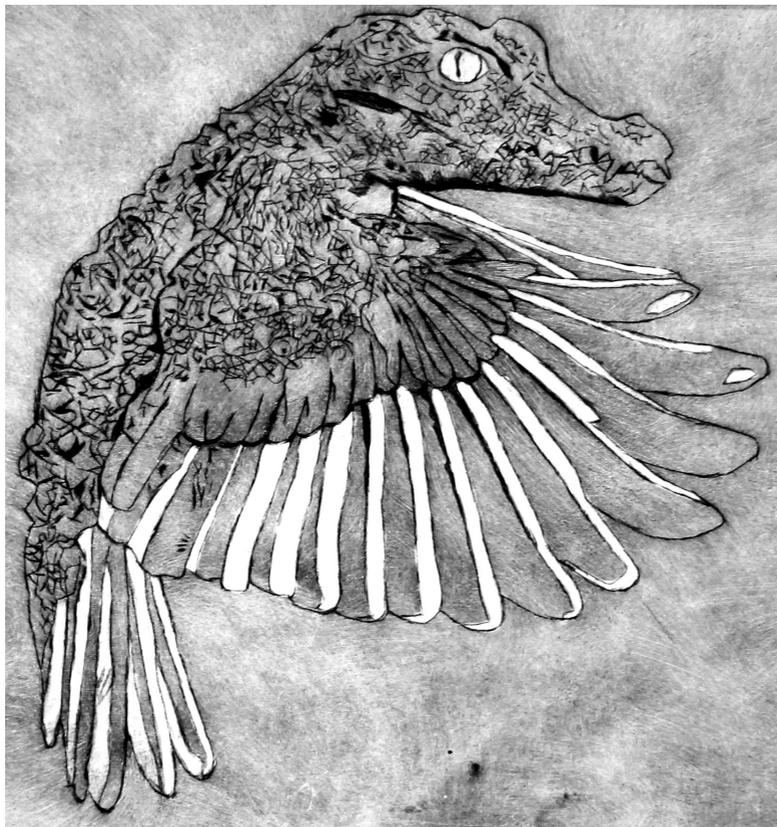


Ascham Ink



Ascham School 2013

Edited by Elise Dempster

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Chapter One: He Woke

At approximately three o'clock in the morning, Mr Williams awoke to the sight of Atticus Finch leaning on the bookcase in the corner of his bedroom. He stared, eyes narrowed, the remnants of a dream still crusting on the tips of his lashes. Atticus tipped his hat.

“Go back to sleep, son.”

He did.

Chapter Two: He'd Dreamed

Ever since he was a child, Mr Williams had been haunted by books.

It was an unfortunate affliction – he'd stopped reading literature in his twenties as one would begin to take vitamin pills: it was a precautionary measure, avoiding further trouble down the track. He'd been dodging Dickinson, abhorring Austen and shunning Steinbeck for the better part of five decades now, and although it had become habit, telling people he didn't read usually got him the same reaction as if he'd confessed to one of the cardinal sins. No-one seemed to treat it as a medical issue. No one asked if he was alright with it – no, it was all about the poor paper giants who were apparently rolling in their graves because plain old Mr Williams hadn't been able to worship their collective genius. Well, refused to. For medical reasons.

People were more willing to listen now that he was older – visibly older, with coarse white hair and wrinkles and a hunchback that would make Quasimodo proud – but Mr Williams suspected it wasn't out of any genuine interest or belief. It seemed more like a product of what he liked to call 'humour the crazy old man' syndrome, an unfortunate disease he'd become unfortunately more familiar with since he'd taken up residency in the retirement village at Green Acres.

But then again, how did he expect them to react when he said he'd been diligently stalked by over a dozen fictional characters all his life?

Chapter Three: The Books Were Burning –

At his age, Mr Williams had frankly given up trying to explain it to himself. He could be hallucinating, or brain-damaged, or routinely drugged but no amount of words would stop the fact that it was now midday, and midday was when they all loved to congregate in whatever personal space he'd treasured when the day began.

He saw Beatrice and Benedick first, this time, and they waltzed into his poky retirement village room in full ceremonial dress and masks, heedless of the barstools and gliding straight through the plastic bench-top and down the hallway. This opened the floodgates and assorted characters from every book Mr Williams had ever read piled into his living room and all began to talk at once.

The cacophony was deafening, but Emma Woodhouse's voice was especially shrill, convinced that she was the most important voice in the building and therefore must be heard above all others. This caused all the March sisters barring Beth to deem it suitable to glare daggers at her from across the room. The cast of various Shakespeare plays Mr Williams was made to study in school stood awkwardly in the kitchen, offering to make refreshments that no one wanted. Heathcliff sulked in a corner.

Winston Smith stood despondently by the window, muttering to himself. Estragon and Vladimir, remnants from Mr William's brief foray into theatre, sat in the middle of the room, Vladimir staring blankly forward and Estragon struggling with his boot. They, at least, were used to waiting around.

It was a testament, Mr Williams thought, to his growing insanity that now he viewed the daily hallucinatory home invasion as more of an inconvenience than anything too mind-shattering. A gaggle of Elizabethan players in full costume passed by, requested directions to The Rose.

Yes, Mr Williams thought, it could definitely be worse.

Chapter Four: Smoke Rose Up

“Hello, is there a... Cecil Williams here? Green Acres Retirement?”

“Yes, this is he. What is it?”

“We have some questions for you. Would you like to sit down?”

“Hold on – what sort of questions, missy? Where are you from?”

“Kindly take a seat, Mr Williams. This doesn’t have to be difficult. We’re from the IMHF.”

“The what-now?”

“IMHF – Investigation of Mental Heath Faculties. We can help you.”

Chapter Five: Ash Came Down

Mr Williams loved to say that he couldn’t remember how it started, but in truth he knew that day so well it was worn smooth from a hundred thoughts scraping back and forth across it. The sky was clear, the day it began, the air crisp and cool and asking to be tainted. His anger had been its own being, then, incandescent and all-consuming and he’d just needed –

The bookshelf was closest. The paper felt so fragile under his hands, the sound of pages tearing was so satisfying – he’d torn the covers free from the spines, crumpled whole chapters under his fists. He hadn’t held back, he went straight for the classics: Shakespeare, Harper Lee, Austen, Orwell, Alcott, Bronte, Beckett – all had been ripped to pieces and scattered on the wind.

Chapter Six: And Buried Him in Ink and Paper Lives

He hadn’t regretted it afterward. Not for years. But one night he woke to the sound of mockingbirds and saw Atticus Finch standing in the corner of his bedroom, and since then he’d seen the remnants of characters in the corners of his vision, on street corners and gathering in his living room at midday. He’d been unable to escape them, had wanted release for so many years. He’d lost so many potential relationships to initial attempts to point

out Jay Gatsby lounging on the couch, no, he's right there, can't you see?

But then he was alone, and didn't mind so much the company of ghosts. The women came to his door and told him to come with them, and he was much less willing to let go. They were real, weren't they? The women took him and they said he'd be fine, he was just in shock, meaningless words fading into the blackness.

He stared. Atticus tipped his hat.

"Go to sleep, son."

He did.



Bombing

Wake up.
She shakes the boy, a rag doll,
Flimsy and still.
Wake up.
As she despairs, her tears dance
Across the pale ballroom of her cheek.
Wake up.
Destruction breathes in her ear,
Its exhale fiery.
Wake up.
Smoke fills her lungs,
They expand with the pain of survival.
Wake up.
The boy lies still,
Dishevelled hair, closed eyes.
I love you.
She can barely whisper,
Regret tickling her lips.
I love you.
Will he ever know?
The rag doll, the runner, the friend.
Wake up.
But the sleep is eternal.
She staggers away, a new journey.
Wake up.
I love you.

Beauty Within

Once upon a time, in a small town in the country of Fairgo, there lived a widowed man named Michael. He was heartbroken when his much loved wife died but what brought him the greatest distress of all was that his little girl, Luce, had no mother to care for her. She had both the face and the heart of an angel. Every night she prayed that her dad could be happy once more. When he married a widow, Camille, she was over the moon, because although she had loved her mother dearly, she could not bear the thought of her father grieving. She had no idea that Camille was evil and jealous. This woman had no understanding of the meaning of a 'fair go'. She hated her stepdaughter so much that she disfigured her face with dark tattoos. The poor girl felt so ashamed at the loss of her beauty that she always wore a dark, black hood to cover her face. Her father spent a lot of time out of the country, working, and did not know what was happening to his child. She was kept like a slave, working from dawn till dusk. There was no one there to help or care for her.

The final straw was when she was thrown into prison, accused of stealing her own mother's jewellery. There, she felt like the whole world had abandoned her. This dark prison was set deep in the heart of a wood. It had a reputation for being filled with evil spirits and haunted by the ghosts of the dead. No one ever came out of there alive. She lost all hope and wept for days as if her soul was bleeding.

After two dreadful months had passed in the horrible prison, one day, the King gave the prince the duty to guard the prisoners and soon he arrived. The King had set his heart on training his son to be the best ruler that Fairgo had ever had. This was why he gave him such a tough task of running this prison: it would test his courage to the limit. The prince was tall, handsome and had a heart of gold. Sadly, however, his father had many enemies that wanted to seize the throne for themselves. They saw the chance when the prince was on duty at the prison, as the perfect time to strike. They would set the prison on fire so everyone would be trapped inside with no chance of survival. It would all just look like an accident.

A fog of malevolence filled the air as a handful of men set fire to the barrels of oil stored in the kitchen. In a few minutes the whole prison building was ablaze. There was screaming and chaos everywhere! The poor prince was caught in the smoke that robbed him of breath. He was trapped in a room, feeling very helpless. Luce's next-door cell came tumbling down, setting her free. She followed the voice of someone coughing and found the prince lying on the floor. Gasping for breath, the prince pointed to his magic sword and held it up shouting, "This will save us!" Then he collapsed.

Instinctively, she grabbed it. For a few seconds, everything went silent. Soon, water began to stream down the walls, drenching the place and dousing the fire completely. Unknown to her, the sword had such powers that anyone with a pure heart who held it would always be protected. The prince and Luce stumbled out of the burning embers of the prison walls, only to realise that everyone else was safe as well.

When the prince saw Luce's face, his heart seemed to stop. He couldn't believe how brave she was. Most of all, he was so intrigued by the tattoos on her face that he was speechless. Luce thought the prince might laugh at her so she said, "I know I'm ugly, you can stop staring at me now." She began to turn away. To her surprise the prince replied,

"You are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. You are so brave. Courage like yours will be respected in my kingdom."

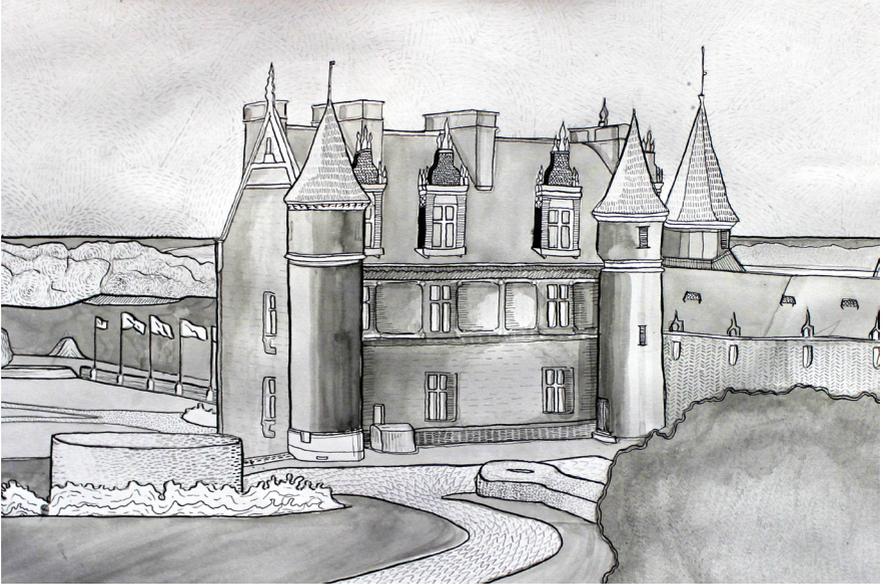
The King was overjoyed that his son, the prince, was safe and so were the other occupants of the prison. The King was fair but not cruel and wanted to give the prisoners a chance to redeem themselves. They could learn from their mistakes. He was eternally grateful to Luce and tried to reward her for saving his son. He promised her that he would find a way to get rid of the tattoos on her face.

The King sent out a message far and wide to see if anyone had a cure. The word spread and a wizard from a far away town offered to provide his help. There was only one condition; someone had to give up their looks to restore Luce's. When the prince heard this, he immediately volunteered to

sacrifice his own looks, as he was indebted to her for saving his life. Luce refused to accept his offer, as she was in love with him. She said, "I would never let you do that for me, I would rather stay like this. I love you." At these words the prince realised how deeply in love he was with her too, even more than a ruby beyond price. He said,

"I love you too... just the way you are."

Luce and her prince lived happily ever after. Princess Luce had finally found her home, in a kingdom where she belonged.



Cinderella Revamped

In a chamber dark and cold
A pitiful girl who had been told
She would not dance at the palace ball.
I alone heard her pleading call.

I appeared in a shower of light,
And the distraught girl told of her plight.
I gave her a dress and some shoes
I said, "Come back any time you choose,
But it must be before the hour of midnight."

It was the best party of the season
Failure to attend was nearly high treason.
The room was so full it was hard to think;
The party theme was "Pretty in Pink".
Even the handsomest prince was there
He saw her as she walked up the stair.

He saw Cinderella and was instantly in love,
He thought her as graceful as a dove.
They danced and danced all for all the night
It certainly gave her stepmother a fright.

When midnight struck she cried, "Oh no,
See ya handsome, I've gotta go!"
She ran from the prince, away from the ball
And on her way she had a fall
For she wore shoes of a high heeled variety
'The "best accessory" known to society.
She fell down the stairs and broke her neck
Her body looked a fearful wreck.

The Prince also ran down the stair,
He didn't notice Cinderella was there
So he tripped and then broke his neck too,
Impaled on the heel of our heroine's shoe!



The Meeting

The man she met. She met a man. This man was the man she met. He was not the man she expected to meet or planned to meet or had carved into her head in a full tuxedo, with a particular nose and eyes and lips and a very particular brain. No, not even close. This was a very different man, the one she met. When she met him she could hardly stand him because he did not fit the shape in her brain of the man she had planned so vigorously and extensively to meet. This man had a big belly and cheeks that stretched over his face like poorly upholstered furniture and when she first saw him, he was reading a book called *How to Meet Girls*, which is not the way she had envisioned the meeting. This non-fit was uncomfortable and made her brain hurt. Go away man, she willed.

Nevertheless, she trailed the man for a few days, saying it was because she had nothing else to do, but in truth, she did have plenty to do and she didn't know why she was trailing him. Her brain made lots of shouts and static about her brain's own idea of hair colour and sense of humour and what animals the man she met would like (mammals) and her brain's own idea of how to be a member of the world and everything that was sort of like her, yet different enough and still: this man she met was the man she met and however you try, you cannot unmeet.

Her brain was in an utter panic at changing. Her brain was very pleased with its current shape and did not want to shift, not one bit. This man liked reptiles and fish. What sort of decent human being could possibly like reptiles and fish? In the end, she decided to tell him one thing before she was to return to her busy life.

"Give up, man," she said. "You're a squat little monster and monsters don't get to live happily ever after."

Your body is full of things. Bones and muscles and thoughts. So how does that all manage to spontaneously disappear sometimes? How can you feel so hollow? The stumpy man trudged home, arms lifting oddly to the sides as if he was covered in paint. He glowed the way unwanted things do: afraid,

desperate and sad. With his head low, he thought about the word lonely and how it looked and sounded so alone, with the l's each standing tall by themselves. Was this all that was in store for him? He tossed the book into the bin; perhaps they were right putting love in books. Perhaps it could not live anywhere else. When the man looked at everyone who lived in Storybrooke, he felt out of place: everyone was petite and elegant. Everything about him felt big and disgusting. Where were all the taller, fatter people? Where were the aliens the size of God?

Man wasn't mean. He was gentle and kind; unfortunately his smile wasn't as beautiful as his heart. But the man was hopeful; he believed that one day someone would look past the surface and acknowledge him for all the good he had done. That night, he lay in bed awake again, for the thousandth night of insomnia, listening to the mellifluous sounds of the animals and his neighbours sleeping around him. It was the most lonesome noise in the world.

Tired of his constant state of solitude, the man decided to carve a puppet made of wood. It wasn't a fancy piece of wood, just a regular, woodpile log; the kind you would put in the fireplace. There was nothing extraordinary about it. But that's exactly why he loved it. No one would understand the puppet's worth, and that alone made it beautiful.

"I'll call him Pinocchio," he told himself. "It's a good name."

The man was proud of his little wooden masterpiece and wanted nothing more than for Pinocchio to be a real boy, so he could have a son, the friend he'd always wanted. Later that night, he wished upon a star that Pinocchio would become a real boy. An old blue fairy heard this wish and appeared to him. She told the man that he had to give his heart fully to Pinocchio in order to make him a real boy, which he happily agreed to. Just like that, the Blue Fairy began casting her spell:

"Little puppet made of pine,
Wake.
The gift of life is thine."

