was. The curtains were drawn tightly, you could never catch people coming or going. It seemed empty. The most activity were the packages being off dropped at the doorstep and disappearing inside.

The front and backyard were nothing suspect either, a few pieces of furniture were stored under the cover of his veranda, the amount of mould on its fabric was the strongest sign of the neglect.

What Chris had been trying so hard to hide was inside.

It had started out as a hobby. A collection. He had always been charmed by merchandise and memorabilia from his favourite TV shows, it was a way to deepen his connection to them. It was a precious thing getting to own a piece of it. It started it like that. He justified it as an investment, one day they could repay him tenfold.

And he insisted on call it hobby even when his items poured out of his study, out of the display cases into the living room, down the hall and into his bedroom. The memorabilia turned into junk as his bank account couldn't keep up, but the need persisted. The goal post merely shifted, the items had less clear value but while they were just pixels, they were treasures he had to have. Soon anything qualified for him to click buy.

He came into a small sum of money before he moved in, inheritance from his mother and he used it to support his lifestyle as he tried to fashion it into a business. He justified acquiring with an intent to resell for a profit.

Renting was difficult with a hobby like his, he could acknowledge that. The place he had was perfect, the neighbours weren't nosey, and his landlord was lazy, meaning inspections were none-existent. This laziness allowed him to settle down in a way he hadn't done before. His hoard had gone unchecked for quite a while.

That's what did it, he had got too cosy. He kicked himself.

His landlord didn't know his name or his phone number, so he posted the notice under the door.

Chris had struggled with depression his whole adult life, he struggled to tidy, to wash his clothes, even clean his teeth in the morning. He would go long stretches without going outside, it had probably been years since he last saw a doctor of any kind. It was all too much. He lived on a seesaw, traveling from one extreme to another. Prescriptions took the peaks off, the lows weren't as low, and the highs weren't as high. But there isn't a pill in this



world that can make him happy. His constant acquiring was a way for him to control that, he could make himself happy. He could order his own care packages of dopamine right to his door step.

To deal with the bad news, he sat on his laptop marking a few items for delivery to calm himself down. The notice was beside Chris on his desk crumpled and then restraightened. The light of the screen caught the grey in his coarse stubble. This was not the life he had imagined for himself at fifty.

He should be searching for a new place to live, hiring a moving crew, a cleaning crew to help with his immense hoard. Instead he sat and scrolled. He couldn't interrogate the ridiculousness of comforting himself like that. It was the only way the anxiety bated and the panic deescalated.

It worked, it left him alone. It was quite again.

52 Days till Eviction

He had made a coffee, scrolled the web, done the dishes, check his emails - cramming in another activity would have been too blatant of an evasion even for him.

Let's have a look at it, get a game plan, he reasoned with himself. So, he stood in the hallway of his room, it was the best place to start. If he made progress here, he might get inspired. Then it would be easy, he told himself.

He knew there was a huge task ahead of him – packing up his things. But the same shame that made him draw the curtains so tight kept him from reaching out. The thought of someone seeing his failure, the magnitude of it scared him. He couldn't do it.

His laptop sat where he slept, on the sliver of his double bed that was not taken up by his bedfellow, a greedy pile of clothes. They weren't dirt, he didn't think. They just needed to be folded and put away. The closet was the problem he had filled it already with boxes. He couldn't recall what was in them, what treasures he might have to grapple with losing and his stomach twisted.

He fidgeted, thinking of his computer, the light dulling him again.

The clothes would do, he reconsidered. And it eased.

Once the clothes were a neat stack with nowhere to go. He was faced with the closet again.

He didn't have to throw stuff out yet. The compromise allowed him to start on the closet.

He was relocating, moving items that shared his bed to the hallway and taking them no further. He was inconstant negotiations with his anxiety to go further, to go through them, make sure they were all worth keeping. That is where they had landed, pretending this comfort was progress and he was able to reward himself with too much gratification. He carried on clearing out the rest of the room in the same manner.



Hours later he stood in a foreign place. He could use both sides of his bed, he paced the full length of his room in awe. It wasn't bad progress for a day's work. He found the fulfillment was a high nearly comparable to acquiring.

As he left his room, his mood derailed. He was blocked by the consequences of not eliminating. Without realising it he'd sealed off the hallway with all the junk from his room, trapping himself. He had to return at least half the boxes to his room to get through.

The realisation of his failure pressed down on him. The stress and the darkness of all his thoughts drove him to his computer like a moth. In the dark, its light coloured his face, filled his eyes and distracting his mind.

He scrolled. It all faded away, he could see only the screen before him.

While trolling auctions, he had always fancied himself an explorer, a conqueror. There was always something better. It was no longer about the items he was chasing, to pass it by was to lose it.

17 Days Till Eviction

With vice of his deadline gripped him tightening. He was could finally see a culling was needed. It was them or him, he thought. It reenergised him in a way, the realisation he had no choice.

Back in his room he stared down the pile of boxes that he had failed to clear last time. He cracked his neck and yanked at his jaw, it was so tense. It had been hurting all morning like his tooth was rotting but as he stuck his tongue back there, expecting to knock up into a culprit, he found nothing.

All this pain tangled with his anxiety, with the darkness that tried to talk him down. As brave as his thoughts were, he was in a cold sweat and felt dizzy.

He extracted one of the packed boxes from his room. It weighed more than he thought, and it pulled him and out of position. He felt a pang in his back. He had to fight the box till he had a handle over it, ignoring the twinge and reset his feet taking the first few shaky steps.

He didn't make it far before having to stop in the hall to breath and rested the box against the wall. His breaths were laboured and angered his chest. It felt like his heart sputtered. The pain extends, slipping down his arms.

Chris dropped the box the urge to breath winning over its mysterious conscious. He hoped it would ease his breathing. His visions pulsed, and the world spun. He focused on his breathing, that he was breathing, that he wasn't dying as the world narrowed.

He recognised it as a panic attack. Yet, it was worse, it was painful, not just scary. That the thing about panic attacks, you lose your breath and your heartbeats so fast that you think you're going to die, that you don't have control. They were painful in that sense.



He didn't realise it was a heart attack. His hoarded artery struggling to forcing the blood to squeeze through a pin prick, like he was through his cluttered halls.

He collapsed ripping down a wall of possessions. They blanketed over him, tucking him in.

Day of Eviction

His body was discovered two weeks later. It took half a day, a team of cleaners and the crew of the ambulance to clear a path for a stretcher to take away the remains. His body had started to putrefy, blackened and liquified it stained where he died like an old timey chalk outline. The smell of decay had leached into any permeable thing. The creatures that had lived with him, scattering under all the layers of acquired items had emerged to consume him.

It was unclear to the medics on site whether it was avalanche or the heart attack that really did him in.

A team of trauma cleaners where hired by the landlord to clean up the site of decomposition and dismantle his beloved hoard, preparing the place for the next renter.

The cleaners were wrapped in white plastic, their eyes obscured by safety goggles and their mouths covered by masks. Entirely, concealed they looked like the Martians from the covers of Chris's comic books, inhumane and sterile.

They didn't know his name, to them he was '11 Carrington Street', an estimated week of clean-up for the team of six. Their job was not to savour, not to inspect only to dispose. Chris's treasures where not anyone else's.



The Road To Home

one

June 6th, 1944; Sword Beach, France

The boat rocks heavily on the water as it moves across the open ocean. It's nearly silent except for the movement of the waves beneath them and the deep breathing of the men. It's eerie when the men have grown accustomed to the constant explosions and gunfire and screaming and crying—

Apart from one man at the front who scours the horizon with his binoculars, the khaki-covered soldiers from the Third Infantry Division look around them, trying to distinguish something, anything from the pitch black. The only light comes from the rounded moon above, reflecting on the ripples of the silvery water. They can't see much, only the faint curves of land in the far distance.

Two soldiers, one from Manchester and the second from London, sit huddled together against one wall of the large amphibious DD-tank. The soaked flooring is hard and uncomfortable, the wall digging into their spines. They're drenched from the rain that had pounded them only an hour before. In their first few weeks as soldiers, it would've led to unmitigated panic. Now, they buck for a section eight, hoping to develop the renowned trench foot or even pneumonia. The infirmary would be nicer than anything they'll confront out on the front.

Not that they could ever go home, at that moment, as they are rowed toward a seemingly suicidal mission. The only way to get off the metaphorical train now would be to jump right into the line of fire and hope to get picked up by a medic before they bleed out in the sand. But they won't do that, couldn't do that. Couldn't shift the responsibility to their friends like that purposefully. Couldn't put their friends through the heartbreak of losing another brother in arms. They'll do what they can to fight and survive and come out the other side.

The Londoner, Private Eli Walsh, shuffles around and pulls a cigarette packet from his breast pocket, offering one to his friend.

"Marlboros? They're for dames." The friend asks, scrunching his face up.

The infantry men affectionately termed him Brooklyn because, although he lives in Manchester, he's got a girl who migrated to Brooklyn that he talks to through sparing letters and photographs until he can get there himself. No one calls him James Williams, not even the Serge.

"Don't have any then," Walsh says evenly, putting Brooklyn's cigarette back into the box.

Brooklyn shakes his head, snatching the cigarette from Walsh's grasp. They duck down low against the wind and Eli lights the cigarettes. They take a long drag, the smoke swirling thickly in their chests along with a rush of nicotine and the sweetness added for the sake of the female tongue.