Three lines were all it took: Pinocchio was brought to life. The miraculous beat of feet against the ground echoed around the room as Pinocchio ran to his father who opened his arms to embrace his new son. The man lifted Pinocchio up in the air and gave him a heart-warming hug. It was the first hug the man had ever received, let alone given. No word or sentence could encapsulate the feeling of joy, which the two felt just to have each other. Never again would he have to be alone. Pinocchio looked up at his new father; his smile faded, however, as a phantom force washed over him. He began to shudder and as the man was about to ask what was wrong, Pinocchio's eyes glazed over. Without warning, he began clawing and gnawing at the man's chest. The man's screams rang out through the workshop, desperate to be heard like the bells of a clock tower. The deathly sound of silence pervaded as Pinocchio hunched over the lifeless man, consuming his heart, with ragged currents flowing down his cheeks onto the wilted collar of his shirt.

A menacing smile grew on the Blue Fairy's face as her wrinkles began to fade away; she smiled the way envelopes do when they swallow good news. She may have intentionally left out a minor part about the spell. With every agreement, there is a twist, a dark secret. The spell which brought Pinocchio to life forced him to devour the heart of the person he loved most, trapping his soul inside Pinocchio's puppet body. Pinocchio was merely a tool to collect souls for the Blue Fairy so she could stay young and beautiful forever. Glancing down at the distraught boy, she said,

"Poor Pinocchio, here's a little tip. Bad wins. Bad always wins. It wins because good has to play fair and bad doesn't. If anything, I did the Storybrooke authorities a favour! They didn't want an ugly looking thing like that lurking in their town forever; he would've been removed sooner or later. Just like all the others."

He would forever be her puppet.

No strings indeed.

The woman sat and watched the sunset through the muted curtains, wondering where the ugly little man she met had gone. Despite her brain's protests, she wondered what he was doing and whether she would see him again. He was a curious fellow; she had never seen so much hope in a person before. Her dainty fingers danced along the windowsill, one by one by one, and during the time it took to do that, her brain remained absolutely quiet. It is these empty spaces you have to watch out for, as they flood up with feeling before you even realise what's happened. Before you find yourself, at the end, different.

The green darkened into black.

Hope is such a dirty word.



Blank Pages, Blank Spaces

'Got no reason, got no shame. Got no family I can blame. Just don't let me disappear...' ~ One Republic.

"Cause of death?"

"Double suicide."

Byron sighed heavily and Christian flicked his eyes up to glance at his colleague and mentor. "You're sure about this one, are you?"

Christian's gaze dropped back to the floor, to the two bodies lying there, almost intertwined. "Positive," he replied quietly, crouching down next to the woman. "Look..." He plucked a bottle from next to her lifeless hand, rolling it between his fingers. It was empty, with dustings of powder still left on the plastic, but Christian knew what those tablets would have looked like – small, round, white. His father had taken them regularly when he wasn't sleeping well.

Byron sighed again. "They're awful sad, these ones."

Christian swallowed and nodded. "Still, we've got a job to do and we've got to do the job. Barry!" He shouted the last word and a tall, thin police officer with a notebook and a bad haircut stuck his head around the corner of the door.

"Sir?"

"Ring up the station and tell the Chief Inspector that we've got a double suicide on our hands. Overdosed on drugs. Tell them the address and such – the normal procedure. Names and details to follow."

Names and details were not to follow. They searched high and low through the flat. No traces of identification were found. History books about the Byzantine Empire lined the extensive bookshelves, a stack of fresh, lined paper sat innocently on the desk, a quill and inkpot beside. Running his fingertips across the leather-bound journals lined up on the shelf, Christian pulled a random one out and flipped it open. The spine cracked in a way that made him wince. He thumbed through the book, looking for traces of

black handwriting, any form of drawing, any markings at all. Every page was blank.

“Found something!” he heard Byron exclaim and he shut the journal and slid it back onto the shelf. Leaving his musings behind, he joined Byron in the living room. The other man was wearing white latex gloves and between his fingers was clasped a small address book. Christian leaned in to look.

“Phone numbers?”

“Loads.” The triumph in Byron’s voice was unmistakable. He opened the cover. Names, alphabetically sorted by first name, were written in neat script throughout the pages.

Christian nodded. “Here, I’ll take it.” He held out a hand and Byron gave him a look. Christian, he knew, had just volunteered himself for a night of unpaid, unofficial overtime.

“You sure, kid? You shouldn’t be working all Friday night.”

“Positive,” Christian grinned, swiping the little book from him. “I got nowhere else to be.”

The first name he tried was listed as Holly Hathaway. It was written inside the front cover of the book and had a little love heart next to it. Probably a mother or, at least, a close family relation, reasoned Christian. He dialed the number and waited as the phone rang. Once, twice, thrice...

“Hello?” a woman’s voice came down the phone.

“Hi,” Christian said. “Good evening. I’m Detective Inspector Johansson.”

“Oh my God!” The woman sounded frantic. “Has something happened to Graham?”

“Are you Miss Hathaway?” Christian asked gently. The woman confirmed that she was. “We’re investigating a double suicide. We found an address book on the man in question that listed your phone number.”

“A double suicide?” she shrieked.

“Please calm down, Miss Hathaway,” Christian said. “The man was tall. He had green eyes and dark blonde hair. Does that sound familiar?” There was a pause down the end of the phone and Christian braced himself for the wailing sobs. The answer surprised him.

“Graham has dark hair.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“No. I don’t know anyone who looks like that at all.” The relief in her voice was evident. Christian’s eyes fluttered shut.

“You’re sure.”

“Perfectly sure,” answered Holly. “I run a PR company. He might just have been a client. But I don’t ever remember meeting anyone who looked like that. Maybe you called the wrong number?”

Christian hung up in utter shock. He was tempted to call up again, just to make sure she wasn’t lying, but somehow, he knew she wasn’t – she had seemed genuinely confused. Sighing, he flipped open the address book for a second time and picked up a pen.

They were essentially nonexistent. That was what he had figured out from the last three hours of circling, dialing, talking. The young man and woman lying on the floor in the apartment would vanish. There would be nobody, nobody to remember them, nobody to mourn them. The thought occurred to him now that perhaps that was why they had taken their own lives. Because nobody would miss them.

He collapsed into an armchair beside the window and stared down at the sheet of paper in front of him.

Father- none
Mother- none
Siblings- none
Spouse- none/possibly deceased
Children- none
Other relations- none
Companies/work- none
Colleagues- none
Friends- none
Flat mates- none
Landlord- unknown
Other acquaintances- none
Evidence- irrelevant phone book, pill bottle
Cause of death- double suicide
History- unknown

How many people, he wondered, had disappeared into the folds of time, with nobody to remember them? Their souls had gone into the afterlife knowing that no one had loved them in life, and now, no one loved them in death. The thought dismayed him. He folded the sheet of paper in half, smoothing the edge down with his thumb, before opening it again idly.

He took a drink of water and glanced up. Something caught his eye. Directly across from him stood a tall mirror, which had been built into the wall to create more light. He saw himself, dark hair, grey eyes, gangly limbs, slumped into a dark brown armchair. There was nothing remarkable about him. How many people like him had vanished? How many had been forgotten within a day? How many people's life stories were now gone? He was just one of the many. With a dawning horror, he glanced down at the sheet again and contemplated what his would look like.

Father- deceased
Mother- deceased
Siblings- deceased
Spouse- none
Children- none
Other relations- none/deceased
Companies/work- police work
Colleagues- deceased
Friends- none
Flat mates- none
Landlord- deceased
Other acquaintances- none
Evidence-
Cause of death-
History- unknown

His mother and father and siblings were all gone. His only colleague was Byron, who would be gone soon as well. He was not unsociable, but his work took up all his time and all the friends he had ever had were scattered around the world. He had no romantic attachments and by extension, no children to remember him when he too was gone.

He stared at his reflection in the mirror. What was it? The image of someone who would never leave a trace upon the world. As he watched and waited and envisioned the hour of his death, his reflection, the only person who was sure to know him completely, slowly turned paler and paler, and finally, disappeared, leaving only the night sky, dotted with stars, and a vacant, empty armchair.



For Me

We saw them raise the guns,
Reflections of us, troops in tons.
General, captain, private and digger,
All of whom pulled the trigger.

Machine guns chatter, shells scream,
Bayonets get stuck in a clotted dream,
The sticky water pulls us down,
Clean red liquid turns a murky brown.

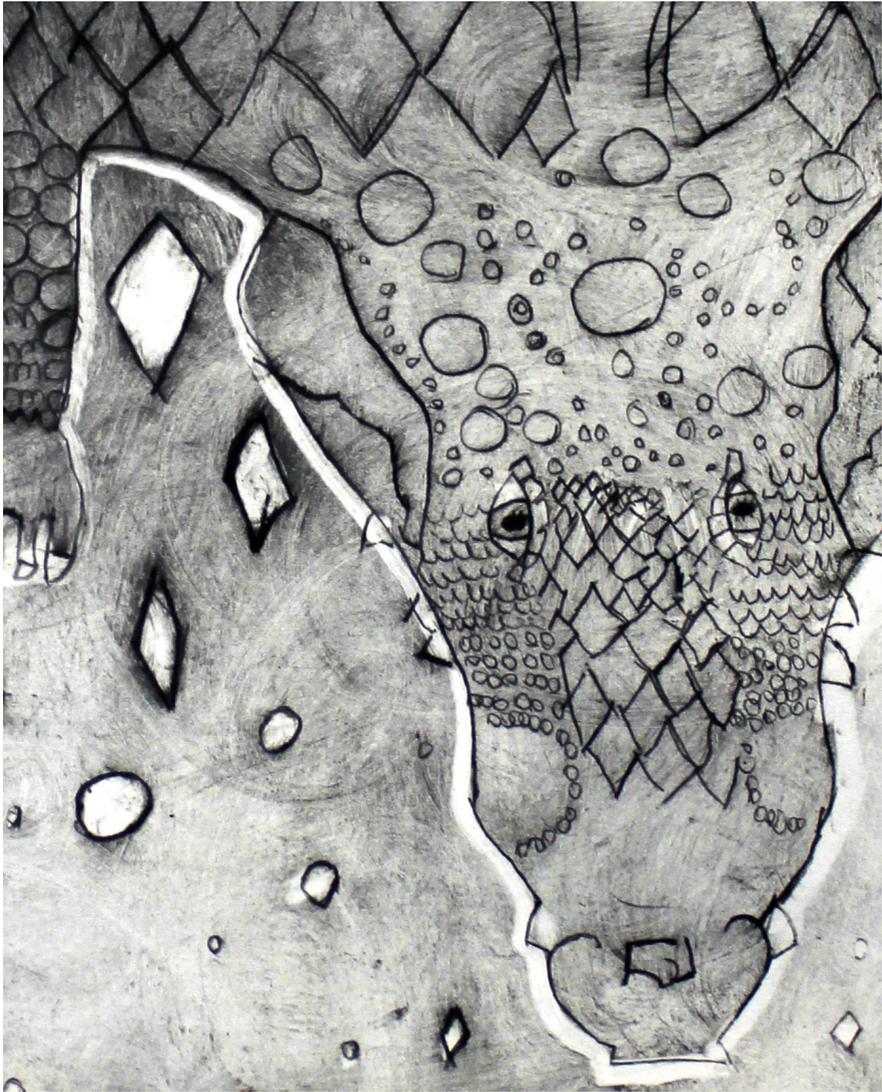
I tripped on a man lying on the ground,
My oldest brother lying on a mound,
The soft squelch underfoot of soldiers past,
Singing with the sound of heaven at last.

The writhing of his body, the pain, the pain.
Two are dead; the last won't remain,
Another death, another flood of tears,
Quenched by my own more powerful fears.

I carry on, knowing I am done for,
Ripped to pieces by what I saw,
Not caring whether to go the wrong or the right
From the day and into the night.

I am anything but a warrior in this place,
A ghost filled with what is a dying grace,
I was a young man under its spell,
Fooled by the men who ring my death bell.

I am a soldier but not a knight,
Stuck in a war, but not a fight.
My friends are gone, in a heaven I cannot see,
All I can hope for, is a place for me.



A Day in the Life and Death of Phillip Cunningham

“Phillip Cunningham woz ‘ere – 1804”. These were the words I scratched with a piece of broken glass on the cold stone wall in the damp basement cell of the Commissariat Store. I was in Windsor in the Colony of New South Wales. I had been imprisoned there for three excruciating days and today was the day of my execution. I could hear them hammering all night. It wasn’t very loud but it was deafening in my mind. I knew what they were building. The bloody English were building a gallows to finally hang this son of Ireland. They had had it in for me since the rebellion in Ireland six years earlier. I hated them and they hated me. They didn’t execute me when they caught me then. They just shipped me, and thousands of my countrymen, to this godforsaken colony. All we wanted was to go back to our beloved Ireland. So we convicts planned to capture Parramatta and then march on to Sydney, commandeer a ship at Port Jackson and sail back home. But our rebellion was quickly crushed by the scheming Major Johnston and here I was now, locked up like an animal.

Stomp, stomp, stomp. I could hear the boots of the hanging contingent marching loudly in my direction, shaking the earth beneath me. The door of my cell suddenly flew open, they grabbed me by both arms and frog marched me out into the bright courtyard. The brightness of the courtyard made me think of ‘the light at the end of the tunnel’. Ironic eh? They seemed in a hurry to get rid of me. Almost without a pause, they pushed me up the stairs of the scaffold, positioned me over a trapdoor, put a heavy noose around my neck and said a few words in their hoity-toity English accents. What is only half a second feels like days when you’re about to be hanged. They then forcefully pulled the lever to open the trap door, for me to fall through and break my neck.

But, just as I braced myself for my last moments, something miraculous happened! I fell right through the hole. The noose must have broken or been too loose. I fell flat on to my feet and instinctively took off, sprinting directly towards the big gates of the Commissariat Store which smoothly opened as I ran through them. I ran like the wind down a cobbled street in my bare feet. I could hear heavy boots behind me. But nobody could catch me. I was soon out of the town and running across a beautiful, pristine green field. It reminded me of County Kildare where I was born. I could hear English muskets being fired behind me but they were becoming more and more distant. As I ran and panted for oxygen, I could smell the freshness of the air and the sweetness of the grass intoxicating my nostrils. I could feel the warmth of the sun beating down on my back and, as I looked up into the heavenly blue sky, I could see the softest, whitest, fluffiest clouds that I had ever laid my eyes upon. I could hear the most beautiful singing of birds and even the chattering of little unseen insects.

I then saw a thicket of trees in the distance and decided that would be a good place for me to hide. The English were probably already releasing their bloodthirsty dogs to hunt me down and it would be hard for them to do this where the trees were thicker. I ran, stumbled and rolled headlong into a gully of soft bushes and brush. I could hear the beautiful gushing of water and realized there was a stream nearby. I waded in the water along the stream so that the dogs would have no tracks to follow. The water was cool and clear and more refreshing than any water I remembered. It splashed on my face, cooled me down and sated my thirst. After what seemed like half an hour, I was sure I could hear no soldiers, no dogs, no noise behind me other than the beautiful sounds of nature.

I decided to climb up out of the gully towards a bright opening in the trees that I could see in the distance above me. I effortlessly climbed the steep banks until I was at the top. And there in the distance, across a grassy plain, was the unmistakable shape of the little village house that I had grown up in. I could see gentle puffs of smoke coming out of the chimney which signified that somebody was living there. They would hide me, of that I was sure. I ran swiftly towards the house, feeling no tiredness or pain. As I got closer, I could see an old woman in a clean white dress near the gate of the

house. She was waving a handkerchief as if to greet me. I knew this was my mother, my mother whom I had not seen for over ten years and who some said had died of anguish when I was caught and shipped abroad by the English. And there, by her feet, running excitedly in circles was Bonny, my red Irish Setter, the dog I grew up and played with as a boy. I felt so excited and relieved and grateful that they were both still alive and recognised me still. I was nearly home at last.

Swish, swoosh, crack! I felt my neck break as my heavy body fell downward and suddenly reached the end of the rope. And swing it did, back and forth underneath the executioner's gallows for an hour or more until the English soldiers came to cut it down. They placed it into a rough wooden coffin and wheeled it on a cart to the cemetery for paupers on the outskirts of Windsor Town. There they threw me into a shallow grave with no headstone or wooden cross, where I still lie to this day.

The Old and the New

She was going to be late. With her school bag slung over one shoulder and belting her against the knees, Taylor ran down the hill and jabbed the button at the crossing. Her folders jostled in her bag and Taylor moved her weight uncomfortably from foot to foot. Pulling her ponytail higher on her head, she waited impatiently.

The walk-sign flashed green and beeped belligerently, and Taylor was channelled into the tide of people. The crowd moved chaotically across the street, racing to the next light. They did not want to stop. Though the crowd clopped in high-heels and tapped in patent leather boots, there was a sense of ferocity. They moved as a screaming face, clothed in propriety, like the vicious beak of an owl hidden by elegant feathers. Racing towards work or school or something very important each person extended a talon, clawing at something they did not want to reach. They moved as a bird, racing after a poisoned mouse.

Hoping to save time, Taylor ducked up a side road, through the back of developed Chatswood. It was only here that she stopped. There was something about this place that hit her right between the eyes. It was a place where, amongst a seething swell of traffic, something stood still. A place that breathed in the midst of suffocation. The verge of a lonely road that stood between the old and the new. This place held the power to stop or to shock, if only for a moment.

On that lonely road, the backs of houses were shouldered together, their bricks perfectly aligned as they stared down at the intruder. Yet their view was far from ordered. It was only here, in the middle of a flood of morning traffic that something of the Sydney bush persisted. The nature strip bristled with untamed natives that no amount of weeding had removed. Wrapping its tendrils around electricity poles and creeping towards the tar seal, the bush held some frightening power.

Before the development, the bush had extended forever. As a small girl, her pig-tails flapping, she had run here on chubby legs. She vultured for startling flowers, or smooth rocks rubbed clean by the wear of time, or shards

of brilliant glass, all hoarded by the crow-like bush. It was a wild playground, bright with the prospect of discovery. She had leapt and wriggled like a gecko through the maze of roots, her father calling,

“Hey! Wadda ya think ya doin’?”

“Only exploring,” she shouted, a smile plastered across her face. Taylor remembered standing on the sandstone beneath the trees, towering above her father while he explained the layers of rock. Remembering her awe, she giggled with glee. She had thought it incredible to stand on something older than her dad.

Now withered with age, reduced to a mere strip between sterile houses and the road, the bush was distraught at its loneliness, surrounded by towering bricks; the bush was frightened, was frightening. It raised a wild eyebrow at the infectious chaos of the morning rush. Growling in the throbbing heat, the bush towered above the road like an eagle eyeing its prey far below. Its mouth gaped, revealing a jagged set of teeth. It swished its gnarled tail in the wind and combed the sunlight into stripes down its rigid back. Taylor could hear with sharp distinctiveness the whipping of an early wind against the leaves, fuelled with heat and city dirt. She walked briskly, passed the towering eucalyptus that had shrouded her as a child, but now threw down its arms at the slightest whiff of wind, passed the bromeliads (who clung to others in parasitic idleness), passed the trailing vines that grasped outwards as if clawing for dictatorial power and hung down in a swooping curtain of hellish evils (or so Taylor imagined now), until she reached the sandstone on which she had once stood. The indelible footprints of a little child were there, creating a stillness, the bush almost calling a plea for remembrance.

Taylor stared solemnly at the ebb and flow of time. The lines of flood and of drought, of life and of death. She ran a delicate finger along the chipped edge of the sandstone, her cheeks sucked in with awe. She was still impressed that the rock was older than her dad.



The King

Birds fluttered about the branches of the pines, the figs and the one old gum, which bent wearily over the bay. Rainbow birds, mere flecks to the eye, camouflaged as they were in verdure, called out to their friends and fought over scraps while an Indonesian cuckoo scared off an Indian mynah and below them, past the oyster beds, a family of ducks quacked along, bobbing up and down on the wave of a ferry that had chugged off to the city or perhaps up the Lane Cove River to Longueville.

And up in that gum tree one small boy of six had found a path to taller places and koalaed himself about a branch, not to sleep, as our animal friends might have, but to shimmy along, out over the water, to a cluster of leaves where his Nerf Gun bullet lay trapped in nature's grasp.

Earlier in the day Finn's Mum had forced him into his togs and a rashie before slapping his bare skin with sunscreen and dragging him out to the pool where he'd played with his Nerf Gun, a present from Santa, all day. But then, spatula in hand, she had torn his toy from him and the bullet in the tree was all he had left so he'd pretended to stay in his room while sneaking out, sans rashie or sunscreen, to scavenge what he could. Inching forwards slightly and reaching out towards it, he gave a little start when the branch lurched and a few leaves fluttered off, landing on the bay below where they aimlessly floated for a time on the serene, lagoonesque water that rippled slightly when a flying fish flicked up and out to glance, free at last, at the sun.

The wind began picking up and, looking out onto what had once been a smooth brown bay, he now saw a monster: smoke steaming from her ears, armed with saucepan-armour and a wooden spoon, riding the white horses to shore.

Hurriedly the boy bum-shuffled along the branch. His heart did start hammering at one point when the branch made a fork and he had to crawl around the other arm and his foot slipped:

But he'd righted himself, so everything was fine.

Further along the wood was thinner and newer and if he just leaned forwards and stretched himself out as tall as he could he could just spot

over Greenwich and Woolwich the sprinklings of teensy little building-tops, the Centre-Point Tower crowning them all; a golden thimble-king shouting, “Look at me! Look at me!”

But the red-eyed cuckoo cawed, signalling the start of a mass exodus from the trees: a squadron of mynahs, a flotilla of lorrikeets and even the horrid cuckoo left, leaving the world in silence. The flying fish had stopped its springing about. And the storm drew closer, the monster kitchen-woman bubbling and frothing, making him shiver.

Finn smiled; this was totally awesome.

The bullet now forgotten, Finn stood up on the branch. The wind gusted in his face, sending little specks of dirt and sand into his eyes, so he grabbed the branch above and jumped up and down like a two-year old on his first trampoline.

“I’m King of the world!” he shouted, but spluttered when a little piece of aerodynamic bark flew into his mouth. But then a movement in the corner of his eye made him turn.

“Finn! Get down here! What do you think you’re doing?”

The true monster kitchen-woman had arrived.

She lacked her armour or weapons, but Finn had always known her mouth to be her most deadly weapon. The sea rumbled and roared, looming and charging and dark, in tandem with the howling and raging wind.

“No!” Finn shouted, “I won’t!”

He clutched his branch tighter.

“Finn, please, don’t argue with me! Get down!”

The branch swayed and Finn’s stomach heaved.

“No! I’m the King! You don’t get to tell me what to do! Nobody tells me what to do!”

The woman – his mother – ran over to the branch and began fruitlessly trying to climb the tree, ripping her dress.

“Oh, Finny, please! Crawl over here to Mummy!”

Hesitantly, Finn bent down, letting go of the branch above so he could clutch the lower, stronger one.

“But I’m the King,” he whispered.

The wind screamed and pushed and the branch screeched.

From the sea below, not even the rained-out, golden thimble-king could possibly be seen.

Bridging the Gap

March 1932 – Her supporters had abandoned her and her workers had disappeared. She stood alone and isolated as the fine sea spray lapped at her bare feet. Her clothes were unadorned yet her beauty remained undiminished and this was, without doubt, the single proudest moment of her life. She held herself with the utmost poise and aplomb and gazed across the harbour and beyond... her city, her empire.

A gentleman ran a nervous hand through his wispy shoulder length brown hair that framed a prematurely lined face. He appeared to be addressing a crowd and as the young lady caught whispers and fragments of what was being said, a knot of excitement began forming in the pit of her stomach. The man paused for breath and walked forwards. She quaked with excitement, waves of anticipation rolled over her as the man cut her dainty red hair ribbon. The two pieces fluttered to the ground and a cheer erupted around the crowd. The young lady smiled; it had begun.

March 1937 – The young girl sighed and stared off into the constellation of city lights. She knew she was loved by all, a miracle some called her, one of the manmade wonders of the world, but she had to wonder... why was she here? What was her purpose? She only saw a handful of people each day, and was beginning to ponder the necessity of her existence. This couldn't last though. In the distance the skyline was rising and forming a manmade jungle of concrete and stone. The scent of change was in the air and the sea gave whispers of more arrivals. She smiled. "Just you wait," she told herself.

March 1970 – She hummed along with the tune echoing throughout the still harbour, her entire being vibrating with pleasure. The city lights flashed and twinkled with excitement and the whole world seemed to revel in the beauty of the night. The lady was no longer young, but with her age came a newfound maturity and acceptance. She was in demand and found herself loving her job, her clients and her city. Especially her city. Beautiful Sydney; her birthplace, her namesake and her life. "Sydney is breathtakingly beautiful

and perfect in every way, let it stay this way for all eternity,” she whispered to the ocean as it gently caressed her submerged toes and feet.

March 2000 – Pain. Blinding earthshattering pain. She lived it day and night; it was her only thought, her only pastime. It was her enemy and her friend, her family, her energy, her downfall and her victory, it was everything and nothing else existed. Though the pain of her decay was physical, she could not help but feel deeply wounded internally. Her entire existence had been an ode to the people and landscape of Sydney, and now her love was discarding her like a used cigarette, spent and useless, regarded with disgust by all. Her joints creaked and groaned as she loyally provided passage to the citizens of Sydney, her beloved Sydney. She was unsure how much longer she would remain before she caved and fell into the waiting blackness. “What has happened to you my love? What has happened to us, to our eternity?” She broke into uninhibited sobs

March 2010 – They swarmed over her like bees fighting over a sugary pile of honey. Feet traipsed across her back and sides and voices rang out issuing orders. Slowly the pain began receding from her outermost extremities as the men worked on her bloodstained limbs, red with rust and neglect. As the layers of pain and betrayal were scraped away, the old lady’s feelings began to resurface. Her former hopes and dreams flooded to the forefront of her mind and she stood proud and strong once more. Her strong legs stood firmly in the glittering harbour while her head stretched up to the clouds. “This is where I belong,” she sang. As she reflected on the past eighty years she considered all of the changes which had occurred. No, eternity was definitely not the right word, it was a concept that she now appreciated was never a viable option, but without change, there was no life. No pain obliterating silicon dioxide paint, no new music and dancing, no children. She herself had been a change from her conception in 1926 to her birth in 1932 and without change, she concluded, Sydney wouldn’t be here. Sydney was the very epitome of change, and the old lady loved it.



Sydney

10...9...8...7...

New Year's Eve stirs her awake
from the watery depths of Sydney Harbour
Roused by the shouts of her people glancing desperately
into
the darkness
She opens one eye lazily to survey the crowd
the multitudes around her
The helicopters roaring overhead

4...3...2...

She smirks slightly as she feels the excitement
building, tasting the anticipation in the air
ONE!
She launches herself into the air
over
the Harbour
as cries of adulation are ripped from every throat

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

Breathing deeply she exhales,
spit-ting out
sparks that dance in the air

rain
ing

their col-
our-
ful

pe-
tals
over

the water

Fireworks shoot into the sky in sync
with the oohs and aahs of her audience

She pauses.

Preening,
grinning widely as she feels the disappointment
of the crowd, wondering if it's already over.

“Show time!” she thinks.

And so it is. Molten gold begins to

P P P P P
O O O O O
U U U U U
R R R R R

from the Harbour Bridge
framed beautifully by the sulphur confetti

EX

PLO

DING

in the air

shim mer ing

mer ing

ing

on the still water below

She glances into the CBD

where her very heart lies

Neon lights

flash

reflected on the towering buildings

acting as night-time sentinels

She feels the energy

thrumming in her veins

the roof top parties and loud music

echoing across the water

toasting her importance in their lives

reaffirming her as home

She smiles indulgently

posing for numerous photographs

by her adoring fans

proud to be one of the first to reach the New Year

Constant clicks and flashes

before they're uploading online

boastful posts with "best fireworks ever!"

She frowns as she notices the mega-watt smiles
of politicians, taking credit for her work
She longs to hiss at them
revealing their corruption, the extortion of her people
for the world to see
but it's New Year's Eve
maybe, just maybe they'll change

Now it's almost over
she increases her efforts to impress
This will be a New Year for the world to remember
she sends more and more into the air
illuminating the Harbour and the houses around it
She does it so quickly that the children keep turning their heads in wonder

Left!

Right!

Up!

Left!

Right!

Down!

Their mouths open in awe as their carefree laughter reaches the skies

Her workers: librarians, brick layers, doctors, the lot
Stop.

As the last of her artwork peters out and the
Night is dark once more
only the smell of smoke
drifts...
through the air, blown carelessly by the wind

Families trickle along her roads at first
until the crowd surges with them
singing off-key at the tops of their voices
Her people are happy
they're with family
they're finally
Home

At last she sinks down into Sydney Harbour
caressed by the waves lapping against her body
releasing her gently under the watery wharf
Until she floats onto her bed
Lulled to sleep by the soft chanting of her people
claiming, "I love Sydney...
I love Sydney."

The Chair

I was always nostalgic walking down Macquarie Street. I'd remember my younger self, running down the sloping street to the Opera House as fast as I could, and then up again to the apartment where I'd spent most of my summers growing up. It was always sunny in my memories of Sydney, but in this moment it was grey. There had been a storm the night before, and the city was still unsteady, trying to gain traction on the slippery slopes.

I stood at the traffic lights, looking around the familiar street. The apartment stayed the same: I couldn't say the same for the coffee shop underneath. Reduced to a room of rubble, its once-proud floor-to-ceiling windows were taped with elongated Xs, marked for demolition. I thought of all the times over the years I'd come to the shop, and felt a sadness. I wasn't one for change.

The Botanical Gardens lay on the other side of the road. I'd often walked here as a child. When was the last time? There at the gates was the sign: No entry to the Garden after hours. Trespassers will be prosecuted.

"Dad, what do you mean there's no way out?"

"The gate's locked!"

"Are we stuck here for the night?"

"Well, there is one way out..."

The gates surrounding the Gardens were now my height. I smiled. How intimidated I had been by the formidable spikes that towered over the seven-year-old me. In some respects, the Gardens themselves hadn't changed over the years: children were still running around on the grass, chasing pigeons, and seniors were sitting on benches near the pond, watching the world. A frail old man hobbled towards a seat, a wrapped package in hand. An ibis appeared just as he unwrapped his sandwich. The old man's face broke into a wide smile, and he tossed a piece of his bread in the bird's direction. Soon, he was almost obscured by flocking birds. I thought of my grandfather.

The girl waited in anticipation. It was five-thirty in the morning. Her grandfather, her Yeye, would be here soon. She wouldn't yet realise that

her grandfather, already in his sixties, would wake up even earlier to make the journey from Elizabeth Bay to Macquarie Street every morning, just to take his granddaughter on a walk in the Gardens. The girl waited in the living room, bundled in winter layers, until she heard three soft knocks on the door. It was too early to ring the doorbell.

She opened the door, and there Yeye stood grinning, a loaf of Wonder White tucked under his arm.

“Ready to feed the birds?”

I’d reached the end of the Gardens. A semicircular path lay ahead; going left would take me to the Opera House, right to Mrs Macquarie’s Chair. There it was: the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House in one frame. A small group of tourists had noticed too, and posed against the stone barriers. I took the path leading to Mrs Macquarie’s Chair. This time, Yeye wasn’t with me.

“Yeye, aren’t we stopping here?”

“Of course not! I’m taking you to see the best view in Sydney.”

“But there’s the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge!”

“Then you haven’t seen anything yet.”

There were fewer tourists now, as I left the Gardens: Mrs Macquarie’s Chair was a well-kept secret between Sydneysiders. And there it was: the chair, which had been carved out of rock itself. Sitting there, I could see Sydney. The yellow and green ferries were moving across the Harbour, and there were the warships docked in Elizabeth Bay, where Yeye lived. I could even see the Harry De Wheels stand. That’s where, after our walk, Yeye would buy me a pie and we’d sit on the docks, and he’d tell me all I wanted to know as we watched the sun rise. Neither the Harbour Bridge nor the Opera House was in view, but it didn’t matter. Mrs Macquarie and I had come here for the same reason: this was our Sydney.



To Dolls Point

I thought you might remember me,
Greeting me so sweet,
So tender,
Smoothing the waves of your sapphire skirt
That rest on the whiteness
Of your knees.
At night I watch you
Watch the moon,
A wash of silence,
Silk cocoon.
Pale lights wisp into
Tendrils of air,
Until all that remains is concrete,
That velvety blackness
Of your hair.
In the morning a café opens,
Your lashes twitch
And push apart.
The dews that coat your emerald orbs
Are tears of the sun
And its smitten heart.
Dolls Point,
Do you remember me?
I used to play with your skirt
And sit on your knees
As I rolled in your hair
And drifted to sleep.

Bench

The sun was darker this morning. A strange thing to say, really. I once thought that the sun was constant; a fierce and obstinate flame that never faltered, never changed. But I know better now, after waking to a thousand suns. Some burst violently into a fire that rages at the edges of the earth, as an animal trapped in a cage claws at its confinement. Yet some do not so much rise as merely dip a tentative toe into the darkness, timidly emerging from behind clouds. Today was a dark sun. Like a drink with a deep red shade had been spilled – not with the earthy grit of red wine yet not quite with the jollity of a tomato sauce – and was seeping through the sky. It was an intense sky, one for remembering and reliving past memories. Every morning I wake to see the sunrise.

I am a father, my son's name is Joseph. I come here with him sometimes because he likes the smell of the ocean and the way it ruffles his hair. He told me once that if you look far enough out to sea when the sun rises you might be able to see yourself, living in another life. I extend my head forward to give myself that few extra millimetres of vision, narrow my eyes and sweep the vast plane. Joseph plays soccer; he's in a team with fifteen other boys, all with long, floppy hair and bright eyes. Full of life and vigour; I always love to watch them charging across the grass with fire in their steps. He's a good player, my Joe. He says that he wants to play soccer professionally in Antarctica one day. I asked why such a place, and he told me that he was going to teach the penguins how to play, because they can move well with their flippers. I suddenly let out a laugh. And it's a proper laugh, not that loud exhale accompanied by a sort of throaty hum that we do when we're trying to convince people that we find them funny. No one is here sitting on this bench with me but I am laughing.

A young woman without shoes meanders past on the concrete path running parallel to the bench that seems to be numbing my legs. It's one of those knobbly pathways that one only dreads when approaching with bare feet. She's looking at the ocean, like me. Clearly in no hurry to be anywhere, but still possessing a sense of yearning to be somewhere, not here. I've seen

her before, I know that. I sit and search in the dusty corners of my brain for some recognition. That's it; she was Joe's teacher one year. Joe liked her, I seem to remember. She was creative and let them paint in class. I wonder what she is looking at so intently, this woman without shoes.

I can feel a groove forming on my forehead, a result of my eyes being unable to handle the bleak white of the now-afternoon sky. I am suddenly reminded of my father and the lines that would be etched on his skin in moments of frustration. He was never an angry man and certainly spent a lifetime wishing to conceal any adverse thoughts he had from me. Those lines were my only indication that life was rough for him sometimes, bringing up a son on his own. I had great respect for that man and I know that if I had the chance to ask about it now, he would tell me that he had not a single regret. I suppose that's why Joe and I are so close. He's only young, but then again he'll always be young to me.