"They aren't terrible," Brooklyn admits, eyeing it curiously. "Your girl get you hooked?"

Eli takes another breath before answering, watching the shadows of his friend's face in the low light. "Sure did, on our first date. I walked her home from the dance hall in the pissing rain and she offered me a taste. I haven't bought anything else since."

Brooklyn offers a square of ration chocolate as repayment, and Eli lets the chocolate melt on his tongue, savouring the sickly-sweet taste. They smoke their cigarettes down to the stubs with a splattering of quiet chatter to distract themselves from the mission. It doesn't quite work. The boat nears closer to the beach. Steadily the men's breathing race and their eyes get a bit wider, swallowing down the lumps of fear in their throats.

"You know this is a suicide mission?" Brooklyn asks carefully, his brow furrowed.

"Don't think like that."

"How can I not? We're being thrown in, unprotected. The Germans will know we're coming a mile off. If we don't get killed on the beach, we have to take the cities—"

"The beach has already been bombed. The city will be bombed before we advance. They're going to clear the path for us."

"Doesn't mean we won't get shot."

Walsh sighs. "We're nothing but a number, Brook. We're pawns on their chess board. If we get knocked off, they just replace us with a spare. All in aid of protecting the king."

Brooklyn pauses. "I ain't ever going to see Evie again, am I?"

"That depends on your faith, pal," Eli says easily. "You believe in Heaven, you'll see her again. You believe in reincarnation and soul mates, you'll meet her in the next life. If you keep your head down and your helmet on, you'll see her when you get to Brooklyn."

Brooklyn looks a bit more settled at that.

Walsh slaps him on the shoulder. "You stay within two feet of me, I'll get you through."

Brooklyn looks as though he wants to argue the possibility of that when suddenly the chattering around them falls silent, replaced with a yell from their commanding officers, preparing them for advancing on the beach. Brooklyn snaps his mouth shut, wide eyes staring toward the front of the boat where, in the dull pastel light of morning, they can see the shore of Sword Beach. It's empty, silent, the waves crashing into the sand in a foam of white.

The boat rolls up to the shallow water and stops with a heavy thud, throwing them all forward with a jolt. The door at the front opens and slams into the sand, a ramp for the soldiers to disembark.

Immediately the gunfire begins, their attackers appearing on the esplanade road above the beach, up the sand dunes. There aren't many, the beach mainly cleared by the earlier air raid, but there's enough. Their bullets fly straight into the boat where the men can't escape, churning them up with a splattering of blood. Brooklyn and Eli can see more and more of the beach as the men in front of them drop like flies.



Walsh, with his face covered in someone else's blood, grabs hold of Brooklyn's shoulders and pushes him off the side of the boat into the water. They land in the shallow waves, discoloured red with blood, bullets hitting all around them with loud splashes. They quickly wade through the water amidst the rogue bullets, tucked in to make themselves small.

Beneath a beautiful display in the candy-floss morning sky, the British soldiers race up the beach in large groups, their rifles raised, and their heads ducked. Dozens of men go down with a shout, their shoulders and arms and legs blown out by machine-gun fire from the remorseless German defence.

The man running in front of Eli takes a shot to the head, the bullet hitting him directly between the eyes, and he falls with a thud to the ground, motionless. Eli jumps over him quickly, clearing the body, and then keeps running. He's practically dragging Brooklyn along with him, the kid's face morphed into undiluted terror.

Brooklyn and Eli dodge and duck as they hurry up the sand, their boots sinking into the churned-up ground. They dive at the last second into the sand dune which provides cover from the Germans on the road above. They get sand in the eyes and mouth, and hurriedly wipe it away, coughing.

With their backs to the dune, they have the chance to reload their rifles, readjust their helmets on their heads, and watch the men who'd been behind them as they attempt to follow up the beach. There are more men fallen than standing. Those who are alive are screaming, clutching their wounds, clutching each other. One man walks around, dazed and confused, his right arm left with nothing but shreds from below the elbow.

The boats they'd arrived on finally follow behind, converted into DD-tanks that plod up the wet sand, engines whirring, and onto dry land. They begin to shoot, their thick canons blasting out explosives toward the German line. A few of the blasts miss, instead ploughing through the houses along the esplanade. Most of the fire hits its target, exploding into the Germans and taking out much of their defence. The men fly everywhere with the force, not always as a whole. Their tanks overturn, bursting into flaming fireballs.

The gaps in the German defence give the Allies the room to move. From the bottom of the sand dune, those waiting negotiate the slope and emerge at the top in a surprise attack, forming a blocking line and shooting at the awaiting Germans. The Allies shoot accurately in a wave of bullets that plough through the men unexpecting men.

Walsh, one of the best shots in the division, aims at them as the last remaining flee like frightened cats into the town. He picks them off one by one, turning to the next before the last has even hit the ground. He gets so wrapped up in the adrenaline of the hunt, in staring through his scope, that he somewhat forgets to watch his own back, confident that Brooklyn will have his six. He jumps, nonetheless, when there's two successive shots behind him, Brooklyn's shoulder jolting lightly into his back with the force they're standing so close together. Eli turns to see two Germans lying on the ground in front of them, Brooklyn's rifle steaming slightly with the heat of the barrel.

Brooklyn looks up to Eli, as though he were looking to an older brother for praise. Eli takes a second to slap him on the back, smirking proudly.

The seaside town of Ouistreham barely stands a chance as the British commandos clear the area of enemy strongpoints. Long evacuated in the light of the D-Day Landings, the town is empty of civilian life. Only the British soldiers remain, standing amidst the smouldering ruins, the air thick with smoke and gunpowder.



Brooklyn and Eli are unharmed, but that notion doesn't extend to everyone. A quarter of the infantry, give or take, still lie wounded on the beaches and throughout the streets. Most of them are dead, unblinking. Those still alive cry out for their mammas as the final memories of their lives flood behind their eyelids like a calming film.

The medics follow through once all the carnage has died down, the gunfire has ceased, and all the Germans have been sought out from their hiding places amongst the ruins. They carry the wounded on stretchers and in their arms to the temporary camp nearby for treatment. They'll either be transferred to the closest field hospital or thrown back into circulation.

The healthy are rounded up before their battle-hardened Sergeant. His face is pulled into a tight frown as he barks some orders. Then the group is off, marching together in two neat lines, their boots hitting the bitumen roads with thuds, a melodic beat. They move through the countryside on rocky and hilly terrain, hard on the legs.

Sounds fill the air – the crunch of gravel and grass, ragged breathing, the jingle of dog tags and rifles and heavy backpacks. Brooklyn adjusts the straps and keeps going. The trees blow lightly with the wind, the warm sun beating down on their backs.

When night falls and they stop to make camp, they can just see the glow of the lights of Caen in the far distance, just before the city goes into its blackout.

two

July 8th, 1944; Caen, France

After an intense stalemate for most of the month of June, the Allies' efforts to penetrate the German forces in Caen prove futile. No matter which angle they attempt to attack from, they can't provide any openings. Multiple operations prove wasteful, leading only to the destruction of the Norman city and the death of many innocent civilians.

That leaves said citizens to begin cleaning up their loved but martyred city, despite the continuing occupancy by the Germans. The Germans bark at them, their words undecipherable. Nevertheless, the citizens go where they're instructed, and they clean up the rubble that's pointed out to them until eventually, the ruined streets resemble roads again rather than gravel.

Some buildings are destroyed, laying in heaps, but some of them are saveable. One such is the home of young Frenchwoman Isabelle Dufresne and her daughter Emilie. Isabelle's husband is long gone, called up to fight for the French Resistance, but the card she'd received in the mail only three weeks ago had put a sudden halt to any daydreams she may have had of her husband returning home again.

Isabelle pushes a strand of brown curls from her face as she bends down, sweeping up the plaster that's fallen from the roof onto the floorboards with the rattling of the building in the bombings. Other than everything being coated in a fine layer of dust, a few upturned picture frames and the window in the kitchen being smashed, the house is relatively unharmed.

As she tips the dust into the garbage bag, Isabelle pauses at the familiar buzzing sound coming from the sky, far off in the distance. She's frozen with fear, listening as the droning noise of an



aircraft flies over the top of the city, getting insanely loud and rattling the walls as it gets closer. She drops the brush and peers out the window, a sense of dread settling in her stomach, but her eyebrows rise in surprise when instead of dropping bombs or medical materials, the distinctly Allied plane spills out thousands of bright yellow leaflets. They rain down from the sky, floating to the ground as they're caught in the wind, and come to rest all over the streets like a meadow of daffodils growing in the middle of the bitumen.

Isabelle bursts out onto the street outside, along with hundreds of other citizens. She catches one of the pamphlets from mid-air, spinning it around to read it.

Urgent message TO THE INHABITANTS OF THIS CITY

Dropped in a very inaccurate way the day of the strategic bombardments

You who read this leaflet, are in or near to a major centre essential to the enemy for the movement of its troops and materiel. The vital objective close to you will be attacked without delay. There is an urgent need for you to leave the zone of danger where you are with your family for a few days.

Do not clog up the roads. Disperse to the countryside as much as possible.

LEAVE AT ONCE! YOU DO NOT HAVE A MINUTE TO LOSE!

Instantly, chatter starts up between the people on the streets, debating whether or not to evacuate as the leaflets instruct. Some reassure that the town is not of importance. Others cry that for them to receive the leaflets, they must be in danger. A heated debate starts up, loud yelling in beautiful French, and it attracts the attention of the Germans, who come over to investigate the ruckus.

Isabelle feels her breath clog in her throat and her heart thud in her chest. They city's been bombed before and she can't see what would prevent it happening again, to draw the Germans from the city and prevent them from reaching the coast. She immediately goes back inside and shoves clothing and important documents and photo albums into a leather suitcase for her and her daughter, leaving the rooms destroyed in her haste.

Isabelle hoists the suitcase up into her grip and hurries along past the burgeoning crowds of terrified citizens that move in herds toward the evacuation points in the countryside and city's churches. Isabelle attempts to push through them, to get to the school a few streets over where Emilie is, but eventually the crowd gets too thick and she gets caught up. She's swept away with the masses of crying and terrified citizens, urged along by the police men who direct the flow of pedestrian traffic, finding herself being steered away from the school. She tries to cry out, screams for her daughter. A policeman on the edge of the crowd's bellowing voice cuts through the terrified murmuring, reassuring that they will all be safe.

The group splits at a cross roads, half of it heading toward the medieval tunnels on the outskirts of town that serve as shelters, the other half hurrying toward the Abbey of Saint-Étienne, the medieval-aged church that has been converted into a hospital to avoid bombing. A large white sheet sits atop the steeple, a red cross painted onto it in crimson blood to identify it as a makeshift hospital.

The crowd rushes through the large double doors and between the wooden pews under the arched beams of the high ceiling. The statue of Christ himself stands behind the altar with open arms, welcoming them all the sanctuary. Beside him, built into the ground, lies the remains of William the



Conqueror, and the Allies wouldn't dare bomb the grave of an English king. The building is strong, the walls impenetrable, and the spirits of both sacred figures will surely protect the people.

The bombing begins a few hours later. They hear the buzzing of hundreds of planes flying overhead, low to the ground, and immediately there's the sound of gunfire as the Germans attempt to shoot down the planes. The first round of bombs is dropped in groups over the city, rocking the earth as though an earthquake had hit. Everyone screams. It's loud, the bombing, the explosions, the screaming, the crumbling of buildings, the scatter of rubble.

Within thirty minutes, the first lot of the wounded are brought into the Abbey, carried by their friends or by Allied soldiers, some of them dragging themselves. Quickly, the pews are occupied by the wounded, lying on them as medics and civilians struggle to save their lives, wrapping wounds and stanching blood loss.

One of the medics yells out to Isabelle and calls her over, slamming her hands over a bleeding gunshot wound to put pressure on the wound while he prepares his equipment. Isabelle kneels beside the panting woman, her hands covered in red, the blood dripping onto the tiled floor. The medic returns with tweezers and a scalpel, moves Isabelle's hands, and immediately digs into the woman to retrieve the bullet and shrapnel. Isabelle looks away, faint, the only thing anchoring her the woman's death grip on her hand.

Another round of bombs hit, closer this time, rattling the church's frame. The screaming and crying intensifies. The wounded moan in pain. A baby screams loudly in the corner, its mother rocking it with small sounds to hush it.

The inside of the church is packed, with hardly any room to move; too many people in one space at once. If the bomb hits the Abbey, despite it being a hospital, there'll be nowhere to run or hide. They're like fish in a barrel, and it's terrifying. All they can do is sit and wait and huddle together, say a silent prayer to the Lord himself, asking to be spared.

three

July 8th, 1944; Caen, France

Walsh and Brooklyn, along with some two-thousand other soldiers, sit hiding in the trees on the outskirts of Caen watching as the bombers fly low over the city.

Then suddenly, after hours of sitting in silence, it all happens at once. The bombs start, dropping from the bellies of the planes with a loud roar before hitting the city, lighting up the land in blasts of red and yellow.

For hours the planes drop bombs, over and over. Some of them get hit by return fire from the Germans within the city, from both tanks and machine guns. Explosion after explosion, fireball after fireball, the city is slowly but efficiently flattened into rubble. Debris flies everywhere into the sky. The air turns black with smoke, the smell of burning wood and rubber and plastic filling their noses.

The wait, just watching, feels like an eternity. Everyone looks terrified, their eyes wide and their hands trembling. Beads jingle as Private Danvers busily worries his rosary beads, mumbling prayers



under his breath. Alden admires a picture of his wife back home, blonde curls looking so life like they could almost bounce off the paper. Sergeant Hawkins has a steely expression, smoking away at a cigarette.

Brooklyn glances around at the hundreds of other soldiers around him, illuminated in shadows beneath the tree canopy. Hundreds of men who look around in a mix of anxiety, calm, heart-stopping fear. What waits for them in the city, after all, is undeniably worse than what they've been facing the last few weeks, waiting to reach the main fight. The soldiers enjoy the purgatory-like existence, even if it only lasts a few drawn out moments, before they'll crash headlong into the lands of hell and meet the devil himself.

Then suddenly, the four-hundred or so planes turn around in the air and flee back toward London, empty of ammo.

At a yell from Sergeant Hawkins, the soldiers push forward. They run from the outskirts of the city into the smoking streets, thankfully bustling with German advancement rather than the Caen civilians. They can barely see far in front of them, can just make out silhouettes and bodies on the ground, but slowly the smoke clears to reveal the wreckage of a once beautiful city.

Brooklyn and Walsh stick beside each other, within two feet as promised, close enough that they bump into each other with each step, their rifles clinking against each other every now and then.

Slowed by the rubble, the Allies' entrance into the city is slowed significantly. They utilise the debris as barricades to fire from behind, to reload, to gather their wits and their breath. The Germans fire back using the same technique, setting up debris and abandoned buildings as posts for their defence. As the Allies move through, attempting to push the Germans out of the city, a lot of the men go down to gunshot wounds and grenade fire, hitting the ground with a thud. There's a lot of yelling, but it's drowned out by gunfire, their semi-automatics singing as they let out rounds of bullets.

The group clears the area and sets off down the main street of the town. In the clock tower ahead, Walsh just spots the glint of metal – a sniper. The sniper takes aim and Eli quickly pulls Brooklyn, diving through the smashed window of a burnt-out pub just as a shot rings out, hitting one of the men standing beside them. The rest of the men copy suit, hiding in the shopfronts along the main street. Someone radios to the Sergeant about the sniper, and two minutes later, his body falls from the window of the clock tower to the ground below.

They've got a perfect view of the street, and as the Germans troop down the street past them, they shoot from their hideout. The Germans don't even see them, haven't even a second to radio it in before they're torn up by gunfire. Walsh covers Brooklyn as he quickly reloads, slamming the magazine back into the compartment. Brooklyn nods to Eli, readjusting his helmet on his head. They stand then and run back out into the street, along the edges of the buildings, searching for any hiding enemies.

Within the rubble, the Germans have hidden land mines, dangerous and lurking in wait. None of them notice them until Alden makes note of the familiar disc shape planted to the ground. They look around and notice they're surrounded by them on every angle, buried beneath the rubble. It'll be a maze to get out, and they're lucky they made it this far in their naivety.

One of the men panics. He sprints away like lightning, a belt of bullets hung over his neck. He doesn't make it far when he runs over the top of a rubble pile and it explodes beneath his feet,



sending him flying into the air every which way with a sprinkle of individual bullets to go with it. A hand falls a few metres from them. Brooklyn makes a gagging sound.

Wary of their exposure in the middle of the street, Walsh pushes on Brooklyn's back to get him to move. They hurry carefully across the road toward a darkened alleyway on the other side to cut through to the next street, sticking together, rifles raised against any attackers.

Suddenly, Private Alden trips over his own boots, falling dangerously close to a protruding landmine. Walsh doubles back and grabs him under the arms and lifts him upright, half-carrying and half-dragging him to safety. He's got the image of the man's wife, blonde curls and all, burned into his mind and he's got to get Alden to safety.

Brooklyn makes it to the alley and turns to his friend just in time to see him step on a large piece of rubble and a lazy landmine waiting underneath, only visible from his angle. Any scream that may have escaped is lodged in his throat like a bullet, but it's too late, anyway. The world explodes in a mass of rubble and fire and heat, throwing Brooklyn backward with the force of it. He smacks into the wall of the building, a throbbing pain moving through the back of his head, and his word goes black before he hits the dirty ground.

four

July 8th, 1944; Caen, France

Brooklyn sits on the bonnet of a burnt-out car, watching as the citizens of Caen slowly emerge from their shelters and hospitals following the fizzle out of the fighting in the town. The soldiers walk through the streets, helping the citizens, carrying the wounded, marching the German arrestees from the city. It's an organised chaos, particularly considering the mayhem in the hours before.

It's all a little blurry to him – running from the approaching Germans, the landmine, being thrown, waking up covered in a blanket of debris, finding Eli and Alden's lifeless bodies–

He'd managed to make his way from the alleys to the main road, and found the city almost completely controlled by the Allies. He'd taken a seat on the bonnet and hadn't moved since. There's a throbbing pain in his forehead from the massive gash along his hairline. He got it wrapped and checked when the medic passed, of course, because Walsh would berate him if he didn't.

He's fiddling with a pair of dog-tags, but not his own. The metal is warm in his hands, having been held for hours now. Brooklyn wipes away at a tear from his eye. Eli certainly wasn't the only comrade he's lost so far – he's seen enough death that he'd go as far as to say the Angel of Death sits upon his own shoulder – but Eli, who he met at basic training, was certainly the first of those men he'd truly seen as a friend, brother, leader.