I look again to the ocean's void. This place is nice, but it's lonely.

* * * * *

This is the time of week when I reflect. It's a Sunday and so she doesn't come today. At least she has no obligation to, but she gets nervous about leaving me here on my own so this morning, as usual, she came to visit. I'm glad now that she did, for otherwise I would have been asleep during a magnificent sunrise; dark and consuming of the sky. I assured her that I would not leave my bed, let alone the confines of this house. Before she left I let out some tender groans so as to console her anxious conscience. They were the senile complaints of a woman with bones that have over time ground down to the bare minimum that she needs to move. She left without hesitation then, sure that I would not be so foolish as to attempt to walk anywhere by myself. There she would be wrong, for I am a foolish woman, and have been all my life.

The fly-screen door falls behind me. I do not wait for any metallic rattle to reach my ears to indicate a closed door, as most cautious people do. For the hinges are broken and it cannot close. I live alone in a small flat near

the ocean. I have a carer who comes and does the things that I can no longer do. It is a sad thing when you lose the distinction between what your body does not allow you to do and what your mind simply does not have the strength for anymore. But I like living near the sea. It means that, though my legs will not take me far, I do not have to walk long before I can hear it. The dramatic whoosh of waves that beat against the cliffs and the gentle patter as they retreat, submissive and almost guilty, before they prepare to fight their losing battle again. I amble across the road – an impressive and daring feat for a woman my age – to the park that overlooks the ocean's performance.

I have no husband, no children. A pregnant 16 year-old, kicked out of home, dropped out from school – it's a terrible cliché isn't it? However she was not accompanied by a selfish and temperamental boyfriend. He was kind, gentle, noble. But she didn't love him. A year passed. A 17 year-old with a tiny son. She fell pregnant again, this time with a baby girl. But she couldn't do it. She ran from both of them and he never knew that she was soon to have another child. The baby girl went to another family and the teenager told herself that she needed a new start to life.

I keep walking, hoping that soon I will reach somewhere to rest; a bench near the water where I can catch my breath. I can see it playing and replaying before my eyes, a mournful and haunting tale that I cannot bear to accept as my own. I think about him a lot, the man that I left (only a boy then really). Even in my most terrible moments, he was never angry. Though I could always tell when something plagued him, for deep creases would form on his forehead. I was too trapped within the concrete plans that I had constructed for myself to explore the possibility of a different direction I could have taken. But plans never do work out, do they? So I live alone in a small flat near the ocean, with a fly-screen door that has never properly closed.

The ocean gets louder until finally I can see the gigantic swell, so endless. I like the sea, but it's lonely.

* * * * *

I had to leave the house. I simply couldn't stay. Sometimes I feel myself wishing that he would just yell at me, be angry and slam a door in my face

or smash some china. But he only looks at me with eyes full of yearning. A hurt that I cannot heal.

I left in a fluster, without the time even to slip on shoes, but the salt-tinged breeze has calmed me and I have returned to my usual pensive meander. I love children; in fact I am a teacher. But I never had kids. I have never wanted them, and I know that he finds it difficult to understand. So do I, most of the time. Perhaps it is because I never knew my real parents and always felt slightly detached from the ones that I had. I know that it is not the case for most in the same position, but I never had that close bond with my mum as I saw other girls have. Perhaps I am just less sentimental than others; I lack some core bodily feature that allows one's emotions to run freely.

I have always loved this park. A small patch of seaside green; a place where I can allow myself to wonder. I scan the choppy surface of the ocean and the image lights up a memory. A little boy with floppy hair and bright eyes telling me that when people look out to sea for a long time it usually means that they have lost something. I smile at the recollection of such a curious child. But the glow inside me is short-lived, for I remember that when I round the next corner I will come across the bench that sits shaded under leafy trees. They put a plaque there, "In loving memory...", for it was where that little boy was last seen.

I catch up with my subconscious mind and realise that I have stopped now completely, that I am leaning forward over the sandstone barrier that separates me from the undulating surface below. Maybe I have lost something, or maybe I'm just looking for a path that was never there to begin with. I watch it heave and surge. It's my home here, but it's lonely.

* * * * *

It was an intense sky, one for remembering and reliving past memories.

A Cobweb of Cobbled Laneways

There are people outside my windows; windows made for their views, yet I look from the outside in. This is my place, viewing stories without captions, seeing the sadness that encroaches upon everyone's happiness, eventually. Voyeuristic in nature; I am old, I am nameless, I am a face long forgotten, but I exist, and I endure.

Life is a cobweb of cobbled laneways; the smell of effluent an incessant reminder of my days spent in these here backstreets of Balmain, by the wharves. Faces pass in a stream of light, a flow of words, a flurry of expectations. When you stray from society, from the regular, mundane existence that becomes a person, you cease to measure days in events or moments, but in shades, but in patterns. The days fold themselves into the nights, your hair lacks lustre, your aches and pains become pronounced, your eyes sink into your face, your cheeks are sallow, but you are, and forever will be, greater than the sum of your knowable parts.

To someone selling their wares, who commutes from the fringes, you're just another hard-knocks case; bad for business, better off gone altogether, your existence wasted. To one more romantically inclined, your story is compelling; a tourist perhaps, sees you and captures you in an artificial flash, fills in the details with the imagination of someone escaping their own future, which has inevitably, succumbed to their past.

Gentrification: double income households, no kids. Gone are the days of the ambulance that speeds off to the dying and the dead, gone are the days of children running amuck in the streets, their parents too busy drowning their sorrows in O'Malleys. Tonight the night is silent, there is the buzz of electricity, of cars, there is background noise, but it is lifeless. It's noise, just noise. This is the ghetto gone trendy, a change seen over a lifetime. Where once one from the East would not venture, you now have pretentious pricks, who think they're on the moral high ground – they vote Labor, they buy their clothes second-hand, but they are carbon-copies of one another, they are unoriginal, and they are boring, they are consumed by a sense of being “cultured”, but really, it is culture that they lack.

In the windows once illuminated by candlelight, candlelight that cast shadows about the families united in their struggle to survive, ten to a room, no room to breathe, there are now faces that have lost the ability to express emotion. They are faces accustomed to being painted, they are masks, they are facades, some too far gone – to ever be found.

But if there was ever a place to find yourself, it'd be in the cobbled laneways, the laneways of my childhood, the streets that no longer belong to me, but rather are caught in the past and the present, in transition. There are buildings and they endure, just as those convict forebears who picked the sandstone endure, in the marked surface of the city.

And although the wharves have scrubbed up and no longer boast dilapidated, crumbling buildings, crumbling families, there is still something to be said, about the undulating, murky water. The same water that we swam in when our mothers forbade us, the water where you can't see your reflection, the water that is Sydney, that offers clarity and some form of consolation, for each and every one of us.

Even if it is only the strength to endure, a home for the homeless, the one thing that leaves you and me inextricably linked, or trapped as the case may be, this is ours – this piece of Sydney that's seen it all.



Through an Airport, Darkly

He can't help but wonder whether he is going to die here, in this sterile, white-walled cell of an airport. In every corner is the appraising eye of an overly cocky security guard, or a speaker that rasps out announcements every ten minutes. Derek's frustration mounts as the line he's been directed to trudges forward with bovine indifference. The carpet below him is weathered, worn and tired, much like the people who tread upon it. In front of him, a harried mother clutches at the arms of her two young sons as they try to run forward into the straggling throng of people. Derek sniffs, and winces, the waft of body odour emanating from the crowd understandable, but, nevertheless, repulsive. He misses his shower. He misses his dog, his wife, his daughter and her laughing recounts of her adventures in the backyard. Derek misses his home.

Two weeks have passed since he departed Sydney for London on business. London had been dreary, his hosts just as miserably tedious as the dribs and drabs of rain always pattering on the windowpanes. His days were filled with small talk, signatures, and sorry faces. In the evening, Derek would retire to his three-and-a-half-star hotel room and watch BBC News, the voices of the reporters as effective as any sleeping pill his wife suggested over the phone, in between periodic updates of his child's hell-raising.

"You'll never guess what Annie's done this time!" Karen would cackle, and Derek misses her crow's feet and laugh lines terribly. If it is possible to measure a relationship by wrinkles, he hopes his will be by the shared crinkles around their eyes, the nasolabial folds that descend from the corners of their noses like a love song. Karen would call him sappy, but Derek prefers to think of himself as homesick.

The people around him are all eerily quiet, as if in worship, or remembrance. Like a tomb, like a minute's silence; the thought coils its way into consciousness, and Derek shakes his head, grimacing. Something about airports always makes him so morbid.

It seems an age before the bunched queue thins out into different baggage check outs. The one he is assigned to is being maintained by a kindly-looking, elderly gentleman, with an impressive white beard. He gives Derek a sympathetic smile before gesturing at his battered leather suitcase, but Derek shakes his head, heaving it alone onto the conveyor belt with practiced ease. As the rubber flaps devour his luggage with sullen slowness, Derek busies himself by staring at his watch. It's early afternoon, which is fortunate. He hadn't wanted Karen and Annie waiting to pick him up at some ungodly hour.

His suitcase is eventually rolled out of the scanner, and Derek cannot move on quickly enough. Up ahead, the passageway leading out to the open foyer of the airport is decorated with various images of the city, all emblazoned with the words 'Welcome to Sydney'. When Derek winds his way out to the entrance, he is struck by a sudden change of brightness – the foyer is dappled by gentle afternoon sunlight. Searching the mass of people awaiting him, Derek feels a small pang of alarm in his stomach when he can't see the faces of his family amidst them. Karen had told him earlier in a text that they were waiting for him, but he can't for the life of him find them in the swamp of happily reunited friends and families. Taking his phone out of his pocket, Derek almost growls when he sees it's died on him.

Just as he begins to consider the merits of asking a complete stranger whether he might use their mobile briefly, Derek feels a gentle tap on his shoulder. Whipping around, he is rewarded with the sight of his giggling daughter in his wife's arms.

"Fooled you, Daddy," Annie titters, tiny hands clutching for him until Karen pushes her into Derek's one-armed embrace.

"Sure did, Annie," he grins at her, and he hasn't done that for about a fortnight, muscles protesting at the unfamiliar movement.

Placing a kiss on Karen's forehead, Derek walks into the warm day with his daughter on his shoulders and his wife at his side. He is exhausted, and his shoulders are straining, but he's finally home.

Chocolat Chaud

The sofa exhaled as old Daisy Baker fell into its velvety arms and enveloped her delicate frame. Sparkling light poured in through the open doors of the rickety veranda, illuminating an ornate cherry-wood cuckoo clock resting atop the mantelpiece. The edges of Daisy's thin lips crinkled into a soft smile as she revelled in the golden warmth. Her body relaxed, from the top of her halo of pristine white hair – which had turned white too quickly – down to her shoulders, along her back, and right down to the tips of her toes. The lounge room was alive; sunlight gleamed off the thin swirls of the ivory wallpaper as though silver thread had waltzed from the floor to the ceiling, sewing intricate patterns in its wake. Two tiny robins were perched on the edge of the twine hydrangea baskets hanging just outside. What dainty little things! They were so lovely, with their chests painted the colour of ripe mango flesh, and oh – oh – how delightful would it be to caress their puffed down with the tip of your index finger. Tinkling chirps fluttered into the living room on the gentle breeze.

But what Daisy loved most about the afternoons was her special hot chocolate. She made the most spectacular hot chocolate – not the cheap, watery stuff sold by those overpriced chain cafes nowadays. Every day, at no later than half-past two when the sun began to move away from her veranda, Daisy sat in the same impression on the left sofa cushion – flattened over the years – with a mug of her hot chocolate. Her time to unwind and imagine and reminisce. Every day, she melted the best Arabian dark chocolate over the gas stove and whisked – not stirred – creamy milk, sugar and a pinch of cinnamon into the potion. The secret was to make it thick, like the real *chocolat chaud* that the French had perfected.

Daisy gazed out the window, at the skyline of Sydney Harbour, and wondered who the best hot chocolate maker in Sydney was. Could it be her? Why not? Daisy couldn't imagine anyone with a better recipe than her own. Would there be a cook-off like on those ridiculous TV shows? Daisy pictured herself in a white, buttoned-up tunic and crisp toque; whisking milk and chocolate in a flurried frenzy, assistants dashing around the professional kitchen as she called "More heat for the saucepan!"

Her mind whipped back to reality, and she stretched over the armrest to pick up a freshly made mug of her liquid treasure. Thin wisps of steam rose in a haze of lightly spiced sweetness. Daisy brought the mug to her face, so that her pointed nose peered over the rim of the mug, and she inhaled: long and deep, to prolong the moment of pure ecstasy. It was time. With a giddy smile, Daisy lowered the mug to her lips. Warm chocolate flowed down her throat and swirled in her belly like molten gold being poured into a –

Daisy halted. Visions of Paris resurfaced. Decadent architecture. La Madeleine. Place Vendome. The Seine winding past the flying buttresses of Notre-Dame. Attaching their love padlock on the Pont des Arts. Casting the key into the irretrievable depths of the river. Memories appeared and vanished – appeared and vanished – like flickering light bulbs. And, suddenly, all at once, it was too much. Daisy shakily set the mug down and let her memories take hold...

1955. Paris. Montmatre. Daisy Baker frowned as she plonked the menu onto the table and slumped back into the chair. It was all in French – again there was no hope in ordering breakfast. Her French was comically atrocious. Last night's attempt at ordering dinner in a quasi-French accent ended with the snooty waitress inviting a pair of ancient French ladies to take her table. Those haughty tabbies began ranting in French garble after having to wait only a minute or two – oh the poor souls. Weren't Europeans supposed to be well mannered? And – how could she forget – they were both clad in layers of disgustingly expensive fur despite the temperate spring weather. It was only her second day in Paris, and she'd already felt as if she wanted to return to Sydney. But she couldn't go back already... not so soon.

Daisy gazed over to the mish-mash of cobble houses of Rue Lepic. One bicycle rider pedalled past. Daisy checked her watch. Quarter-past eight. She chuckled: it was still too early on a Sunday for this street to be bustling with Parisians sauntering about. Daisy looked down at the multitude of round tables and outdoor chairs cramped in small groups. She could imagine all these rickety maroon and cream woven wicker chairs disappear in the evenings under a simmering layer of people cramped onto the narrow footpath. Later, Daisy would walk up to Sacre-Coeur with her sketch-book and –

“I promise you will like our *chocolat chaud*, miss.”

Daisy’s ears perked up at the sound of English. She turned away from the street. What she saw caught her off-guard. Standing in front of her was a man so incredibly handsome that he could have been pulled straight out of a Jane Austen novel. Dark brown hair, kind blue eyes, ivory skin, crimson lips, a tall build and – and – so perfect in his entirety.

“Oh – er – you speak – well, of course, you do – sure... a – a hot chocolate.”

Daisy tried to suppress the violent blush spreading across her cheeks. She looked down at her hands and then bent down to pretend to search through her purse. If only she could find a time-turner or an invisibility cloak – anything to rid her of this childish embarrassment! Hunched in an awkward brace position; one hand plunged in her purse, nose pressed to her knee, Daisy listened for the clack clack of his shoes against the ground fading away. Then, as jittery as a mouse, she slowly pulled herself upright in her chair. Daisy covertly glanced from left to right, and saw that he had disappeared into the café. She inwardly let out a sigh of relief as the only other customer three tables away – a balding man cooing to his poodle – didn’t seem to notice Daisy’s plight.

She chastised herself for acting so abashedly, stammering like a little girl. It had been years since the butterflies in her heart had fluttered as they were now! She flapped her fingers by the sides of her face and subdued the flush in her cheeks. Finally, a moment to breathe. But to her horror she saw him at the far end of the café; a tray balanced in the crook of his elbow. He had already begun nimbly weaving through the maze of chairs and tables in her direction. She pushed her chin down, into her throat, and fixated her eyes on the fascinating woven pattern of her armrest.

“For you, miss.”

And then, as she peeled her eyes from the armrest and glanced down at his scruffy leather shoes, linen trousers, a white shirt – the top two buttons were undone – collar, neck and, finally, to that perfect face, he flashed her the most divine smile. A smile of hope and affection. An abashed little girl gazing up at Apollo. She mentally kicked herself. But Daisy knew, in that moment, that she was completely and utterly conquered, and completely and utterly in love...

The lounge room was soundless. Old Daisy Baker peeled her eyelids open. She had fallen asleep on the dusty sofa. Shadows had forced away the sunlight. A prickly chill shivered up her spine. Daisy pushed herself up and hobbled to the veranda. She struggled for a moment with the latch and then swung the glass door shut with a piercing smash that made the frames hanging on the wall shudder. Monet. The Rouen Cathedral series, six of them, hung side-by-side, tracking morning until twilight. Replicas, of course. Daisy drew the thick, olive green curtains tightly shut so that only slivers of light peeped through the crack where they met. She fumbled around in the dull darkness for the light switch – she should have learnt by now to turn the lights on first – and returned to the sofa.

The cuckoo clock struck seven. Whoo whoo. Daisy looked up at the clock. Whoo whoo. Her eyes drifted to its right, at a fading picture in a tarnished silver frame. Whoo whoo. It was a beautiful frame: simple and elegant, flat with an edge of silver rope around the border. Whoo whoo. The picture was tattered, preserved by two panes of glass. She couldn't see the photo clearly from across the room, but she knew it well enough to draw its shape for shape, line for line. Whoo whoo. 1974. The Eiffel Tower in the background. Mid-shot. Two faces caught mid-laughter. Whoo whoo. Daisy's arms outstretched to the sky, pearly blonde hair cascading to her waist where a pair of ivory arms clasped firmly, lifting Daisy a metre above the ground. Their peals of laughter reverberated through the living room. Whoo whoo. The arms belonged to a divine Frenchman, dark brown locks of hair, eyes blue as the clearest sky, and what a smile! Oh – a smile to die for...



Tea Leaves

Winifred sat hunched at the table, her arthritic hands, rough from hard work and mottled with age spots, cupping a steaming mug of tea, allowing the warmth to seep into them as she absentmindedly prodded her teabag with a fork. Lost in thought, she pierced the teabag and the leaves floated to the top. She straightened slightly; a shine long forgotten glinted in her eyes, the skin around them crinkling as her mouth lifted up into a smile. She knew what this meant.

“Do you see that Harold, do you see that? Visitors are coming.” Winifred began to hurry from place to place, a piece of paper suddenly in her hand, jotting down each problem with her house.

“Stop being stubborn, Harold, and help me tidy. There is so much to do and for all we know, they could arrive tomorrow.” Winifred heaved aside the heavy metal door that had once led to a garden which now resembled a junk yard, piled high with rotting furniture that had been disregarded over the years. Stepping out, she sighed as she took in the mess before her.

“Do you remember Harold, when I used to kneel out here for hours, I was so very proud of my gardening. Oh and look at this rocking chair; you used to sit in it right here and read the newspaper or smoke a cigar in the evenings.” She began to upright a large flower pot that had fallen onto its side, the dirt strewn across the terrace floor, but stopped, sighing as she realised that it was no use.

“Goodness, these things are heavy; I can’t possibly move any of them. I wish you could help me; this was what having a man in the house was for, after all.”

Winifred began to hum a tune under her breath as she worked around the heavy furniture, sweeping the broken shards of wood and glass into neat piles and chatting happily to her husband. She propped a ladder against the side of her house and went in search of some paint, careful not to walk under the ladder on her way to the door, for that always brought bad luck. Shuffling up the steps one by one, Winifred almost slipped on a loose step that had been rotting away for a long time.

“I asked you to fix that step years ago,” she murmured to her husband under her breath as she gazed down to the bottom of the stairs, knowing that if she had fallen, it would probably have been the end of her. Before she forgot, she added the step to her list of things that would need to be fixed later. Rummaging through the attic for a tub of paint which she knew she had put up there somewhere, she gasped in delight at the sight of a horse shoe with its open end pointing towards her. She picked it up, made a wish and threw it behind her, over her left shoulder for good luck. Finding the paint, Winifred returned to the garden and methodically began to paint the house, taking up most of her evening. Exhausted, she made her way to bed, admiring the small improvement she had made on the house that day.

“We are getting there darling, soon the visitors will come,” she sighed before drifting off to sleep.

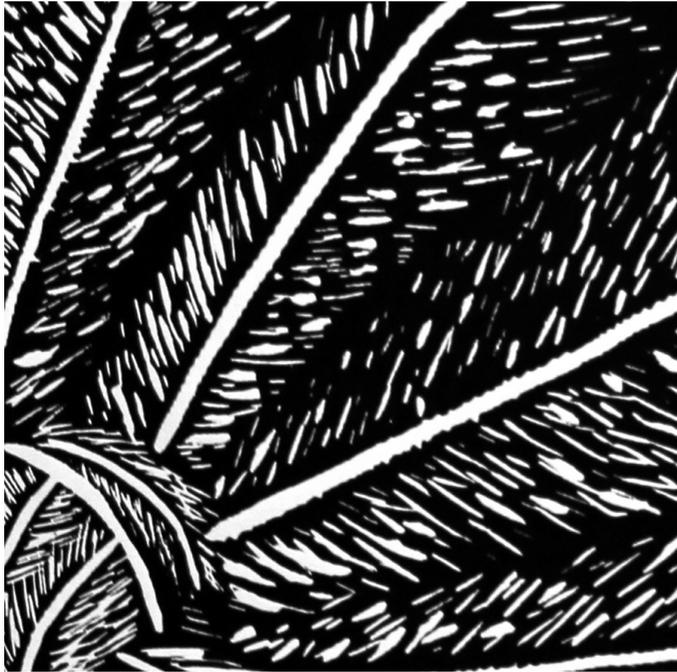
Over the next couple of weeks, Winifred worked hard on the house, hobbling from place to place, now with a skip in her step, polishing, dusting, painting and even fixing the stairs and a leak discovered in the roof. All the while, she chatted to Harold, at times momentarily forgetting that even if she begged, Harold wouldn't be able to help her with the toolbox or move an extremely heavy piece of furniture. After years of grieving and of moping around the house, staring out of the window each day whilst stirring her tea, Winifred started laughing again and spending more time outside, continuing to use gardening tools she hadn't touched in years and sketching the outdoor scenery that she had forgotten was so beautiful. Finally, Winifred began to run out of chores in the house and she knew that it was nearly time. Her companions would be leaving their homes to set off for her cottage as the tea leaves had said.

Preparations finished, Winifred slumped into her chair, exhausted, but after a moment's rest she sat up straight, craning her neck, eager to see as far as possible, to catch sight of the visitors as soon as they came into view. She ran through a list of people who could possibly be visiting in her head. It wasn't long. She had barely any friends; the few that she had were too weak and old to travel far.

“There aren’t any relatives Harold, except that ghastly nephew of yours. I have not seen him since the funeral and although you always said he was a good lad, he didn’t seem upset by your death, rather more interested in the will you left behind. It doesn’t really matter who is coming, I would appreciate the company anyway out here on my own. It gets terribly lonely.”

Winifred sat back down in her chair by the window. It had begun to rain and droplets of water slid slowly down the window sill; her eyes never left the horizon, where figures would soon appear. She patiently sat as hours turned into days, spending them by the window watching and waiting. The excited shine soon faded from her eyes, her shoulders began to droop and her lips lowered to their former turned-down position. “They have to come, Harold, I saw the tea leaves on the surface with my own two eyes,” she mumbled over and over, frantically searching the horizon again.

The visitors never came.



Cormack Ongoing

I.

I, like everyone else, had heard of the Cormacks. But unlike those eager knowing others, I knew them before I had heard of them. I lived in their penthouse on the farthest edge of the island, right at the water's lap. I was sixteen, new in New York, and I already understood the city.

There's nothing really to know about New York, other than that it will always feel the way you do. On a bad day the East River is slow and stagnant, slimy with centuries of unnecessary muck, and Times Square is a sickening beacon of consumerism and superficiality and all the ways America's brightness leaves you blind. But on a good day there is no place in the whole world more perfect than the reservoir, the fire escapes are quaint like a picket fence, and you are the only person who knows about that little park just behind the UN where the light's always orange and the pigeons don't fly.

We'd moved indefinitely for my mother's work, and now her work had demanded her back home – a case that had unexpectedly gone on appeal. She was furious about the change but determined to be back within a month or so. In the meantime I needed a place to stay. I'd asked Sasha first.

Sasha Kumble was often the first; first in track, first to answer in class, first invited and unfailingly last to accept. A girl of extremes, I suppose, but when I first met her she seemed a girl of superlatives. She impressed me. Her brownstone townhouse and all those rooftop parties stood tall from my street view.

I impressed her too; I was her novelty companion, the one with that accent and funny turn of phrase. With her I was the girl who was always invited and with me she was the girl who had interesting friends.

Sasha squealed when I asked her, "Of course you can stay with us. When? I'll ask Mom!"

"Over November I think?"

"No, that's Thanksgiving. I'm sure you could stay with us straight after."

Most families, like Sasha's, were going away for the break, but Caroline

Cormack said she'd host me. Not just for the weekend but for the whole six weeks. It seemed rude to refuse and it was a promising offer: Caro Cormack was always good company. She had one of those rare, all-inclusive smiles. When she looked at you and flashed her perfect teeth the joke was in your name, the party in your honour.

I told Sasha straight away. I was sitting in the Kumble kitchen, helping her mother Monica with the dishes, trying to escape the barrage of inane questions about the weather and koala bears. Monica was a graduate in literature at Columbia, a full time feature on the blog the New York Social Diary and, apparently, a committed Charles Cormack worshipper.

"You're staying with the Cormacks over Thanksgiving? The Cormacks? What a shame we're going away, you could have stayed with us."

"Let's be real, it's more of a shame we couldn't have stayed with them. Can you imagine living there?" Sasha was never one to let a conversation lag towards the niceties. Better to scoff and sneer than drown a yawn with a pleasant smile.

"I'm sorry, what's the Cormack thing? I don't think I understand."

"You know, the Charles Cormack?"

I knew that the twins Caroline and Olivia had lost their dad years ago. I knew he was called Charles and that there was a wing at Columbia with his name on it. But I didn't know his name was, in fact, the Charles Cormack.

Sasha and her mum were quick to fill the gaps in my knowledge. The first gap was my not knowing that New York worshipped the people who wrote about it. The second was that Charles Cormack was one of them. The one. He had founded *Lit* in the seventies – a *New Yorker*-esque literary magazine, talked about almost as much as he was. He had written novels too, three of them won Pulitzers, and in between the editing and the writing, he had sponsored a lot of charities, gone to a lot of parties, and spent a lot of time on boats with Capote. But he'd had the twins well into his third marriage, and he passed away when Caroline and Olivia were four.

Monica concluded her recount of the Cormacks: “I wonder what it will be like living with them, I mean, what will they really be like?” It was everyone’s favourite question. The intonation was unvarying. Always the really.

I was curious too. But not about who they “really” were, rather why they had agreed to host me. You’d think they’d be more private, with the city jostling to thrust its foot across the threshold, to penetrate the wonderful world of 2A East End Avenue. But then again, perhaps I offered my own kind of privacy: the girl who barely knew their name might learn them from the inside out.

II.

I remember the day I moved in with the Cormacks. As with any arrival, a feeble kick of disappointment informed me as I crossed the threshold that, perhaps subconsciously, I had expected something different.

The Upper East Side has a peculiar smell, like the subway if it were muted, like lukewarm bagels and a stale breeze from brick to brick. Their penthouse was in the centre of that smell. It was right on the East River but the walls were so thick that it was hard to hear the FDR Drive. That part of the city, which always looks red and always feels like a dwindling dusk. The high rises are dwindling too, five, seven, sometimes twenty stories. Sky-reaching, yes, but none of them tall enough to scrape it.

I was first struck by the darkness. The penthouse was gloomy: antique lamps, mahogany surfaces and heavy blinds covering windows they never chose to open.

I had barely finished blindly battling down the corridor when I met Mrs Cormack. Mrs “Call me Sally” Cormack. She was older than I’d expected, she had greying blonde hair and was wearing a tasselled scarf and boots. When I picture her, I always see this same combination. It was as if she couldn’t bear to take the scarf off, like a restraint that hugs while it binds. She laughed lightly and tightly and always seemed flustered. But she’d sigh often too and sit very still, flitting between intense and breezy, like she couldn’t decide which version of herself was best to impersonate.

Sally showed me to my room and hovered there while I wondered whether

or not to start unpacking. It was a beautiful room, one of the most spacious I'd seen in months. There was an enormous double bed and books seemed to hover out of the dark on every wall. But that afternoon all I could see were my own shuffling feet, the outline of the vast bed, and the framed photos illuminated under the desk lamp. Inside the largest one, a tall man with thick blonde hair laughed and shook hands with Clinton. He was smiling like Caro.

Sally caught me staring. "You must miss him." I tried to sound mature. I hoped she couldn't tell just how young I felt.

"Oh, you know, a little and a lot. But I have the girls. Olivia writes just like him, you know. It's a real gift. She writes about him too. It's her way of processing it all I suppose."

I nodded. I understood. Death takes a long time to process. Sometimes it takes a lifetime.

Sally left me alone to unpack. Caro entered almost as she left. I learnt later that this was a very Cormack transition. They would exit and enter simultaneously. It was always impeccably timed. I often thought that they didn't quite live in the same house because the space they shared was the width of a doorway and the time they spent together was however long it takes for two people to walk in opposite directions.

III.

On Thanksgiving, I didn't wake up until noon. When I finally stumbled into the kitchen, I found Liv sitting at the counter, a piece of toast in one hand, a pen in the other.

"Mom's upstairs preparing a playlist. She wants to create the right ambience for this family affair." Liv pronounced "ambience" with a French accent weighing it down, irony sinking her smile into a sneer. Caroline might have been the brighter of the two, a flame we liked to watch flicker, but Olivia was certainly the smarter. She could turn a phrase the same way Caro could shape that smile and toss her long blonde hair. And today, as most days, Liv had sharpened a very fine point. It was midday on Thanksgiving and none of the Cormacks had yet been in the same room.

It seemed that this great American holiday could scarcely scratch at

the surface of a typical Cormack day. As always, the trio was separating, squeezing themselves into the antique shadows. I'd been there a few weeks and the better I knew the twins the less I saw them; we'd drift in and out of each other's rooms, with a homework question, complaint or anecdote, or sometimes we'd find each other in the kitchen, taking leftovers and boiling minutes away waiting by the kettle. But every time we saw each other it was like a chance encounter, a subtle wobble in solo orbits. It wasn't unwelcome but it wasn't routine.

Today, however, we gathered round the turkey. Liv and I set the table, folding the napkins and lighting the two great candles that usually stood sturdy and stubbornly dark on the mantelpiece. They wavered nervously above us while we ate. This was the first time I'd seen both Caro and Liv have a conversation with their mother.

They were different people. Their voices sounded tighter, like something was trying to haul their words back down their throat even as they spoke. Caro's perfect cheekbones seemed to protrude more than usual and Liv set her pointy chin in a scowl.

"What do you usually do for Thanksgiving?"

Each Cormack glanced at the other before Liv answered.

"Normally we don't do anything."

"That's not true Olivia. We always have a big family meal. And sometimes we go to Connecticut."

"Mom, we always go to Connecticut. It's not special." Caro said "special" like it was a curse, spitting the word at the table.

Caro rarely agreed with Liv. At school they had set up a transparent truce, an agreement to disagree, trying to remind everyone that all they shared was a last name and a womb. Other than that, they were strikingly different. Around this table they were aligned under different terms. They didn't care what Sally had to say. Every comment was slashed, two quick minds against one, with me as a silent witness, trying to listen to the sound of my own chewing and smile like I was relishing my taste of a Real American Family.

"I'm sorry you don't think it's very important, Caroline, because we're going to Connecticut tomorrow."

“Mom!” They complained in unison, one voice that set Sally’s face in decision.

“I thought our guest might like to see it. It’s a family holiday and we’re going to spend time together.”

The complaints went on. Well-argued reasons about homework or commitments or the state of the Connecticut property, all met with dark refusal. Eventually they crept back into quiet. And by the time we reached the pumpkin pie they laughed that they were too full even to speak, knowing full well that they were just sick with conversation, bursting with the loops and repeated sneers, the comments that circled and never led anywhere except back to silence.

And all the time I was wondering why they’d agreed to have me, what they were trying to prove or whether there was some aspect of their dim tension, the gloomy limbo between conversations that I hadn’t yet understood.

Liv signalled the end of the meal. “Thanks Mom – that was delicious.”

“I didn’t prepare it on my own this year. I had some help.” Sally winked at me.

The candles’ flighty shadows darkened Caro and Liv’s scowls and there was a twist in my stomach that wasn’t only filled with food. But I winked back.



Catch Me If You Can

You track me across the stage: jealous eyes, admiring eyes, celebratory eyes. They take in the warm, confident smile that hides my guilty conscience. Today is a day for celebration, no matter how undeserved.

Solemnly I step up to the podium, unfolding the pages I have agonised over for weeks. Never before have I felt so devastated by words, especially my own words, printed on a page. I fix my smile in place and begin to speak.

“I am so honoured to be here today as the recipient of Epic Magazine’s 2014 NovelQuest Prize, and I want to thank everyone who made this possible. To all my fans and everyone who supported me, thank you. To my editor Benedict Arnold, who influenced and shaped my fantasy stories into something amazing, I also offer heartfelt thanks. I am extraordinarily fortunate to have found a home at Random House Publishing and am grateful to my wonderful colleagues who revealed the elegant balance between making art and making money in order to follow your passions. I would also like to thank my publisher and strongest supporter Jonathan Smith, who took a chance with my stories and today is like a second family to me.

“And last but not least: Jane of the Arches, my faithful protagonist, who has stayed beside me throughout all our challenges over six years. Her strength of character (poor pun intended) has opened my eyes to much more than just the almost tangible Commuworld that she lives in. She has helped me fulfil goals and define my own integrity as an author and as a person.

“When I first began writing I only dreamed of having a fantasy book published. Today’s success is therefore surreal, almost as if I’m living someone else’s life as a success story.”

I chuckle and your polite titters follow.

“It’s rather hard to make it in the business, with the greats looming over you: J.R.R Tolkien, C.S Lewis, J.K. Rowling... After them, what’s left behind for us to write about? How can the rest of us ever measure up? Maybe I should have called myself C.J. Ponzi rather than Charlotte Judith Ponzi.”

I laugh lightly, sticking carefully to script.

“Whatever the case, I know I have been privileged to be introduced to a circle of truly talented writers and to be welcomed warmly by so many amazing authors, many of whom have been heroes of mine for a long time.

“It’s actually a rather curious process to be accepted; one is generally excluded until you can prove that you stand out as an individual. Then after that, it’s the presence of originality that ironically ties you to the rest. I owe a great debt to my numerous mentors: they offered much inspiration whenever I delved into their various worlds. Even as a child I loved the magic that came with fantasy stories, and especially how clear cut a hero’s choices were: good versus evil, white versus black. I loved too those books’ ‘all’s well’ resolutions. As real people, alienation is often our fate, but in heroic stories it is only temporary: the great protagonists find their place in society eventually.