At least Brooklyn can be assured that Eli fulfilled his promise and he got Brooklyn to the other side safely. He hopes Eli can rest peacefully as well.

Brooklyn looks up when he hears a woman crying out in anguish. He spots her easily – a young woman with dark curls, running through the streets in the direction of the school. Following her are a



group of similar aged men and women, calling out similarly. Names, he realises. Brooklyn slings the dog-tags around his neck before he slowly slides off the bonnet of the car and follows after them.

Isabel's feet can't carry her fast enough through the destroyed streets toward the school. She passes her home, or what it once was, finding it a ruin of rubble and fire that she only spares a passing glance.

The group of parents approach the school, finding it partially destroyed. One half lay flattened by a shell, the other half somewhat standing despite a few holes in the ceiling. She's breathless and speechless and can only stare open-mouthed as the other parents scream for their children.

Isabel steps into the rubble, attempting to manoeuvre it and get to the classrooms, but she pauses when she hears the loud creaking of metal and men's voices, as well as the crying of children. She squints through the smoke as male figures emerge, dressed in khaki, their arms laden with rifles and packs and small children. They carry the children from the wreckage and into the waiting arms of their parents, who cry gratefully for their children's lives.

A young man with a thick bandage around his head and kind eyes approaches Isabel, and in his arms is Emilie, a little bruised but thankfully unharmed. Isabel begins to cry, taking her daughter from the man's arms and wrapping her up in her arms, cupping the back of her daughter's head and pressing a longing kiss to her forehead.

Isabel looks up at the young soldier, his haunted expression. He offers her a small smile, but it doesn't come from the soul. She notices he wears three sets of dog-tags around his neck and her eyes turn soft with pity, lacking all the coldness Brooklyn had expected from the French for what the Allies have done to their city.

"Merci," Isabel cries. "Merci."

Isabel practically flies into his arms, hugging him tightly around the neck, Emilie between them. Brooklyn pauses only a moment before gently hugging her back, wary of the way she cries against his shoulder, loud in his ear. She presses a sweet French kiss to his cheek to his bloodied cheek in thanks.

Brooklyn manages a smile despite the lone tear in his eye. "You're welcome."



Speechless

3:57. Dull apartment blocks meander in and out of sight. The grey linoleum on the floor is streaked with tinges of yellow and orange as the sun shines through the carriage windows. He slumps down onto the vacant seat, avoiding eye contact with the other passengers. The flowers he holds in his left hand appear heavy, his eyes sunken and stained red. He looks down at the watch *she* bought him. 3:59. Darkness envelops the carriage as the train enters a tunnel.

He looks up cautiously to find a smirking infant and young mother opposite him. The child gives the tousled man a grin. The man tries his best to return the favour, mustering up a strained smile between gritted teeth. The baby lets out a sharp cry and cuddles back into its mother's arms. The man quickly averts his eyes back toward the floor. They remind him too much of *them*.

4:02. Light bursts into the carriage as the train breaks free of the tunnel. The sun's rays hit his wedding ring, sending a dazzling reflection toward his face. He swiftly closes his eyelids and covers his face with his hands as a single tear forms in the corner of his eye. Attempting to distract his thoughts, he turns up the volume on his headphones and pulls out his phone to change songs.

Unlocking the phone reveals the time and the date – he didn't need to check either to remember it was their anniversary. He settles on a song, *Long Live the Queen* by Frank Turner. The booming acoustic guitar chords immediately pulse through the headphones as he tilts his head back, sinking deep into his chair.

'You'll live to dance another day / it's just now you'll have to dance for the two of us.'



For a brief moment he allows himself to remember the dancing classes they took together. Nothing seemed to matter when the music started. He found freedom in learning to speak with his body rather than his mouth.

The wheels on the corroded rails screech to a halt, jolting the carriage sideways. He opens his eyes and is thrust out of his thoughts as he realises he has reached his stop. He looks down at the busy road, spotting the small, unobtrusive graveyard across the street. The world seemingly rushes past him as he is herded out of the carriage by the homogenous crowd of people.

4:08. On time. As he walks toward the graveyard his memories begin to haunt him. He remembers when they told him *she* wasn't going to make it. He remembers when they said the baby wouldn't either.



He looks frantically at the digital clock sitting atop the mess of his desk. *4:02. Late.* She would almost have finished her shift if he didn't hurry. He quickly stuffs his satchel with his electronic tablet and design briefs, haphazardly sliding everything else off his desk and into his drawer. As he stands up to leave, he becomes aware of the sinking feeling developing in his stomach. Self-doubt starts to creep into his inner dialogue as he heads toward the exit. *Why bother? Everybody probably asks her the same question anyway.*

He enters the elevator at the end of the office and looks back at the clock on the other side of the room. The doors begin to close. *4:04.* The doors slide shut.

As the elevator lets out a ring and the doors slide open, he is met by a blaring congregation of people, walking into a small but busy shopping centre above a subway station. He weaves through the crowd into a quiet corner of the mall. *4:07.* He walks up to a florist shop which is adorned by an array of colourful blooms. As he steps inside the store he lets out an exhausted but relieved breath – she's working again.

His gaze fixates on the cavernous gap between her two front teeth. He watches with joy as the corner of her eyes wrinkle when she laughs, how her hazel green iris contrast perfectly with her lightly freckled cheekbones. He spots her grey hearing aid sitting comfortably



behind her ear. She looks nothing like *her*, but it still reminds him of *her*. As he approaches the counter she gives him a big smile.

‘Chester! I almost thought you weren’t coming. How are you today?’ she asks with a slightly muffled voice.

Chester pulls out his tablet and stylus from his satchel, proceeding to scribble on the screen. He scrunches his face in deep focus and holds the tablet with straight arms out in front of him, turning the tablet toward her, revealing a smiling face accompanied by the line he had planned the night before.

‘I’m sorry I’m getting so late Jenny, my legs are finding it harder and harder to move this mounting waistline!’

She lets out a little giggle, reminding him of how much more active he was when he took those dance lessons.

‘The usual then?’ Jenny asks.

Chester pauses for a moment before making a fist, raising and lowering it like a nodding head. Jenny raises her eyebrows in admiration.

‘I see you’ve been practicing, I’m impressed.’

Chester struggles to hide his excitement as Jenny turns away from the counter and heads toward the back of the store. She picks several roses as Chester begins to frantically scrawl on the tablet. His mouth blubbers with trepidation as he attempts to speak.

‘J-J-J-Jen-J-Jen-Jenny’ he blurts out.

I sound so stupid.

She turns around and smiles at Chester before moving her fist in the same nodding action as he did before. He holds up the tablet and shares the message he had been deliberating over all day.

‘What are your favourite flowers?’

‘Oh I’m glad you asked...’ Jenny begins.



‘But I’m afraid I’m not much of a help. My favourites are daffodils but we don’t sell them. Can I ask what they’re for?’

Stunned, Chester tries to hide his disappointment by biting his lips as they start to quiver. His mind goes blank. He hadn’t planned what to say next.

‘Oh...ah...th-th-th-that’s ok. I’ll just g-g-go with the r-ro-r-rose-ro-roses again.’

Jenny chuckles to herself as she bundles seven roses into a small pink wrapper, the way he always asked for.

‘For three years now you’ve come here every week and bought the same flowers. Maybe you should try something new for her.’

I don’t think she minds, he thinks to himself. He passes her the money. *If only Jenny knew*. He raises his flattened hand to his chin and mouths the words ‘thank you’, before lowering his hand toward Jenny.

She mimics the motion and mouths ‘you’re welcome’.

He turns and leaves the florist, beaming from ear to ear as he walks down the adjacent escalator to the train station below, taking a seat at a crowded bench on the station’s platform. He fiddles around in his pocket and feels for his wedding ring. His face droops as he slides the ring around his finger and stares at the roses in his left hand with remorse.

He still blames himself for the accident. Chester looks down at his watch again to see how much longer he would have to wait for the train. 4:15. *Late*. He thought about how that was the time *she* died.



3:46. He holds the flowers tight in his right hand. The carriage is shrouded in darkness as it travels through the tunnel. He sits with his back straight and chin up, a sense of optimistic energy pulses through his body. Sunlight bursts into the carriage as the train exits the tunnel, hitting his face and warming it in a comforting embrace.

He looks around the carriage until something catches his eye – the smiling baby from a few weeks ago. The child again locks eyes with him, this time quizzically analysing Chester’s face. Instead of forcing up a twisted smile, Chester pulls out his tablet and quickly draws on it. He



holds up the tablet to show the goofy smiling face he drew. The baby giggles in amusement, causing the mother to look over at Chester. She too smiles, gives a sociable wave and taps a man sitting next to her, pointing in Chester's direction. The young father's face creases into a kind smile, putting his arm around the mother and child, tightly cuddling both. Chester moves his attention from the family and looks toward the window, observing the soft clouds floating peacefully in the sky. One formation almost looks like *her*.

He slowly recognises the memorable guitar chords of Frank Turner's *Long Live The Queen* pounding through his earphones once again.

'We'll live to dance another day / it's just now we have to dance for more of us.'

He listens intently and closing his eyes, allows a memory of *her* to seep into his mind.

'You need to move with the rhythm Chester,' he could hear his wife saying.

He moved his legs stiffly and accidentally stepped on her feet. She patiently restarted the song and he tried again, lasting a few more seconds before making the same mistake.

'You're too focussed on being in time, just like you always want to be *on time*. Just go with the rhythm Chester, let go.'