“Now I want to share with you a very brief excerpt from a story I never published, and probably never will. It is called ‘Tickle My Fantasy’. I hope you can all find in it some new meaning of relevance to your own lives.

“Jane considered her plight. Had she not done enough for The Commons? Had she not led the Collective Army across the Bridge of Individuality successfully and conquered the tribes of Isolationists? Had she not proven herself again and again when they regained ownership of the Pool of Ubiquity and scaled the Mountain of Conformity? Had she not retrieved the magical relic of Edon with its gift of the Power of Self-Rule?”

“This is the passage I re-read before coming here tonight. As Cornelia Funke once said: ‘Which of us has not felt that the character we are reading in the printed page is more real than the person standing beside us?’”

Here it is at last. I press on without hesitation.

“So although I am greatly honoured that in the audience this evening are representatives of both Mr Spielberg and Mr Cameron, I have decided finally that I cannot and must not grant film rights to my books. As I see it, my characters have taken on a life of their own and are real not only to me but to all of you as well. Each of my readers belongs to the characters that now inhabit their imaginations: reading has immortalised them. I therefore cannot with good conscience allow my proudest inventions – your fantasy

friends – to be dragged from where they belong – namely inside your many minds – and condemned to a single, finite life on screen.”

As I gauge your reaction, I wonder if any of you realise that I am lying. Do you really not see the struggle I suffer as I contemplate the strangeness of this ironic self-immolation? How many of you even truly care?

“For those of you who are disappointed by my decision...”

I pause, forcing my tone to remain neutral. Surely you can sense the disguised undertone of bitterness mixed with regret?

“...I am sorry.”

(I am sorry that I cannot be successful without being caught.)

“I hope you will all continue to support my upcoming books and understand why I am doing this. I am doing it for my characters, and ultimately for all of you.”

I force myself to sound convincing, proud of how my voice never wavers before I gather up my papers and step away from the podium until I am safely off-stage. I watch your eyes darken – threatening, predatory, as I walk away. The forced, polite claps rain upon me like acid as I silently plead for you to not judge me too harshly, nor to alienate me for my actions.

All the world's a stage. This morning I played the hero, but now I will be mocked and vilified as the Girl-Who-Made-The-Wrong-Choice. I will be a pariah of the publishing industry. But I am contract-free, and, although you do not know this, I have forsworn the writing of more books. My published works will never be translated, so with luck, the original story that I thieved from a decades-old magazine in a foreign language will never now be discovered. I had wanted so intensely to join the elite club of famed writers. But they were never who I am.

The Robbery

Dark room. Silence.
The invisible figure
Moves to the blue diamond;
Such purity.

She removes her
Cover, fingers slowly wrap
Around the gem – the chill creeps
Into her heart.

Her hands begin
To lift the treasure, eyes
Focused on the pale blue stone;
A vision:

White cheeks, trapped
Between cold bars of iron
Black-and-white clothes, her only
Wish – to be free.

She turns away
In fear, the guilt and regret
Seeping into her heart; heat
Rushing through her hands.

And she looks back:
A new reflection of a
Sick woman lying in bed.
Pain, agony,

A soft whisper:
“Take me away, take my pain...”
Her every cough, she could hear.
Her every breath, she could feel.

Her hands are numb,
Tears pour out of her blue eyes
Onto the jewel; colourless
Blood on the gem.

She snatches the
Blue and runs towards the door
As red sirens surround her
Crying: “Hold, hold...”



Health is Wealth

Incubation Stage

The Infected came first, scuttling into the gleaming hall, Moistsheets and thermometers tucked under thin arms, eyes flicking from side to side. They dragged the chairs from the edges of the room, scraped them with piercing screeches across the gleaming white floor, until they were scattered across the plastic surface. Some were hurriedly wiping down their chairs and the surrounding areas with the company-produced Moistsheets, others were bent over at almost grotesque angles, inspecting the uneven chair surfaces for microscopic germs. Riley, leaning against the wall, watched them make miniscule adjustments to their chair legs, seeking the furthest distance from those around them. In a way, thought Riley, it looked like an intricate latticework, peculiarly uniform in its frenzied madness, or, she smiled ironically to herself, more like the symptoms of some violent, mutating infection that converted every movement into a spasmodic jerk and made every facial expression one of intense, barely restrained panic. Looking away from their uncomfortable intensity, she took her place at a chair untouched in the back corner, comforted by the absence of the surgical tang of Moistsheets.

The speaker, as always, was from Savemed. There were hardly any doctors anymore; only Savemed, which manufactured and distributed the drugs, their 'professionals' who gave the weekly meetings, and the new 'healthcare system', Mednet. This particular 'professional's' appearance contrasted sharply with those waiting anxiously on the edges of their damp chairs, their skin pale and clammy with anticipation in contrast to his own tanned smoothness, their hands clenched around their chairs and their nails ravaged, his own neatly manicured and handling the projector pointer with calm authority. And yet his eyes shared the same fanatical eagerness, the same slightly off-putting darting movement, like a reptile always seeking and calculating the best place to sun and warm its cold blood.

He began the meeting with the customary "Health is wealth", which the Infected muttered with knowing nods after him. From there he began

his usual 'prevention', this week about the newest mutation of an illness spreading through Russia. Riley, not listening, was musing over the slogan, "Health is wealth". It occurred to her that certainly, it was true, but not for the Infected or people like her – only for them, Savemed, and probably, she thought, for this man. Noticing that the room had suddenly gone quiet, for a moment she panicked, fearing she had spoken aloud. But then she realised that the man was merely pausing to build audience anticipation before his reveal of the newest illness, and after a few seconds, even she was sitting on the edge of her chair. With a flash of hushed syllables "Polio", the listeners, like puppets controlled by strings, collectively shot back into their chairs in shock. Riley, herself a participant in the ventriloquist performance, thought, "They know," as her heart beat against the steel bars of her ribs. With that one word came a rush of images of her father flashing through her mind, shaky with her grief, like the projection of an old film against a blank wall: his youth and vitality, bowling his thundering strikes at the alley, smiling back at her as she jumped and clapped as a child. Then a sudden rush of images of him doubled over in pain, eyes open and unseeing. She quickly suppressed the association.

The Infected began to mutter and shout in fear, their voices rising in a vibrating crescendo, until the man, having waited with that reptilian glint in his eye, sparkling with the rising panic, began to calmly describe, as always, the pill which Savemed had newly developed, the miracle cure which alone could save the Infected from the polio epidemic. Nodding his farewell of comforting reassurance, Riley thought it only made his eyes glint more menacingly in the reflecting light. Riley was the last to leave, having moved to the side to avoid the stampede of those who had recently read that too long indoors decreased immunity. As she looked back through the doorway, the man, still standing in the same place, hand resting on the projector button, flicked his glinting eyes over to her, mirrored and magnified by his glasses. She began to sweat, despite the 18 C temperature of the room, designed to most effectively prevent the incubation of germs.

Prodromal Stage

Riley walked quickly across the office floor to her desk. Strangely, her office, full of people with minds' like her own, was her form of comforting isolation and she dove into her lumpy office chair with relief.

She flicked on her computer screen and as usual, dragged her cursor past the giant pop-up tab for Mednet. In spite of this, the pale yellow website popped open, trained to respond to her cursor movement, swallowing up her desktop. In bold letters, it read: "Enter your symptoms." It always took her a while to find the 'x' button, tiny and hidden, and distressed as she was by the images on the screen: a visceral photo of a GBU sufferer, a child weeping blood, her pale cheeks and mouth stained with red, like a twisted Snow White caricature. "Probably just dye," Riley told herself, but nevertheless she purposely avoided staring over at that side of the screen as she searched for the 'x'.

With a sigh of relief, she clicked open her favourite news page and to her horror read the top article, describing excitedly how Mednet's user network had begun to rival that of Google's and that according to rumour, it was currently crafting a takeover bid. Riley, eager to vent her frustration, lunged around her desk towards her closest colleague and was brightened at the look of sheer panic on his face as he sat hunched over the computer screen. As his screen came into sight however, the pale yellow leapt out at her. The man lifted his shaking finger, unable to speak, and pointed at the first diagnosis beneath his symptom search, which read '82% mortality rate.' Riley softened and for a moment he appeared only a child to her, pointing with mouth agape at his scraped knee, liquid eyes begging for assistance.

Back at her desk, many times writing a document, she would rouse herself from thought and find she had typed '82% mortality' amidst the lines of her service analysis. She could last only another forty minutes before she made the excuse of feeling ill, a well-heeded one in the office, her boss almost ordering her to leave. Behind her she left the man, still in the first stage of disbelief, vacant eyes trained at the screen, the sickly yellow light only enhancing the sallowness of his slick face.

Clinical Stage

She tried to think of nothing but the comforting regular soft clack of her black patent leather shoes on the pavement. As she turned a corner, she saw a line of the Infected, desperate to get to the front to receive Savemed's newest polio medication. Those unsure of the nature of their ailment kept jumping in and out of the line, as they continually reassessed and then rejected the likeliness of this being their potential infection, as Mednet had almost certainly calculated it was for all of them.

Finally, the familiar building came into sight, glorious to her now in its decrepit state, its clear unashamed dirtiness. She smiled as she saw the sign with the 'B' missing, the same for as many years as she could remember, the dimly-flickering letters reading 'owling.'

Within the dark womb, she felt alone in a quietly pleasant way, it being empty, except for one older couple and the manager, a middle-aged man with a gut that spoke more of beer-guzzling than any strenuous bowling activity. She felt a deep sense of gratefulness for this place, since so many such as this had been closing rapidly since the Health and Prevention Act had been passed. Mednet was always running articles on the rapidly depressing effects on immunity that dark, underground places had.

The simple query of the manager for her shoe size, caused a shot of corroding emotion to leap through her veins like an injection and suddenly the association she had repressed in the centre rushed up, more potent for her weak attempts at repression. For years, she and her father had bowled together, his ability to bowl his thundering strikes decreasing as hers steadily improved, until as an adult she won almost every game, which each time made her heart crumple up a little inside her chest. Tied inextricably with these memories, another pushed its way up to the surface, of leaning on her mother's thin arm, watching her aged father in the clean pristine hospital bed through the thick plastic sheet of the quarantine wing, such a different figure to that in the bowling alley, pale and waxen and so small, wrapped up like an infant in the swaddling cloth of plastic and damp sheets and IV tubes. "Polio. So rare," the doctor shook his head.

Realising the manager was still waiting, she replied , “Size 8, please,” but so sadly that even the manager lifted the corners of his mouth slightly as he handed over the shoes.

Back in her solitary lane, she picked her usual ball, pale yellow, but as she went to place her fingers in the holes, suddenly she froze. Before her eyes she could see the people who had used this ball before her: images rushed up at her – adults and children stuffing their wet mouths with greasy food.

Her father, swaddled in the hospital.

She remembered how often they used to be together, right before his illness. Had she been exposed?

She could sense the germs within her, rallying her organs to mutiny.

Her father, his brittle hands and bird-like arms. The thundering crash of the bowling pins.

And those three holes, which seemed to expand in her vision until they were all she could see or comprehend. She imagined herself in a moment of inattentiveness, touching her face with those fingers. And when she thought of what she had already touched in this place, her stomach heaved itself into her throat and she just reached the exit, before she threw up on the pavement.

She stepped out of the shower for the third time, still intently focused on retracing her steps that day. She sat at her desk, inspecting with new eyes the house she had lovingly styled. It appeared crawling to her now. Turning to her computer, she clicked on her favourites and opened Mednet. Her eyes widened as she caught sight of the new revised mortality rate for ‘Gingivitis’ and she tried to remember if she had flossed last night. Hands shaking, she typed ‘fever, nausea, possible hallucinations’ into the symptoms box and clicked ‘Search.’ As the website calculated and searched through its ever-expanding database, Riley prayed that a pill for whatever she had contracted would be unveiled at the next meeting. Her house, her furniture, her photos disappeared into a dull blur and her vision narrowed to include only the rotating circle of the ‘searching’ sign, each turn of the tiny wheel out-spun by the frantic whirring of her mind.

The Waiting Game

Bright light births life,
screaming in silence, coated in a sickly
stench of sweat,
claustrophobia dissolves into
fear of the open,
where hands grapple at air, catching
nothing, reaching nothing.

Alone,
alone. Are you ready to be alone?

Waiting. Now you must wait,
in a room.
Sign on the door reads 'Life'
artificial light burns
the eyes, the smell
of ammonia scrapes the throat.
The cold stark reality
drains from you care,
sympathy, you no longer hold,
empathy, was lost when you opened your eyes.
No longer do you have effect. Waiting,
a marathon task that steals the patience
needed for the wait.
Absolution is in sight though
out of reach.

End? Is there an end?
Yes, of course. A door,
there is always a door, a way
out, take it upon yourself,
grapple for the handle, pull it
and you're free.
Close your eyes and you will
never have to see again.
End the wait.
The equal and the opposite cancel
out to create void.
Light to dark.
Death to life.

The Laceration of Sky-Coloured Souls

i. scarlet

They are meeting death
head-on
with a challenge in their hearts
and insults worthy of gods
dancing
 like fire
on their tongues.

For they have kissed kismet on the lips
and defied
sidereal expectations;
 they are making this pyrrhic war
 their own,
with loaded weapons and
hubristic ammunition.

These boys with eyes so eager
circle their prey,
hungry as lions that rend and bolt raw flesh,
until they close in for the kill --
 and they realise
they are not running at men nor monsters,
 but themselves.

ii. grey-blue

These men, now no longer mere mortals,
 are sempiternal
as they tattoo their marks
on the skin of history;
 while ink as black as night
seeps into the very marrow
of ancient bones.

And, while their fates have already been sealed,
they continue to fight
 bravely
until the very last moments,
when death carries their souls
 gently
 away.

The leftovers are blank;
living corpses
which lie, unwanted,
 unnecessary,
like discarded cigarettes
in the gutter of
 human waste.



Square Deal

“A man who is good enough to shed his blood for the country is good enough to be given a square deal afterwards.” – Theodore Roosevelt

*

The thing they never tell you, not in history books or gory stories or whatever, is how you're treated afterwards. At some point in societal evolution, humans developed an ability to empathise with each other without wanting to stop killing each other en masse. So afterwards, after you're thrown your pittance of medals, after you're honourably discharged; that's when they stomp all over you. That's when they steamroll you with words like 'atrocities' and 'brutality' and 'murder'.

What those Civilians never really got, not in the tribunal, not when they kicked you over their GDR, not when they declared you barbarous and banned and banished, is that they asked you to do it.

*

Staring at him across the water, Alice shivers – she can almost feel her mother's scandalised whisper, hot in her ear: Bad Blood, filthy, sick-in-the-head, warrior brute. A monster in a man's skin, stooping low at the Great Dividing River to splash the toxic liquid into his mouth with the reckless abandon of the beast he must be. Glancing up, Alice realises that he can see her as much as she can see him, and she gets the queerest urge to draw her cardigan closer around herself, as if any material could shield her from that gaze. Alice thinks maybe he can see into her, that the BB with one stubbed arm could scrutinise her wildly pounding heart with beastly hunger.

And then, grotesque and awkward, and so disarming for that, he smiles at her.

*

She reminds you, abstractly, of a spooked horse; not for her energy, which is so controlled in her bony frame you think she might explode, but for her eyes, so nearly rolling in fear. You imagine her rearing up, limbs splayed out in terror, and stifle a laugh. The sudden bitter aftertaste of the GDR, a pissant stream with a grandiose title, twists your mouth into a grimace, but the girl smiles back at you anyway, tentative as the child she clearly isn't.

"What's your name?" you ask her, for want of anything better to say. She doesn't reply, but you weren't expecting anything of her, poor ickle lamb, probably suckled on horror stories that poured from her mother's breast in equal amounts to her milk.

"W-what's yours?" she forces out, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Dylan," you offer, sitting on the muddy river bank. The sun is high in the sky, and you feel sweat begin to prickle at the back of your neck. It's not the first time you've encountered a Civilian at the GDR, but they've never tried to talk to you before. You've grown accustomed to the terrified quickened steps, or worse, the disgusted sniffs, noses turned so high you'd think the old crones and soft-bellied gents could still smell the gunpowder on you.

The girl takes a deep breath.

"Mine's Alice."

And it's not the prettiest thing you've ever heard; but it's nice all the same.

*

Alice keeps Dylan her dirty little secret; keeps him under wraps, under her cardigans and her cotton shirts, she folds her ribs around him, protects him and shrines him next to her heart that knocks a little faster against her fine bones every time her mother asks but where could you be going, this early in the morning? Her father, head permanently buried in the daily newspaper and hand permanently buried in the Rottweiler's fur, occasionally glances sidelong at her. Alice often wishes to tell them, laugh in their faces at the fact

that she herself finally, finally, has something for herself. And yet, the very idea of letting Dylan go from her cradle is sickening, so, when her mother asks, she says she's off to meet friends. And her mother shakes her head; I didn't know you had any, darling.

*

When you fought in the war, you were underage. The guns they gave you were too heavy in your baby-fat hands, and every time you fired them, the recoil would nearly knock you over. When your arm was blown off, it was close enough to the end that they didn't bother sending you home early. The war had been harsh to you and yours, but worse to those you fought, and, in the wake of the treatment administered to them, all returning soldiers were considered loathsome. Mothers would hurry their children away from you, and when Soldier became Bad Blood became BB, the Separation almost seemed preferable to staying on that side of the river.