He slowed his breathing, closing his eyes as she started the song again.

'It doesn't matter if you fall out of time, as long as you recover and let the song take you where it wants to. You're the passenger, not the driver. Don't follow the thoughts in your head, follow the beat in your heart.'

He closed his mouth and tried his best to remove all thoughts as he started moving once again. He soon found himself dancing in perfect tandem with his wife.

'Now it's your turn Chester, try without me.'

He is shaken from his daydream as he hears the station being called over the loudspeaker – it was the stop after his. He looks out the window in panic and swiftly checks the time. 4:02. *Late.*

When the train reaches the station he quickly makes his way through the tight congregation of people inside the carriage, squeezing up to the front of the train doors. As the doors lurch



open he rushes out onto the platform. He sprints out the exit of the subway before the rest of the crowd leaves the station, running in the direction the train had just travelled. 4:04.

Are you kidding yourself Chester? You'll have a heart attack if you try to run all that way.

Sweat forms on the top of his forehead and he feels like his heart will burst out of his body. He becomes lightheaded and his face turns bright red.

After what seems like an eternity to him, Chester sees the previous station appear in sight. He pauses for a moment, placing his hands on his knees and panting heavily as he reaches the subway.

He continues and travels down the escalators toward the tracks. Slowing down, he now feels how clammy his hands have become and notices his pores continue to perspire as his body tries to cool down. He hops off the escalators in a small shopping centre one level above the subway station. 4:16. She had usually finished by now. He takes his wedding ring off his finger, kisses it and puts it in his pocket. *Time for me to dance for the two of us.* He pulls out his tablet and triple checks the message he had prepared on his tablet earlier that day.

4:17. He looks down at the flowers he holds tight in his right hand. The golden trumpet-shaped coronas, the soft petals, the bright yellow blooms – seven daffodils. He shifts through the crowded shopping centre and steps inside the florist, using the tablet to cover his face. A familiar voice reads the message aloud.

'Do you want to go dancing with me tonight?'

Jenny pauses for a moment in thought. Chester slides the tablet below his face and looks directly into her deep, green eyes. It is like the way *she* used to look at him, except it wasn't *her*, it was her. He almost looks down at his watch before stopping himself. Jenny pulls her hands out her pocket and slowly moves it into eyesight. She smiles as her hand forms into a fist, slowly raising and lowering it like a nodding head.

'What time?'



Evelyn

1.

Evelyn

It feels odd to wake up naturally. No sounds. No TV. No alarm.

I feel well-rested and the pillow is soft beneath my cheek. I stretch out, my whole body shuddering with the effort. I haven't opened my eyes yet, I am savouring the moment. Then it hits me. No sound. None. No sound. No birds chirping. *No sound.*

Fragmented memories flash, like a strobe light in my brain and I feel my heart speed up to match the recollections. I do not want to open my eyes.

But I force them open.

I am in a room. It is small. A few metres square. It was once white. Maybe a long time ago. Its walls are yellow now. They remind me of my best friend growing up. Sammy's parents smoked inside. Sammy always smelled of smoke and the walls of her house were this same colour. This same yellow. I haven't spoken to Sammy in years.

I look at the corner farthest from me. There is a toilet. A basin. There is a door but something inside me knows that there is no way that door is open. I sit up. Too fast. My head spins and that's when I feel it. The nausea. I didn't feel it when I was lying down. Chloroform. The fucker knocked me out with chloroform. My hand shakes as I raise it to my head and my wedding ring glints at me. My kids. Oh God, my kids. Has he got my kids? I start to scream.

"Evelyn." A voice fills the room. "Evelyn. You should calm down now." There are speakers. Small ones on the walls. I notice them now. I scream louder. An unbearable, high-pitched sound comes through the speakers. I stop screaming and clamp my hands over my ears.

"That's better." The voice is deep, gravelly but still light. He's happy. The fucker is *joyous*.

"My kids." I try to keep my voice steady.

"Your kids? Your kids are fine Evelyn. You came alone, remember?"



I close my eyes again, relief overcoming fear.

"I can see you're happy about that. You could be a happy person Evelyn. We could be happy together."

My eyes snap open. He can see me. How can he see me? I glance around the room but I can't see a camera.

"Yes Evelyn, I am watching you. I've always been watching you. Do you like that? Me watching you?"

"What are you even talking about?" I moan, pulling the bed sheets away. I am dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. Not mine. "I don't even know you and where are my clothes?"

"Oh, you know me Evelyn. You came to me."

"I answered an ad! For fuck's sake! An ad. I wanted to get my son a bird. Do you even have birds, you sick fuck?"

The high-pitched sound starts up again but this time for much longer. I cover my ears. It's excruciating. But I don't cry. Because fuck him. After what seems like an eternity the sounds stops.

"I won't tolerate abuse, Evelyn."

"You're right." I mutter. "Abuse is awful. Kidnapping however? Totally peachy fucking keen."

The speakers around me chuckle. "I love your sense of humour, Evelyn."

I lift my chin and the voice sighs.

"Do you really think I kidnapped you Evelyn? Is that what you think I've done?" He is starting to get worked up, I can hear it. "Evelyn, I *saved* you?"

"Saved me?"

"Yes!" He is exasperated. "From a mediocre life. Boredom. I SAVED YOU!"

He screams the last three words and I do not recoil even though every part of me wants to throw the covers over my head.

"I want to go home." I say.

"You are home."

There is a *click* and I know he is gone.

Finally, I let the tears escape. I bury my face in my hands and I sob.



2.

Evelyn

My name is Evelyn Masters. I am thirty-eight years old. My kids are Austin and Lucy. My husband is Mark. We live in a cream coloured four-bedroom house. It has a red roof. I love animals. We have a dog, fish and a rabbit. Austin wants a parrot. I wanted a cat, but Mark is allergic. We go to dinner every Thursday night with our friends Steve and Kathy. I always order the Caesar salad. I drive Austin to his baseball games every Saturday. He is almost seventeen now and doesn't need his mum watching over him, but I always stay. I chat with his coach Michael and then I sit with the other parents and we discuss our children's futures. University versus TAFE. Working versus travel. Lucy has dance on Mondays, gymnastics on Wednesdays. She is fourteen now and is starting to get bored with them both. She wants to go to parties, she wants a 'real' social life. I can relate to that.

Every morning, after dropping the kids at school, I go to the same café and order the same coffee on my way into work. The hipster at the counter doesn't even need to ask my name any more. He hands me my skim latte with a smile and I smile back and rush to work to do a bunch of filing and minute some meetings for five hours, then I'm leaving to pick up the kids. At the pick-up zone I always pop inside the school's café to catch up with parents and staff from the school. Mr Wilson keeps me up to date with Lucy's maths and Craig, Josh Evans' dad, boasts about our 'boys' and how they're going to play baseball in the US someday. It's always at this point that Meredith, Simon's mum, rolls her eyes and asks if I would like a coffee. Tuesdays I do Yoga. Fridays I do high intensity boxing. I do the same thing week in, week out.

Every morning, as I sit in my new prison I reflect on my life. I remind myself of who I am. Of my life outside of this tiny room. I think of Austin moving around inside my swollen belly as I would eat a bowl full of fresh cherries, the only thing I was craving. I think of Lucy's tiny hand wrapping around my finger as she fed. I think of the way Mark's green eyes crinkle at the corners when he laughs at whatever stupid thing I have said. I think of my morning coffee. They were good coffees. I wonder if Mark is still having Thursday dinners then I remind myself that no, Mark would not be having dinners. Mark would be looking for me. Mark would be panicking. I can imagine him in a wrinkled shirt; clothes hanging from his body as he loses more and more weight from worry and from the fact that, in almost nineteen years of marriage, Mark has never cooked himself a meal. He's also never ironed his own shirts.

I imagine my face all over the news. Long dark hair, blue eyes, the freckles that seem out of place on my olive skin. The too-small nose. The lips, the top one always fuller than the bottom. I used to



obsess over that until I met Mark. He liked my face. My hair. My body. I was always taller than the other girls and that drove a lot of guys away. Not Mark. He loved it. And now he doesn't know if he will ever see me again. And neither do I.

My name is Evelyn Masters. I am thirty-eight years old. I have two kids. I have a husband. I love animals. And, like an animal, I have been captured.

3.

Evelyn

Eleven days. I have been here for eleven days.

I don't scratch the days off on the wall like in some black and white prison film. I write them in the journal provided by my captor. On my fifth day, I woke up and there it was; a blue and pink journal, a pop of colour in my dreary cell, and a pen. The pen has cats on it and a chrome cap.

"You came in here while I slept?" I know he's there and sure enough there is the click I've gotten used to through the speakers.

"Yes."

"Gross."

He chuckles. "Oh, Evelyn. You are entertaining. Are you hungry?"

For the first three days, I refused to eat. There is a slot in the door that he feeds me through twice a day. Simple food like eggs, toast and bacon for breakfast and roast vegetables and steak or chicken for dinner. The first day I threw the plate against the wall. The high pitched squeal came through the speakers until I cleaned it up. I thought about keeping a shard of the broken plate but he could see me. After that I just sat on the bed, arms crossed, not looking at the food until he would ask me to pass it back through the slot. I tried looking through the slot once. All I could see was darkness.

"I haven't poisoned the food Evelyn. If I wanted you dead, don't you think I would have done it by now?"

I didn't answer him.

On the fourth day, I weakened and ate the breakfast. Maybe because I was so hungry, maybe because the prick could actually cook; it was delicious. I polished it off.

"No, I'm not hungry."



"I am so happy that you are eating Evelyn. You were getting thin. We can't have that."

"Why, are you going to skin me Buffalo Bill style?" I filled a plastic cup with water from the sink. Along with toothpaste, a toothbrush, a bucket and modesty curtain for when I use the toilet and wash myself, there is not much in the toilet area. There are some neatly folded clothes in a basket under the sink. He provided me with at least two weeks' worth of underwear and clothing.

"No, he starved fat girls then skinned them. I'm feeding you."

"How generous."

This is how we communicate. He tells me how he is doing what's best for me, how he is looking after me and I respond with sarcasm which he finds 'amusing' then he leaves, and I am alone to stare at the walls.

On today, the eleventh day, I am staring at my journal. Apart from the strike marks I have made in it to mark my time here, I haven't written in it. I am getting bored. I remember a time when I used to long for alone time. When the kids would be crawling all over me after a day of washing, cooking, cleaning and Mark would come home from work, sit on the couch, stare at his phone and complain that he was too 'tired' to put them to bed. So I would put them to bed, most of the time falling asleep next to them. I would wake up in the middle of the night, shuffle back to our bed where Mark already lay snoring. I'd stare at him for a long moment and contemplate leaving. Not running away from the kids, I could never do that, but leaving just for a couple of nights. I yearned to be alone.

Now, after a week and a half of being alone, I am pretty much climbing the walls. I have eaten my breakfast and had my coffee. He started bringing me coffee a few days ago. It's in a tiny tin cup that just fits through the slot. It's pretty good. I've done a workout with the little space I have, cleaned myself up and plaited my still-wet hair that I wash in my basin with soap. The towel provided is starting to smell funky as it never dries properly in here. The dirty clothes are also piling up.

I give in and pick up the journal, opening to a fresh page but I don't write. I draw. I haven't sketched in almost twenty years. I married and became a mother so young, there was not much time for anything else. But I loved to draw. The pen makes it a little more difficult, but I manage. About two hours later my children's faces stare back at me, drawn from memory of a portrait that hangs in our living room. I can barely see it, my eyes are so blurred with tears.

"Evelyn."

Oh, for fuck's sake.



4.

Him

The monitor is grainy, but I can still see. She has drawn her children. It's a rough sketch given she has used the pen I left her. But it is very good. She swipes her arm over her eyes.

"Evelyn."

She looks at the ceiling. This is her exaggerated way of rolling her eyes. It's charming.

"What do you want?"

"Are you crying?"

"What do you care?" She slams the journal shut and wipes her eyes with her t-shirt.

"I care." I do.

"Right. You've taken me away from my family. Put me in a box. So caring."

"You'll understand."

She snorts. After a long silence I speak.

"You're drawing."

"I was."

"When was the last time you drew?"

She sighs. I can tell she does not want to speak to me, however I also know she is craving human interaction. So, I wait.

"Around eighteen years or so." She waves her hand. "Before my son was born."

"Why did you stop? That looked good to me."

"I stopped because I was busy being a mother. And stop spying on me."

"I'll do as I please." I say this in a calm tone which I know infuriates her. "You stopped because you became a mother."

"That's what I said."

"Your children ruined your future."

."That's not true." She snaps. "I *chose* to become a mother. I *love* my kids."



"Oh, I don't doubt that Evelyn, but you gave everything up for them. You gave yourself up to that unexceptional life you were living."

"Gees, here we go with your 'I saved you' bullshit." She grabs the journal and puts it under her pillow. After she has done this, she folds her tanned arms across her chest. She is practically pouting and she is beautiful.

"You have been here not even two weeks and you have already started doing something you love again. Something for yourself."

Her mouth opens and quickly closes. She has no retort for this because it is true. Her life is devoted to her family. Even the yoga and boxing are just fillers because they are the only nights her brat kids don't need to be taken somewhere.

"No snappy retort Evelyn?"

"I want some pencils."

This surprises me. This woman is full of surprises. I love her. She has never asked for anything except her freedom. "You want pencils?"

"Yes. If I'm going to draw, it's not going to be with a shitty pen. If you're going to keep me in this fucking hole, I need to do something other than workout and clean myself and wash my hair with that shitty soap." She gestures to the basin. "The towel stinks, the clothes are dirty. You're supposed to be helping me, right? That's what you keep saying."

She is standing, her arms still crossed. Her blue eyes are shining with fear and exhilaration, I can tell. Because she is defying me. What's to stop me from going in there and silencing her forever? But I won't. She must know that I won't.

"Very well, Evelyn." I smile a little. "I'll see what I can do."

5.

Him

It is day thirteen when I go to her room and push a bubble-wrapped parcel through the slot in her door. She picks it up and starts to open it but I have instructions first.

"Stand in the corner."

She looks around. "Why?"



“Do it. The corner to the right of your bed. Face the wall.”

She hesitates. I know she is thinking that I am going to kill her. She doesn't look frightened but her wary hesitation is a sign.

“I won't hurt you, Evelyn.” She flinches as though I have read her mind. “I am coming in to get the laundry. You will not turn around. You will face the wall. When I am gone, you can open your gift.”

She walks to the corner and stands still. I wait a little, watching her to make sure she is going to stay there before I leave my monitor and walk downstairs. The basement is dingy, as most basements are, but my parents kept it tidy whilst they were alive. Still, the laundry room my father built with his own bare hands has come in handy.

I peep through the food slot before I enter. She is still standing in the corner. Good girl.

Unlocking the padlock, I enter the room slowly, not taking my eyes off her. Her long hair hangs down her back in a braid. She's right, the soap is doing it no favours. It has gotten rather dull. I put the clothes from the laundry basket into a bag and replace them with fresh, clean clothing. I also put a few extra things on her basin. I stay silent the entire time. Through the speakers, she hasn't recognised me but in person my voice may tweak her memory. And we can't have that. Not yet.

I cast one last hungry look at her before I leave, clicking the padlock back into place. It is a satisfying sound. I paid a fortune for the best padlock on the market. I don't rush back to my monitor. I have a feeling she won't move, and I am right.

“You can open your parcel now, Evelyn.” She turns slowly and looks at the parcel. She is more apprehensive than she was before, but curiosity gets the better of her and she eventually picks it up and opens it.

“Derwent Graphics.” She mutters to herself. “And colours.” She runs her long fingers over the boxes. Then she picks up the paper I have given her. “This is the good stuff. How *Misery* of you.”

I laugh before I speak. “No, Annie bought him the cheap stuff first. He asks for the expensive stuff later.”

“Regrets that pretty quick, doesn't he?” She murmurs as she continues stroking her new treasures.

I chuckle again. “Yes.”

She looks up and finally notices the new clothes. “Why all the blue?”

“Matches your eyes.” Which she rolls as she finally notices the basin.



“Shampoo and Conditioner! Moisturiser!” She practically coos as she picks them up, cradling these products like they are a newborn baby. Before she can stop herself, years of ingrained manners escape from her. “Thank you.” I can tell she has surprised herself a little.

“You are welcome.” I am happy that she is happy. “I have something else for you.”

She places the products back on the basin. “I don’t need anything else. This is more than enough.” She is wary now. She thinks she does not want to be friends with me.

“No, I want to give you this. But first, you should use your pencils. The woman at the store said they were the best.”

“They are.” She sits on her bed, already taking a lead pencil out and laying out a fresh piece of paper. I leave her to it.

6.

Him

Evelyn has been mine for over five weeks. I watch her this morning as she wakes up, stretching her long legs and swinging them over the edge of the bed where my parents once slept.

I didn’t kill my parents. I only say this because I know how this all looks. I didn’t kill them. My mother died peacefully in her sleep five years ago and my father followed her within the year. They were good parents. They did the best they could with what they got.

I watch as a black kitten jumps up onto her lap. I brought her Ziggy a week ago. Apart from the day I carried her into my home, this was the happiest day of my life. After once again instructing her to turn around, I did my usual clothing swap, leaving a few things for her. An eye cream, a mirror to sit over her basin, some new paper to draw on. Her walls were now lined with her art. Incredible, intricately detailed portraits drawn from memory.

After I had left the room, I watched her turn around and look curiously at the little cardboard box I left. It was not long before I heard her shriek and she began weeping as she scooped up the kitten and held him to her face. I had never seen her so happy, not in years, and her joy was my joy.

Now, as Ziggy tries to settle on her lap she chuckles “Off you get. You’ll get cuddles later.” And she moves to clean out his kitty litter. She does this dutifully every day, leaving the plastic bag for me to



collect. Ziggy curls in and out of her legs and I am a little envious of him as she picks him up and tickles his chin.

"You're super cute, aren't you? Just the smooshiest little thing, I love you!"

"Thank you." I say and watch her shake her head and put the kitten down on the bed.

"Get off it. I was talking to Ziggy." She gives the kitten one last scratch before heading to the basin.

"I'm curious, is he named after Stardust or Marley?"

"Stardust, of course." She brushes her teeth and spits. "I used to sing that song to my kids."

"Odd choice."

"Not in my house." She washes her face and although I have watched this morning routine a million times, I never get bored. But I have an earlier shift at work today and need to leave soon. She chats as she applies her moisturizer. "I want to draw Ziggy today but getting him to stay still will be tricky."

"Why don't you do it while he's sleeping?" I suggest as I clip on my nametag.