You were nineteen when it happened, and when you tell that to Alice, perhaps four weeks after you first meet, she gasps. Her hand makes an aborted movement towards you, and you wonder what she meant to do. Perhaps a reassuring hand on your shoulder, or even on your own, singular hand, which rests in the mud as the world on Atlas' shoulders.

"Come see me tonight," Alice tells you, green eyes sparking with flinty mischief.

And who are you to deny her?

*

"Father," Alice begins, coyly running her hands through her long blond hair, and keeping her eyes firmly fixed on the darkening sky, "why is that stream at the edge of town called the Great Dividing River?"

Her father peers at her over the top of his newspaper, and narrows his eyes. "Why do you ask, sweetheart?"

“Well, I was walking past there the other day, and it occurred to me that it’s not so much of a ‘great river’ as it is a little stream. I was only wondering, though.”

Her father huffs, puts down the paper, and rubs at his eyeglasses. “Alice, dear, you know how there are bad men across that stream?”

“Yes, of course.”

“You also know I helped put them over there, don’t you?”

“Did you?”

“Indeed. Now, when we were questioning how we could encourage that lot to stay on their side, we decided that giving the stream a formidable name would encourage the Bad Bloods to stay away from it.”

Alice blinks, and manages a smile. “That’s very clever of you, Father.”

“I should think so,” her father hums. “It was frightfully difficult in the beginning to get anyone to agree to building them infrastructure and the like. Why, they thought that we could just shoo them all away with no provisions whatsoever; and that the BBs wouldn’t come back! Foolishness, really, don’t you agree?”

Alice fidgets. “I think I’ll be off now.”

Her father raises his brow, his mouth tightening. “And where would you be headed to at this time of night?”

“To meet some friends, I’ll be back soon, don’t you worry.”

She leaves before he can respond. The Rottweiler growls.

*

From the moment Alice arrives, it’s clear she’s been running.

“What’s wrong?” you ask, as she bends over for air. The GDR below is almost pitch at night, the stars above bounce off its surface as myriad compasses. The stream’s quiet lapping at the banks bordering it, along with Alice’s strained breaths, are the only sounds. When she straightens up, she is the most resolved you have ever seen her.

“Is it safe?”

“Is what safe?” you ask, head cocked to the side.

“Your side of the stream. Is it safe?”

You pause, considering. “Why are you asking anyway? I mean, it’s not as clean as your side, I reckon, and we’re probably a bit rougher around the edges—” Alice cuts you off with a groan.

“That’s not what I’m asking, Dylan. Is it safe? Can I trust you to keep me safe?”

This time, there is no pause at all. “You can trust me to try.”

And then you hear it. A furious roar, the thudding of feet, a barking dog coming ever closer.

“Take my hand,” you tell her, urgently, holding out your arm like a length of rope.

And she does.



Strangers

The summer heat relentlessly wrapped its coils around Flora's body, causing her to break out into beads of sweat at just the raising of an arm. It seemed as though the whole of Sydney was drugged into a sleepy stupor by the sickly, suffocating heat. Nevertheless, Sunday was a fine day to be out at The Rocks, Flora thought to herself as she trod on the familiar path that led up to the markets.

Flora inhaled the familiar scent of cinnamon intertwined with other spices that wafted languidly from some unknown market stall. All around her she was aware of the sheer number of bodies that swayed to the leisurely rhythm of a drowsy afternoon. The very air hummed in mellow contentment. Flora glanced wistfully at the "nuclear family" strolling in front. She watched with a peculiar sense of affection at the two children gambolling around, squealing with delight at the stall selling chocolate dipped strawberries. The older boy playfully tugged at his sister's pigtails and when the poor dear started to tear up, he laughed and planted a kiss, sticky with sweets, on her cheek. The innocent proffer of affection seemed so familiar to Flora. How many times had her brother, Colin, done the exact same thing, all those years ago?

The heat subsided a little as Flora took refuge under the huge canopies that spanned the markets. They resembled the fragile paper that Flora, as a child, had rendered carefully into a delicate flower with her nimble fingers. It was a popular game amongst children in China. Upon asking a series of questions, each petal flapped open and closed to reveal an answer. Through this game, deep thoughts were spilt, followed by hysterical laughter shared with Colin. Flora yearned more than anything to see Colin, to see her family again. Pushing the aching in her chest aside, Flora delved into the stalls, taking a naïve delight in the intricate little objects that lay before her. She marvelled at the display of quirky jewellery, the peculiar wooden mobiles that spun without the wind, the intricately painted ceramic art works and the cacophony of colours spattered haphazardly on numerous prints.

The ecstasy of discovering the novelty of the items soon wore off. The aching returned with even greater intensity. All she could think about was how Colin would have loved to visit The Rocks. The thrum of chatter that

accompanied markets and crowds was reduced to a monotonous buzz in Flora's ears. Overhead rose the Harbour Bridge, shrilly announcing the passing of a train with each metallic clang. Flora attempted to seek solace amongst the throng of people. However, in some obscure way, the presence of so many others only served to increase Flora's utter loneliness. Flora passed unnoticed through the crowds. She was just another face in a sea of so many.

Flora pondered as to whether she ought to head back home when she caught sight of a little stall set aside in its own sheltered corner away from the hubbub. Spread out over the rickety table was an array of silk shawls, gleaming with an opalescent quality under the ambient rays of sunlight. Above the stall was a flimsy wooden sign that said "Genuine Chinese Silk Scarves". What had caught her attention was the old, petite Chinese lady sitting behind the stall snipping away at a delicate sheet of red paper, creating intricate swirls of symmetrical patterns. She looked to be about the same age as Flora's mother. Seeing Flora approaching her stall, the old lady smiled benevolently, beckoning her with her hands. The lines etched into that kind, matronly face bespoke wisdom while her eyes sparkled as though she understood Flora completely. Flora eagerly hurried forwards, foolishly thinking that the old woman would say something, anything to console her.

"Very nice shawl, only ten dollars. You don't like this one, we have plenty other ones!" The old lady exclaimed with an exuberance that far surpassed her age. She continued to jabber on, spewing forth an endless stream of verbiage recommending this and that at the great prices of such and such.

Numbly, Flora shook her head, subjected to the mockery of disappointed hopes. What was she thinking? That with one glance, they had made some sort of fanciful, ridiculous, spiritual connection? What was she to some stall owner? A stranger, that's all.

She Who Hesitates

There is that moment of observation in the back of an elevator. It is brief and disappointing; no one familiar walks through the doors. But I expected that. Then, facing the entrance, I wait with the herd, for the levers to turn and the doors to close and the craft to sweep us en masse to the layers of people buzzing above.

But the little box is not yet full. A series of adjustments shifts me from my corner to the center, and I am still staring out at the carpeted foyer and the curved glass table with its clutch of flowers climbing towards the molded ceiling. I think of greenhouses and bright red tomatoes, but there is snow pooling on the marble floor and falling from the shoulders of our coats. I am beginning to steam beneath my layers of insulation. Even so, I'm never surprised by the dampness of the city, and the traffic, even indoors. I can't see my watch, but I can feel myself growing later; I already lost precious minutes on the subway.

The doors are still open. Someone has laid an arm across their track. Like shaming a latecomer, we all watch the last man to enter. A watch follows the hand, a sleeve, a suit, a polished pair of shoes, a shaven jaw and thick sable hair. Here, clearly, is a man preparing for great heights.

I know his name.

The thought is like a trophy, then a failed dive, when the water slaps your stomach and drinks up all your air.

Martha Swift
Extension 2 Major Work (Extract)

Ours was the type of house that you made a dash for after school on Friday if the weather looked good. All of those inescapable family fables with sticks and bats and broken windows were almost ingrained in the walls. For a while, I had my school friends and my cape friends; my city friends and my summer friends. We made a trio, Charlotte and Hunter and I, connected by age and by accident: a chance invitation from my parents to theirs.

I think it was Charlotte who first suggested that we might go over to hers, independently, to swim or run amok on her mother's landscaped lawn. Not that it was a stretch for our freedom; they had bought next door to me and Hunter was two houses down across the road. The thrill was more in the principle, like when she suggested that we walk to town by ourselves, or imagine a zoo near the river that ran behind our gardens. She was always saying that when she was little; 'try this', 'try this', and I would say 'imagine', 'imagine'. I was convinced that her head was inhabited by undiscovered animals and games with new rules and streaks of bright colour that Hunter and I would inherit once we got older. But Hunter was already old, with handed down secrets and the need to best his brothers in mischief. Closest was Colt, ever present, ever drifting, Hunter's older brother by one year and a bit: half playmate, half adult, and constant adversary. I was their friend and their accomplice.

This is Hunter van Buren.

I think he saw me, but it's doubtful. As per protocol, he has turned to face the swiftly closing doors. No, even if he did look round, he probably saw only my splash of orange scarf, not me, per se. I can't say if I wish he did. Then there might be two people in this little box waiting for the crowd to file out and the space to start a conversation.

Say he doesn't leave before then; how do I begin? Perhaps: "Hello. How have you been?"

So he might say, "Well, thanks. I'm quite involved with Dad's company now."

And I could almost say, "I know, I read the articles." But I would catch myself because it wouldn't do to be too interested, so instead I'd say; "Really? That's great. I'm sure he'd be very proud," and even as I did I'd know how haughty it would make me sound, how condescending, like I knew what his father would have thought.

How banal!

The whole thing is banal; to talk of all the little milestones we've reached. That is always the case, but over and over I expect it to be different. Over and over, I realise I'm relating the tiny struggle of writing a witty dedication page or making an illustration deadline, and in return they are telling me about their daughter's self-picked shoes or new favorite phrase. There is no way to acknowledge twelve childhood years, then the absence of seven. Somehow, it makes me shrink.

Everyone else is staring at him and the back of his head, this ambitious young man from the papers.

I know his name, but not from an article; from fireworks and ice creams and picnics and boat trips. This is Hunter, the boy from those summers.

I had nestled each elbow into the gap beneath the headrests. My head was thrust forward and my back spanned the space between. The leather clung hotly to my bare skin. Charlotte's smooth face and even teeth shone on my right. On the left, across the cup holders cluttered with soda cups and paper boxes, Hunter's hands slipped evenly over the wheel, but his eyes darted between our conversation and the road. He laughed with us, occasionally injecting himself into our babble, and the car slashed beneath us just a little too quickly.

"You're driving like an old lady." Charlotte shot playful derision and it slipped easily along the dashboard, filling Hunter till he tore his hands free, letting the car dribble all over the road. We swung left, dipping into the oncoming cars. Charlotte shrieked and I cackled.

The roll of the car bore us to torpor.

Smears of salty grease painted all our lips, the sparkle of warm soda floated along my tongue, and I breathed in the car and the air from the windows and the form of the others lounging before me. I soaked in the unconscious tremor of Hunter's sleeve against my fingers and, beneath my ribs, my flesh felt a thrill. It ran into my spine and along the roots of my hair until the back of my mind began to melt. The afternoon licked at the leather and its breath scorched the metal around us.

Hunter stretched, expanding. "I'm thirsty." He glanced quickly at me. "Is there any more water back there?" I flipped around, tearing my arms free like Band-Aids. On the far seat was a bottle of Poland Spring, still with little globes of condensation running into the grooves in the plastic. I lunged at it, already knowing his indebted thanks.

"Here," but the offer fell short.

The straw in his lips, Hunter sucked little bubbles from the empty soda she offered him. Just icy debris now, it gargled; Charlotte giggled. I felt the roll of my eyeballs as they flicked in my skull. They landed, but the two carried on. Her other arm darted out quickly, an arrow, and brushed its nails through the short hair at the back of his neck. Biting the straw in his teeth, he smiled lopsidedly, and then a car honked and the road divided and our attention was back on the concrete. I saw Charlotte's eyes on me in the mirror. On the floor of my stomach, I felt something twist.

Charlotte fell silent. We all stared ahead.

I looked at the dashboard. "It's late. I should get home." I was trying to retreat or run for cover.

Hunter flicked the indicator in reply and rolled down streets with stretched shadows until he hovered in front of my house. I slid across the backseat and dropped gracelessly onto the pavement. Out of habit, I poked my head through the passenger window, but Charlotte was there and she had nothing to say.

"Thanks for dropping me back," I said, suddenly formal. "Maybe I'll see you guys tomorrow," and I was disappointed to lie because I had always wanted to see them every day.

They drove off together and I couldn't remember if I despised them both or was sorry I'd been in the way.

Remembering myself is not at all like watching far away characters. It makes me queasy; I was so eager, so fanciful. I was convinced I was the heroine, though at the same time someone would arrive and save me, 'understand' me. If Charlotte's head was full of colours, mine was full of fairies.

It might be the heat; I've the vaguest sensation of a blush creeping down from my eyebrows. I just know I'll be a delicate shade of pink when I finally arrive to look at their cover sketches. I can tell them it's the cold I've had; I'm still a little stuffy. Of course, they'll assume its nerves; "A first adult novel is always stressful," so they keep telling me.

I did see them the next day.

The grass pressed on my fingers and made patterns in my arms. I had wandered outside to lie by the bank, staring at the blue space between the clouds.

I spotted them walking together; Charlotte pointed me out. It wasn't obvious, just a tilt of her head or a roll of her shoulders, and she had prepared herself to meet me. Hunter pretended not to adjust.

The prick from the grass was suddenly in my eyes. I clenched my jaw as if that could stop the sting.

Their approach lasted eons, like it does to greet someone you have already seen on the other side of the road; too far to shout and too close to ignore. I lay on my elbows as they strode up from the river, trying to spot some guise of guilt in their obliging smiles.

"Hiya Alice! What're you doing?" Hunter flung himself down beside me. His arm was warm where it ran near mine. He had borrowed his brother's eau de cologne.

My nose wrinkled; my mouth tugged itself sideways. I was trying to be aloof; to transcend their treachery and let them know it. "You smell like Colt."

"Yes! I thought so!" She was suspended above us. The sun snatched a few errant hairs and shot them through with gold and orange, like a braided halo.

"You girls are weird." He crossed his arms like he could be indignant. "Why do you even know what my brother smells like?" Ah the rivalry; we had an easy weakness to exploit.

I shrugged, feigning nonchalance. "Girls notice these things." It felt rash, a little bit dangerous. I had this new theory that I should be more reckless: the other side of unobtrusive Alice.

Charlotte did not dwell on our frivolities. "We're going into the high street to get some lunch."

"If you want to come." The belated invitation came from Hunter.

I ploughed on. "Where were you thinking?"

"Dunno. Village Café or something." Her voice shrugged.

"Yeah, alright. I'll go get some money." I ran across the lawn and up our stone steps, swept my wallet from the counter and reemerged.

While I was inside, Charlotte had tucked herself into my spot beside Hunter. Once again, they stopped their conversation as I walked the length of the garden.

I waited in the strung seconds as they dragged themselves upright.

Then they were walking and I was behind, tacked on to the side of their pair. Occasionally, I agreed or put in my “I remember that!”, but I began to hear snatches of new stories.

Each account became like driving nails into my ribcage. Still, I clung to their stride and listened for my chance to break in and spend my own memories.



Elements of Life

There seemed something uncanny in the silence. The quiet had never bothered Leila before – indeed, she had always found it serene, characteristic of her countryside. She remembered living on the family farm when she was ten... the gunky mud pies, the lowing of the distant cows, and the towering crops of wheat that stretched endlessly. Of course, now the land was a lot sparser, with the years that had passed between her visits and the recent drought.

She had decided to revisit her childhood household with Adrian, her boyfriend of two years. Leila and Adrian's relationship seemed to be heading towards the stages where there was nothing more to be learnt about the other; not a stage of comfort, but a lack of substance and connection between them. She had some sort of notion that perhaps a link between present and past could reignite that initial feeling she had experienced with Adrian.

Closing the window, she moved to the fireplace where some weak flames offered little warmth. She attempted to stoke the fire, prodding the wood deeper into the heart of the fire, attempting to replicate the bonfire nights of her family...

"The trick is you have to blow onto the glowing paper," her father said, bending over the neat arrangement of wood and paper on a charcoal bed. A few seconds later, a flicker of a flame swiftly consumed a corner of paper and gradually spread to the piles of wood. When the wind blew the smoke in Leila's direction, she would always emerge spluttering and tearing up, as the stinging smoke engulfed her. Yet there was something mesmerising about the smoke on a still night, with curls of smoke rising up, up, up... only to dissolve out of existence.

On some occasions Leila had witnessed bushfires, and the dense clouds of smoke that billowed up and left an opaque film on the horizon for several days afterwards. Not quite the silver lining in the clouds one would hope for, but...

“Leila! The water’s run out again!” Adrian yelled. The memory drifted away from her mind, like the faint wisps of smoke after a fire is extinguished. Leila entered the kitchen, where he was twisting the tap in frustration. The grating squeak, squeak of the tap made her wince.

“This is stupid,” Adrian proclaimed, gesturing wildly around the room. “No internet, no hot water... this place has nothing.” He scoffed and strode out the room, offering no opportunity for Leila to soothe him. Not that she had anything in mind to make him feel any better.

Escaping back outside offered no relief from the tension in the house. Adrian had pounded up the stairs to his bedroom, no doubt to take a nap to sleep off his annoyance. She breathed in the night time, the cool air stinging her nose. Adrian’s temperament was like fire – he could be a comforting blaze, but she was frequently overwhelmed by his personality. Leila retained a respectful distance and silence whenever he was in one of his moods.

Her mother had always been a steady source of comfort. When she was younger, every evening she would snuggle up to her mother’s side on the swinging hammock in the backyard. Her mother used to tell Leila about her dreams, about escaping the country life and moving to the bustling metropolis.