"Not a bad idea." She ties her hair up and I see the cat watching her hair swing from side to side as she turns around. "It'll be hard to get all that detail given how dark he is. I don't know how you managed to find a black kitten that's completely black. Most of them have a white spot somewhere."

"Oh, I have my ways." I am slipping on my shoes, looking down when it happens. There is a crash. Ziggy has jumped onto the basin and knocked the mirror to the ground. "Into the corner. Now!" I command and Evelyn flinches. Picking up the kitten and rushing to the corner, she stands completely still, and I rush down, grabbing a plastic bag on the way.

When I enter the room, Evelyn is still in the corner. As I pick up the mirror pieces, I notice spots of blood on the floor, but I don't have time to worry about that now. I look around, making sure I have every piece.

"There's one here. Near my feet." She says quietly. For a moment I worry that she might attack me, but she is too busy cuddling Ziggy, her face buried in his fur. I quickly grab the piece, careful not to cut myself and leave the room.



7.

Evelyn

"Did you hurt yourself?" His voice comes back over the speaker and Ziggy jumps a little in my arms.

"Yes. It's not bad though."

"Do you need a bandage, or can it wait?"

"I'll clean it and wrap it in something. It can wait." I pause. "I might need some antiseptic cream though."

"Sure. I'll bring some in later."

"Okay." I hold Ziggy closer and move to the bed, taking out some art supplies. There is a click and I know he has left. And now I know where he is going. When he picked up the mirror piece I saw a glimpse of his reflection. I know why he knows my name.

I put the kitten down and wash my bleeding foot and wrap some toilet paper around it. I look around this room. This room that has become mine for over a month. Yes, I use that diary for rough sketches now, but I still strike off every day. And it's coming up to forty. I look at the walls covered in my art. Portraits that tell my life story so far. I can't lie, it's been a joy to rediscover this part of myself. Something that was buried so deep, I had forgotten how it was my first love. Before Mark. Before my children. I sit, and I draw all day and I get my food brought to me and my clothes washed and I have Ziggy.

But I haven't seen my children in five weeks. I haven't seen sunlight. I haven't driven my car. I haven't slept in my bed. I sit on the bed that isn't mine and start sharpening my pencils so I can start sketching Ziggy.

Yeah, I know why my captor knows my name. He has written it down almost every day for the last three years. He has written it down, smiled at me and told me to have a nice morning.

The hipster from the café.

That mother fucker.



8.

Him

When I return, Evelyn is still drawing. I do love to watch her in her element. Her right hand running across the page in lightning fast motions as she fills in the fine hairs that stick out across the kitten's back as he lays curled up in his favourite spot on the foot of the bed. I remove my nametag – *'Hi! My name is Seth!'* – and change into shorts and a t-shirt. It's unseasonably warm out and I've been on my feet all day. It feels good to come home and watch her. It must be cooler in her room, she has long sleeves on.

I still remember the first time I saw her. Everybody else that comes into the café is in a rush. They avoid my eyes, mumble their order, snatch their coffee and leave. Not Evelyn. She looked right at me. She knew what she wanted. She smiled. And I knew that she needed me. That she was trapped. I began looking forward to her coming in every morning and then I began to watch her. I planned the rescue.

I practiced first. Two women. Different ways, different rooms. The first almost got away and this was due to a series of mistakes on my part. I didn't use enough chloroform, I tried to keep her upstairs, I didn't secure the door enough. I was unprepared, and she paid for it. I never saw her face on the news. Clearly, she wasn't missed.

The second woman was easier. I knew where she would go and what I needed to do. It got boring quickly, she was no Evelyn. I kept her for a week. I saw her face on TV but that faded quickly. People forget.

When I overheard Evelyn on the phone one morning about her son wanting a parrot, I knew it was the opportunity I had been waiting for.

"Nobody in this entire town sells parrots. I've called every pet store, it's driving me crazy. Thank you." She took the coffee from me with a grin. "Yeah, I'm going to have to check the paper."

I keep watching her now. I wonder if she remembers knocking on my door that night five weeks ago while I came up behind her with a chloroform-soaked rag and my face covered with a stocking. She didn't even make a sound. This is how I knew she accepted this. That she'll love me eventually.

"Evelyn."

Her head snaps up, her eyes have that glazed look they get when she has been drawing for hours.

"Yeah?"



"That looks good."

"Thanks." She runs her hand along Ziggy's body as he stretches lazily. "I've got a great model." She tidies up her pencils.

"I've got your antiseptic cream and bandage. How's your foot?"

"It's ok." She shrugs. "Sore."

I feel a pang of guilt for leaving her all day with an injury. I hope it's not infected.

"I'll bring it down to you."

"Ok." She gets up and stands in the corner. Good girl.

As I walk down, I wonder if I should offer to bandage the foot up myself. It might be too soon. As I open the padlock, I decide to just leave the bag with her.

She is still in the corner. Ziggy has left his spot on the bed and is rubbing against her bare leg. I place the antiseptic cream and bandages on the sink but as I turn to leave, my foot nudges something on the floor. Ziggy's litter bag. I bend down to pick it up and suddenly, there is a sharp pain in my neck. I bring my fingers to it and they come away wet. That is when I realise, it is not cool in here. It is warm. She had something up her sleeve. I reach up to pull what is jammed out of the side of my neck out. A pencil. My blood is squirting everywhere as I turn to face her. And she kicks me squarely in the balls. It brings me to my knees but as I am falling, I grab her around the waist and she comes down with me. We are rolling around the floor and it is nothing like I imagined in my fantasies. For one thing, my blood is all over her and for another, she is hissing "Fuck you!" as she elbows me in the nose. I hate to do it but I punch her in the ribs, whilst gripping her hair with my other hand. She screams. My balls are killing me. Still, I keep my hand wrapped around that long braid. She is strong though, she rolls us over so she is straddling me and I don't even see it when she jams the second pencil into my throat. My grip on her hair loosens. I am no doctor but I'm sure it has gone straight into my larynx. She moves off me, kneeing my head as she gets up, and everything goes black for a moment.

When I open my eyes, she is standing over me, her tears making tracks through the blood that is smeared on her face. Her eye is swelling up, I cannot even remember hitting her there and even now I am sad that her face is marked. She doesn't take her eyes off me as she picks up Ziggy who has remained completely unfazed through all of this. She starts backing towards the door then stops. She comes back to me. She bends down and places her hand on my chest. I cannot move as she leans in.



“Thank you.”

She glances around at the pictures plastered all over the room and her eyes meet mine. Those dark blue eyes. Everything around her starts to look fuzzy as she stands up again, cradling the kitten and backs out of the room. The door closes behind her and I hear the padlock jiggle.

Click.



The Cynic

Approaching the entrance door, The Cynic presses her hand firmly on the sign labelled “Push”. Stepping inside, she’s greeted by a dimly lit, faux-industrial chic café. Wooden pallets are lining the walls, former jam jars house coffee and assorted smoothies, there’s even an old metal bed pan being used as a water jug. This scene of the repurposed aesthetic has become so familiar in contemporary brunch and café cultures, the now ironic banality is not lost on The Cynic. Releasing the door and sensing it wisp back into its position, she feels a slight electric shudder through her torso. This is the location she chose to walk to, yet, she doesn’t want to be here. The one, The Know², insisted.

You need to leave the house, it’s important to get out of your comfort zone!

This phrase constantly rings in the back of The Cynic’s mind. An internal sigh is expressed as The Cynic accepts The Know and begins walking towards the counter, leaving small remnants of her comfort zone behind. Shuffling forward she lifts her head to see a sign “Please wait to be seated”. She waits, but only for a moment, as a slender, tall and overly well-dressed man greets her in excessive excitement³.

‘So how are you today?’

In the midst of The Cynic forming an appropriate response, the man interjects.

‘Such amazing weather today. My God, it’s just so beautiful.’

Annoyed at the need to start her brain rolling again, searching for a different yet equally appropriate response, The Cynic opens her mouth, attempting to further herself away from her comfort zone.

‘Actually, it is a lovely day —’

‘So, table for one then?’

The waiter again interrupts, The Cynic paints internal pictures of revenge.

His complete existence is nothing more than a pompous charade, attaching his entire sense-of-self to this job of taking food orders from the pretentious middle class of the city. Ugh.

The Cynic alters her dialogue accordingly, responding with a flattened

‘Yes.’

Approaching her designated table, The Cynic pulls the chair from underneath to reveal what appears to be a long and perfectly curled pubic hair⁴, just sitting there, alone, in the centre of the chair. What

² “The Know” is the internal reference The Cynic uses for her psychologist and “life guide”, Julie.

³ A cliché in café culture, this “cultured” man exists everywhere, nothing about him says “individual”, he is a caricature, a pure manufactured falsehood, as displayed by his curled and overly curated moustache.

⁴ *Pubic Hair* (noun) Latin in origin; *pubes*. Latin pronunciation: “poo-bess”.



seems like an eternity of staring, seeing the pubes' existence down to a near atomic level, hunting for its geneses, a reason for the pubes being involved within her life, The Cynic snaps herself back to reality. The Cynic moves the pubes with a napkin and sits down.

Another waiter approaches, positioning two menus on the table in geometric perfection. Glancing harder at The Cynic's appearance, he quickly removes one of the menus. Whilst The Cynic flicks through the menu made of repurposed Sao biscuits⁵ and tyres, she overhears the conversations of surrounding dinners. A table of overly excited women directly next to her can be heard supporting one of their own through what appears to be an emotionally troubling time. Phrases such as "Oh my God, you're just so beautiful"⁶ and "He's such a bastard, you deserve better" are announced between fits of laughter. The table adjacent to the supportive women holds a group of verbose, bearded and moustached hipster lads. In between comments of what overpriced jeans go with which ragged shirts, multiple lads discuss the hardships and turmoil of their apparent lost masculinity and lack of female admiration, lamenting that the "post-modern condition" is clearly to blame⁷.

Overly engrossed in observing her fellow dinners, The Cynic is startled to see a waiter standing in front of her, inquiring as to her meal preference. Not wishing to cause annoyance or be seen as "one of those"⁸, she quickly opens the menu, flicking through pages of stale Saos to find something appealing.

'The eggs benedict please.'

The Cynic hates eggs benedict. Pushed into avoiding a social faux pas, she chose the first item she came across. Internal dialogue begins to overwhelm The Cynic.

You're a piece of shit. You can't even order a meal you fucking moron.

Such intrusive negative thoughts constantly berate The Cynic, her self-worth plummeting in the process. Small remnants of her rational and conscious mind make brief appearances.

It's ok, perhaps it was just that you haven't eaten a good eggs benedict before, you might like this one.

In an attempt to calm herself, with shaking hands, The Cynic pours herself a glass of water⁹. Her paint-shaker style hand movements make this task difficult. Water begins flinging everywhere. Recognising the scene she is creating, The Cynic attempts to rest the water receptacle back on the table. The water-logged and consequently frictionless table sends the bed pan flying away from her, crashing onto the ground, alerting all with even barely functional hearing, that something distinct has happened. Eyes closed, bowing down towards the table, her hands covering her face, she

⁵ A dry savoury cracker biscuit popular in Australia, its hardy and robust nature make this the perfect item to chisel café menus onto.

⁶ On an objective level, considering every possible human culture, at any possible period in history, within all possible alternate universes, both physically and in character, this woman was not in any way beautiful.

⁷ No discussion is given to their rank body odour, lack of employment or blatant solipsistic attitudes — traits seemingly inherent to all lads residing at said table.

⁸ The common consensus within the hospitality industry is that diners are given ample time to choose their meals, an inability to choose within the allotted time causes great irritation to said wait staff.

⁹ Although aesthetically "pleasing" to some, the old metal bed pan actually functions terribly as a water jug due to being difficult to hold and manoeuvre.



imagines everybody in the café looking directly at her¹⁰. Remembering advice from The Know, focusing on her deep and rhythmic breathing, she begins to quell her internal unease.

A staff member has noticed the rivers of water surrounding The Cynic's table. In a state of panic, bright fluorescent safety cones and reels of plastic tape labelled "CAUTION", are placed around the liquid. Within this constructed perimeter and seemingly out of nowhere, eleven unidentified people wearing HAZMAT¹¹ suits bend down and point high powered hair dryers at the puddle. The Cynic and various other diners are moved to different tables away from the scene. As The Cynic sits down she's abruptly greeted by a stranger in business attire grasping a business card with the insignia "Marie Marion: Attorney At Law". Conversation ensues. As the café's legal representative, questions are asked and questions are answered. There will be no legal action on the part of The Cynic. Papers are quickly drawn up, presented for appraisal and then signed by all parties concerned. All parties shake hands, fluorescent items disappear and as a result, flat whites and eggs benedict appear in their place.

Expressing an internal sigh, The Cynic picks up her knife and fork in preparation to eat her meal. Staring begrudgingly down at the eggs benedict, she recognises something very familiar. The pubes is back. Surprisingly, not overly upset, more curious, The Cynic begins questioning.

Is this the exact same pubes or a new pubes from the same body?

The questions of who owns the pubes or how it again came to be within her presence, doesn't really factor.

Will the pubes help the eggs benedict taste good? Perhaps that's the key to a decent brunch, a sprinkling of pubes...

Scared at the prospect of creating yet another scene by questioning the staff, The Cynic moves the pubes aside and begins slicing into her breakfast, hurriedly eating it so to avoid any potentially unpleasant flavours staying within her mouth¹².

Surprisingly content with the consumption of her breakfast, The Cynic eyes the pompous male staff member in the hope of ordering another coffee, that few moments of quiet reflection with the accompaniment of a flat white would help ease her mental state. As the staff member approaches her table, questioning The Cynic on what style of coffee she would like¹³, she faintly notices a character in the distance that has just sat down at the opposite side of the café. After ignoring suggestions of foreign acquired and locally produced poop coffee, The Cynic waits patiently for the

¹⁰ They are. The table of overly excited women snicker and giggle, while the hipster-lads remark with unintelligible grunts and snorts. A staff member, staring in fascination, sips a customer's long black.

¹¹ An acronym for "Hazardous Material", in reference to this specific case, that material is sparkling water.

¹² Unbeknownst to her, The Cynic is actually a very noisy eater thanks to chewing with her mouth open and breathing at the same time. Sonically, this suggests the misplaced clamber of horse's hoofs over mounds of dead babies, while faintly in the distance, someone vacuums hot liquid cheese that's been spilt on the carpet. A sound so outrageous, the entire café is yet again drawn to notice The Cynic's behaviour.

¹³ The pompous staff member begins describing the different coffee bean options available. Some come from dense Brazilian jungles, others from the vast savannahs of Kenya. The staff member suggests his personal creation; hand-picked and self-defecated Guatemalan beans, filtered through faded vintage 501 Levi's.



arrival of her flat white while analysing the newly arrived customer. The face is familiar and brings with it the sweats and shakes of an anxious mind. The face belongs to The Cynic's ex-partner, Darryl. He's a tall and handsome man with dark brown, curly shoulder length hair. Even though the relationship ended some two years ago, the vivid memories still bring an anxious fear to the mind of The Cynic¹⁴. Not only does The Cynic need to deal with the existence of Darryl within what was supposed to be a safe space, but he is sitting next to a new love interest, kissing her neck and stroking her hair with The Cynic's feet. An internal rage begins developing within The Cynic as she watches Darryl kick open a menu and Pogo dance at the various food options available. It's at this moment The Cynic begins to accept and own her emotional state, shifting her focus away from Darryl and towards the guidance of The Know, shifting her internal dialogue to a more stoic mindset.

I understand I'm upset and it's ok, I don't need to react to it though. Darryl has tattoos of my feet on his hands, this is hardly someone worth agonising over.

As her flat white is positioned in front of her, The Cynic removes a blank notebook and pen from her satchel, believing this is the time and place to meditate and journal on her state of mind, hoping to bring about a tranquil overcoming. Putting pen to paper, she watches as the ball from the pen nib breaks away, leaking blue ink all over the book, the table and unfortunately for The Cynic, her lap. Realising the ironic absurdity, she begins laughing as she dips toothpicks into the ink, scribbling away... "Aboard this boat, a ship of fools, waves crash, forward and backward, towards the horizon, a distant and unknown land".

¹⁴ The most vivid and traumatic memory is of Darryl revealing a tattoo of The Cynic's feet, transposed over his own hands. Although this sexual fetish was accepted by The Cynic, the incredibly accurate visual depiction of her anatomically elongated toes represented as fingers, was too much to bare.



Maybe in The Next Life & A One Time Thing

Maybe in The Next Life

Somewhere between leaving the past alone
and falling in love with you

not subtly,
not willingly,
and not without confusion.

A glass bulb smashed
and whispered the conclusion.

From the day it all begun
I knew,
I knew it would be you.
You would be the third
You would have a piece
You would be so good for me and nothing could compete.

Never mind your cluttered mind
never mind the whispered conclusion
with eyes that change from blue to red
it couldn't be an illusion.

A charm,
a sign,
a word,
a night of me getting ready for you
and you wearing your old habits
or are they new?
or are they never going to change?
because I brushed my hair and put it up the way I like it



and went to bed with it still in.
So then when I woke up,
I remembered you hadn't shown up.

Not really in the way I want it
or how I know it could be
that's love though
in all its simplicity.

So the next time I should think of you
I'll most likely think of doves
not enough time has gone by,
but it's time to make my peace.

It was quick.
It was fun.
it hurt me quite a bit.
A life that will be in the next
and friendship lost in this.

It's sad you know, and I was warned.
still, even with your stubborn fist,
a beautiful mess I couldn't resist.
So, when you look to your other half,
and wonder where it is
just know I'll be gone
then you'll know where I'm coming from.



A One Time Thing

Up, up, up and away we go

The back of your mind is locked away behind a small restive door
that in this moment is jarred shut
The key thrown away.

Where did the key go?

WHERE DID THE KEY GO?

Where-did-the...

Life as an oxymoron
makes the body roll backwards
A heavy chest feels light
And the heart turns into a third eye.

The wood is smooth
My pants, like clouds
And a hand through the hair
Like the soul leaving the body.

Like the soul leaving the body

Like the soul leaving the body and
Entering into the person in front of you
Who is completely made in the image of you.
You don't know which one you are
But it doesn't matter

Your together even if your apart



Even if your apart

Even if your apart

Even if your

The door is slowly creeping open

And-slamming-shut!

Now a new structure appears in front of you

A figure from your past?

Not even a lost key can keep this one out

Or in

in

in

Empty Promises form in front of me

Words to you but a contact to me that

Binds the body and the mind

For when you break it my body loses and I

Lose my mind

Lose my mind

Lose my

...