“Just imagine... the buildings all illuminated, and the people – the people – why... there’s probably just as many people in the city as there are stars in the sky,” her mother used to say, gesturing to the darkening twilight. As they sat there in contented silence, they watched the cosmos come to life, as if someone had turned on the light switch of the heavens.

Leila could not figure out why her mother would want to leave her life on the farm behind for a long part of her childhood. But now she knew why – the beauty of the countryside was no diversion from its stark emptiness. No matter how close you were to the few souls around you, there was that feeling of loneliness that could not be shaken off. And looking towards the sky now, it was as if God had spilled table salt, with the innumerable specks that dotted the sky. The illusion of presence that did not hide the emptiness

that Leila felt – or really, did not feel – as she thought about the state of her relationship with Adrian.

What was she thinking, bringing Adrian to her old home? Their relationship had been hollow from the beginning. With no one to conceal the rooted qualms of their relationship, she could notice nothing except his flaws. She sat on the front porch, thinking for a while, but then drifted restlessly off to sleep. Another dawn, and the slow dance of the infinitesimal stars as they flickered out of sight.

Glow-In-The-Dark Stars

I lie straight and flat on the bed
in the corner of my room,
in the sliver between the bookshelf and the desk,
and I think about the stars.
The alarm clock watches on reproachfully,
the bedside table creaks, resentful.
(It is past midnight.)
I lie there and look up,
watch fiery globes of plastic and glitter,
watch my mother perched on a wobbly ladder
as she builds the sky with globs of blu-tack.
Ten years on and only three have fallen –
the biggest, spiralling down in the dead of night,
to be found among the socks next morning.
Over time they have faded, their shine has dimmed.
But every now and then, I lie straight and flat on my bed,
bring my hands to my face,
and watch galaxies bloom behind my eyes.

The Door I Opened

The asphalt passed under my feet like a treadmill, splatted with gum. To my left was a cacophony of cars, shuffling down the choked road. On my right were a row of shops that shoved the pavement into the road. *Art and Art-ability* was emblazoned on a colourful sign above my head. The artfully stained door was tightly closed but the toxic taste of paint still exuded from it. Through the window, spindly, vividly painted mannequins grinned vacantly, limbs dangling.

I turned down the narrow alleyway beside the art workshop. Mould clung to the walls and the cobbled path; the two houses on either side stretched upwards like the sides of a canyon. The sound of light thudding and music reached my ears. I glanced at a slightly ajar door curiously. Its paint was peeling and green, finished with a bronze knob. It was inconspicuous, easily missed. I reached to it hesitantly and pushed it forward, feeling the damp mildew under my fingers.

A slender girl was dancing inside, her back to me. Her plaited auburn hair jumped with her leaps. A radio watched on nearby, quietly humming a classical tune.

She stumbled a little abruptly, muttered under her breath and stomped towards the radio. Her dark gaze caught me.

“Who are you?” she challenged and then bent to stop the music. I blinked a few times. “Why were you watching?” she demanded.

“I just heard music an’ saw th’ door was open,” I mumbled defensively.

She shook her head. Unplugging her radio, she slipped on some soft boots. She was fixing a beanie on her head in the mirror when I ventured curiously, “Wa ur yer in Mrs Baker’s studio?”

She spun around in annoyance. “I’m her daughter.”

I opened my mouth and watched her stride out of the room. “Wait!” She looked around at me. “What were ye doin’?”

“Ballet,” she replied, rolling her eyes.

“Ye in’t half bad!” I blurted out.

She smiled at me sarcastically. "Thanks. Tell Ms Silvetto that," she added under her breath.

I sensed an opportunity. "I in't Ms Stiletto –" I began quietly.

"Silvetto."

"But you're pure guid at th' big leaps!" I mumbled sincerely.

She looked at me with new eyes, pleased. "You're a nice little girl... what's your name?"

Hesitating, I muttered, "Nixie." She took my hand and shook with warm, smooth fingers.

"Scottish girl, eh?"

I grinned and nodded.

"I'm Eve," she replied. "You should pop over. I practise Tuesdays and Thursdays."

* * * * *

The rush of wind from the cars pushed at my ankles playfully. The cars were flowing past quickly today and the park on the other side was visible. There were dogs and people scattered across the park, like wind-blown dandelion seeds. A zephyr brought to me a strong scent of paint and petrol, the sound of barking. I turned down the alley and sought for the peeling paint of the green door.

It was opened further than usual and I caught the sound of crackly piano music. Eve was inside and I took my seat next to the radio. I watched her satin-bound feet spring away from the floor and her legs whip upwards. Her arms drifted lightly, as if unattached to the power of the lower half. I began clapping, awe-struck.

She twisted around at the noise and landed oddly. She stalked to the radio, her face set in an irritated frown, and switched it off. Eve looked down at me accusingly.

"When I told you to come, I didn't ask for you to interrupt," she snapped, brow lowered in a frown.

My eyes suddenly began to heat and my throat began to choke. She fiddled with the player and gulped some water. The song restarted and she rose. I watched her dolefully. She prepared for a pirouette but faltered, attempting a half-hearted spin. She stopped, looked at me and sighed.

"I'm sorry, Nixie... I didn't mean to snap at you but I hate it when someone interrupts me while I'm concentrating," she admitted, walking over and sinking down the wall next to me.

There was a stretch of silence. The room smelt of rubber and shoe soles; air cool from the sneak of the wind through the door. She grasped her bottle and swallowed some more water. Her hair was plastered in tendrils down her forehead and her bared arms and face were tinged pink. Our shared breathing filled the room, hers short and ragged and mine quiet.

She stood fluidly. "Do you want a go, girlie?" she asked, placing a hand on her hip, staring down at me. I nodded eagerly and struggled up to stand. She flipped out the CD from the player and replaced it with another.

"You might want to take off your shoes," she added over her shoulder. I readily toed off my joggers and dumped my jacket next to the radio.

A bright piano melody flooded out of the radio and Eve led me to a bar near the mirror.

Eve and the waltzing rhythm led my dirty feet in a tripping caper across the rubber floor. I caught a glimpse of a bedraggled girl in the large mirror by the bar as I jumped past. My foot suddenly hooked the other and I twisted in a bizarre pirouette, tumbling to the floor. The impact jarred my bottom. I sat there, shocked, with my dark hair tangled over my face and legs splayed.

Eve burst out laughing and crouched down to meet my bewildered gaze. "You're quite good at that, if I say so myself," she decided, offering me a hand, dark eyes twinkling. I snatched it and heaved myself up.

"The trippin' or the jiggin'?" I asked huffily, brushing the back of my trousers.

She grinned. "A bit of both." I pretended to glare at her. My breath was erratic in my throat and my forehead was damp but I was pleased. Eve began gathering her things up and glanced at her watch.

"Gosh, it's five o'clock already – your mother will want you home soon!" she exclaimed.

“Me mam won’t min’,” I shrugged, with a show of great bravado. Eve chuckled and I wriggled on my shoes and jacket before smiling up at her in return.

“D’ye think we can dae this next week?”

* * * * *

Over the month, I began mastering the little dance. Rhythmic steps and a waltzing rhythm stitched the frayed edges of my dreams. I looked down my outstretched legs and watched my sock-clad toes point. I pictured myself twirling elegantly across the stage, roses soaring in from all directions and the gentle bounce of a tutu around my waist. Eve’s face was shining in the crowd, cheering, as I gracefully curtsyed.

The music rose, echoing in the small studio, and I looked up to see Eve perform a whirl before dramatically falling to the ground.

I let a moment of silence stretch before she raised her head. I burst into rapt applause. She curtsyed, flourishing her hands and I laughed.

“Your turn,” Eve winked as she stood. I hurried to my position eagerly and then rearranged my face, taking on a solemn mask. The merry tune began and I jumped in small springs carefully down the studio. Eve’s voice rang in my head, “Light as a deer. Do it with contained energy!”

My arms curved around me and I skipped daintily. I lifted my pink tutu slightly to better show the spell-bound audience my pointing steps. I began to spin. My tutu fanned out as I pulled up into a spin and I heard gasps and scattered clapping. I finished in an elegant pose and glanced down as if unaware of the grace of my movements. The audience burst into cheering.

Eve clapped loudly, her face shining with a glowing beam. “Well done, Nix!” she exclaimed, striding over and sweeping me into a hug. I squeezed her tightly. She offered her bottle and I hastily gulped it down. I wiped my mouth with my arm and hiccupped.

We both giggled and she sighed happily. “Ah, we are a pair, eh? Just wait... give it a few years and we’ll be dancing on the Sydney Opera House stage together.”

We both subsided to silence, contemplating that sparkly future. We walked to the chairs near the mirror and stretched our limbs.

“Why don’t you enter for a ballet school?” she asked casually. “You should try the Academy... that’s where I go.”

I shrugged. “Me folk don’t ha’ any money.”

She frowned thoughtfully. “You know, they offer scholarships, Nix. Next week, they’re holding auditions. I think you could brush up that dance, eh?” She grinned down at me.

* * * * *

I glanced up at the forbidding building. The grey sky threw a bleak cast over it and I considered turning around. I squared my shoulders and walked up the worn steps. The imposing mahogany doors loomed over me. A little bronze plate was set at eye-level, engraved with the words ‘Academy’. I set a cold hand on the brass, round knob and felt the silky texture of the metal. I twisted it carefully and pushed it open.

“I can only show you the door. You’re the one that has to walk through it.”

Morpheus, *The Matrix*



Two of a Kind

Two separate forms, separate but unbroken,
One a mass of lithe, muscular power,
The other slighter and yet more commanding.
Together they are captivating,
Alone they are nothing.

An unseen power binds them,
One could not imagine them apart,
They move as one, both working hard,
Travelling faster and faster,
Not yielding, not slowing.

The motion of the two is perfect,
Rhythmic to every extent,
The horse with the force and endurance,
The man with the power to guide him,
A beautiful pair, with the power which used to drive nations.

The vigour they move with tells all,
This is no chance match;
Power and control,
They go together from the beginning,
Only horse and rider know how it feels in that moment.

**Alice Sinden
Poetry Day Prize Winner**

They know it all too well,
The moment will come to stop,
But not just now,
And when it does they still know,
In fact they can never forget.

When they are both old and retired,
Perhaps no longer together,
They will remember the rolling hills,
Which fell away before them,
The freedom they felt never to leave them.

They will think of the things,
The things they saw together,
And they will know,
What it is to live in the moment,
Never to forget right now.



Fracture

The icy wind whistled in the hollow of Simone's ear and bit at the bare strip of skin on the back of her neck. It was the coldest winter she'd ever experienced in her fifteen years of living in Collinsvale, and that was saying something. She hooked her finger through the thin elastic holding her hair in a low ponytail and pulled it out. Her hair tumbled down against her shoulders in a sheet of silky black and eased the pain of the cold against her neck. The stone cold air battered her face like invisible frozen tipped spears colliding with her skin. She leaned her head down, hoping the top of her head would take most of the fight out of the rush of cold, and looked down at herself. A faded brown tartan overcoat took over most of her body and a pair of thick rubber boots covered what was left. To anyone else she'd look ridiculous but to the other six hundred or so people living in Collinsvale, her attire was completely normal. "Lara, hurry up. If we don't keep moving we'll freeze." A cloud of warm air chased the words out of her mouth and then faded in front of her eyes.

"I'm coming," a light yet energetic voice yelled from behind her, "don't get your knickers in a twist." Simone turned back and saw a mob of golden blonde curls bounding towards her. Lara had the same almost translucent skin as Simone but the similarities ended there. Where Simone had eyes petite and dark, Lara had two wide pools of blue curtained with thick lashes which seemed to wave when she blinked. Her face was round and still held a hint of the chub from her toddler days despite her almost being six. Simone had a slender face with fine features and high cheek bones. The two sisters looked nothing alike, something often commented on.

"Are we almost there?" Lara asked as she hopped from foot to foot on the dirt ground. Her boundless energy always seemed remarkable to Simone. She was never like that.

"Almost," Simone replied as she stuck out a gloved, lanky-fingered hand for Lara to hold. Lara shifted the bundle of branches she gripped under her left arm and grabbed the hand.

"What are you doing with them?" Simone questioned, gesturing at the pile of plant matter under her sister's arm.

"I'm going to build something," she replied absentmindedly. She bit her lower lip in concentration as she stared up at the treetops, counting them silently.

"And what is it you plan to build?" Simone questioned, her curiosity about what exactly went on in the mind of that little girl creeping up on her. Lara stopped moving and turned to Simone. Her eyebrows creased slightly and a look of confusion spread across her face, as if offended by the question. Almost instantaneously the look disappeared and was replaced by her normal wide-eyed, over-excited expression.

"I'll race you," she practically squealed and, before Simone had time to even process what she had said, she was off, her little body clumsy in the set of slightly oversized gumboots. Simone raced after her, her hair fighting against the wind. Air rushed through the gap between her thin pale lips to the back of her throat and a wave of icy coldness ran through her body from the pit of her chest to the tip of her toes.

A small town, Collinsvale was always quiet. Roads were never busy and streets were never crowded with more than a few people but even so there was the ever-present hum of people going about their lives. But out here in the woods it was silent. There was no noise to be heard and the coldness seemed only to accentuate this, a cloud which deadened any sound. All Simone could hear was the steady thumping of her feet on the firm untrodden dirt and the pounding of her heart resonating in her ears.

As her feet hammered at the ground, the surroundings turned to a haze of greens. Tree upon tree upon tree blitzed by her. She ran one more step and then stopped, collapsing her hands on her knees. She took deep breaths, feeling her lungs absorb the fresh cold air like a sponge. She stood like this for a moment, hunched over, catching her breath. Her joints ached in the cold. Another gust of wind began to build. A smile crept across Simone's face. It had been a while since she'd felt like this. Free, happy. She threw her head back and put her arms out and let the wind collide with her body. It pushed at her outstretched arms and legs and tickled beneath her chin. The wind caught her hair and pulled it up, up and up and up like a sail. The wind was heavy but Simone felt light, as light as a feather, like if she relaxed

her body just a little bit more the wind would pick her up and she'd fly with it. She'd run with the breeze like a slip of paper. She'd dance in the sky and tumble in the gusts of air and then, when the wind had settled, she'd drift amongst the low setting clouds.

She opened her eyes wide. Above her trees towered, their trunks thin and willowing, winding into the sky. Trees wrapped around trees and branches joined with branches and leaves formed clouds of green in all different shades. The inordinately tall trees had roots to match. The feet of the trees had fought their way to the top of the soil and now grew across the earth like dirty brown snakes seething in the leaf-coated ground. Simone had grown tired of living in the same little town with the same little stores and the same little people. But she'd never grow tired of the woods. They were beautiful, surreal. Even the wind seemed to call her name. "Simone," it whispered as she closed her eyes once more, "Simone."

She walked the rest of the way, stopping every now and again to caress the markings in the ancient trees. The trees began to thin and became dappled as the woods opened up to a slope of ground. The hill was lush with grass and sprinkled frost. It ran down to a lake nestled at the back by a line of pine trees. The trees cast long dark shadows across the water. Or at least they would have, if there had been water. But, where there should have been rippling, clear blue water, there was smooth, pale ice. Simone had known this lake her whole life but only once before had she seen it frozen. But even then it didn't look quite the same, quite as spectacular as it did now, completely frosted over, catching and diffusing the white light of the sun.

Lara crouched in a patch of snow drop blossoms where the lake met the hill. Simone sat on the hill's edge and watched, absorbed in Lara's concentration as the little figure picked at the flowers and sprinkled them over a knee height hut made of the sticks she'd collected in the woods. Lara stood to marvel at her work, pushing back a golden curl from her forehead with the back of her hand. She looked up and noticed Simone. Her face lit up and she waved with her right arm high above her head.

“Simone,” she called, “Simone look! The lake!” She bounced up and down, unable to contain her excitement. Simone smiled back at her and stood, brushing the dirt from hands. For just a second she looked away. She took her eye off that curious little girl for just a moment. Her eyes returned up to where they were before, on the patch of freckled purple blossoms but Lara was no longer there.

The tiny figure in the distance floated atop the water. Except it wasn't water and she wasn't floating. It was ice, and she was standing on it. She took another step, light, timid. Simone sprinted down the hill, almost slipping on the wet grass. “Lara! Lara, stop! Get off!” she shrieked, her heart pounding in her throat.

“Look at me Sim! I'm a ballerina!” Lara beamed back. She took another step, more confident now. Simone reached the edge of the grass and stopped.

“Lara,” she said, more calmly, willing her voice not to quiver, using all her strength not to scream and yell and scare Lara into doing something rash. “Come here. It's not safe on there.” Lara didn't hear, or she chose not to listen.

“I'm a ballerina!” she repeated in a sing song tone. She twirled wildly and fell forward with a thump, landing on her hands and knees. She froze for a moment and looked up to Simone. The rosy red in Lara's cheeks disappeared and her eyes grew even wider in fear. Simone stopped breathing. She stopped moving. She stopped thinking. For a moment neither of them said anything. They just looked at each other, not daring to move as if the slightest tremble would cause the whole sheet of ice to shatter.

But nothing happened. Lara's lips quivered and spread into a sheepish smile and she started giggling softly. Simone relaxed and finally started breathing again and then joined in on the giggling. Lara stood back up on her feet. “See,” she smirked, still giggling, raising her eyebrows in an informed manner, “it's fine.”

And just like that, the ice collapsed.





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And to all of the contributors and all of the writers in the senior school – keep writing! Revel in your creativity and share it with others for it makes all the difference.

Elise Dempster

