

THE VUP HOME READER



2020



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TE HERENGA WAKA

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From the publishers

The *VUP Home Reader* is everything we're working on at the moment—extracts of books which were published in February and March, books which are in the warehouse or on the water, final proofs and uncorrected proofs, manuscripts and work-in-progress—stretching into 2021. We offer it as company, as entertainment, as a promise.

Stay safe and well.

Stay home and read!

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Eamonn Marra

Home

from *2000ft Above Worry Level*

February 2020

I got kicked out of my flat and fired from my job. Mum had just bought a new house in her old hometown so I suggested to her that I could come stay for a while and help set it up. I deactivated my Facebook account and bought a plane ticket.

The only flatmate with any sympathy left for me asked if I was excited to move home.

‘It isn’t home. It’s where my mum lives. I’ve never lived there before,’ I said.

‘Home is where your mum is,’ my flatmate said.

‘Home is where your stuff is,’ I said. I had left most my stuff outside the Salvation Army.

A few years ago Mum and Dad did dance classes together. It was pretty cute. I had never—and still have never—seen Dad do anything that resembled dancing, but every Wednesday night for a year they would go off to a school hall in the next suburb over and learn the basics of waltz and foxtrot and those kinds of things.

‘Oh, it’s all just a bit of fun,’ Mum said. ‘We’re not taking it seriously.’

After a year, Dad decided it wasn’t for him anymore. They stopped going out and Dad got very into the news. Every night after the six o’clock news he would watch the other channel’s timeshifted six o’clock news, and after that he’d change to an international news channel.

Whenever Toby and I went home for dinner Dad would tell

us about another violent attack that had happened somewhere in the country, or in another country like ours. Sometimes they were random and sometimes they were part of a pattern unfolding.

‘I honestly believe we are heading for a war,’ Dad said. ‘It’s happening locally, it’s happening nationally, it’s happening internationally. People are not respecting each other. Not respecting authority. Something is brewing.’

Mum watched with him for a while, but complained that they paid for all those channels and only ever ended up watching three of them. She bought a second TV for the bedroom—something she’d never allowed when we were growing up. ‘What kind of house needs two TVs?’ she used to say.

Eventually Mum got bored of TV and went back to the dance class alone. Within a month she had graduated to the advanced class. Every time she came home Dad would ask her who she’d danced with that week.

‘Sometimes she has to dance with the other women,’ Dad told me at a family dinner. He laughed. Mum stayed quiet.

Dad took over the laptop. He’d sit on the sofa hunched over the coffee table, browsing news websites while the news played on TV. He would sit down straight after work and stay there until after the table had been set for dinner, then return to the laptop straight after dessert. Mum kept a notebook of things to research: books people had recommended to her, auctions for box sets of TV shows she used to love, articles her co-workers were talking about. Whenever Mum finally got to use the laptop, she would pull out her notebook and get a week’s worth of internet out of the way in an hour. When Mum was using the laptop, Dad wouldn’t look at the screen or read over her shoulder, but would sit close by, waiting to have it back.

Toby bought Mum a smartphone for Christmas so she could

use the internet without having to wait her turn. Every time Toby or I came around we would have to show her how to use it again—which button was the camera and where the photos were saved and how to attach them to an email if she wanted to send them to us. Mum got sick of asking us for help, so she enrolled in a class called Communicating through Technology. She told us about learning how to make and edit short videos using an app. She said it was amazing what you could do on a tiny machine.

‘Why do you even need a smartphone?’ Dad asked Mum. Dad had had the same phone for the past eight years and had only just mastered texting.

‘I just want to send photos to my friends overseas,’ Mum said.

‘You’re being naive,’ Dad said. He told us we should delete all our internet accounts, but that before we deleted them we should change our names and dates of birth and locations. We should upload photos of random people and befriend strangers from the far reaches of the world. We should try to break these websites’ algorithms so they couldn’t work out who or what or where we were. ‘These websites, they have no way of making money otherwise. They’ll sell you to the highest bidder.’

‘Everyone has a smartphone these days,’ I said.

‘If you spend more time in the real world and less time online, it might make you happier,’ Dad said.

I got a friend request from Mum on Facebook a few days later. Her profile picture was one of me and her and Toby where none of us looked good. The only other thing on her profile was a video she had recorded on her smartphone. It was thirty seconds long. The first ten seconds were of her facing the camera saying that she would appreciate no one telling Dad about this, and the final twenty seconds were of her trying to

work out how to stop recording.

Mum maxed out at about fifteen friends. They included me, Toby, a couple of people I recognised from her work, a woman in a floral dress, a woman with big horn-rimmed glasses, a middle-aged man in a military uniform, three people whose profile pictures were cartoons, one whose was a flower, her friend Pam who lives in Canada, and a very sexy lady.

‘You know that one is just a scam,’ I said.

‘I thought it was Pam’s daughter,’ she said.

‘Why would Pam’s daughter want to add you?’

‘I haven’t seen her for five or six years,’ Mum said. ‘And she was always very outgoing. But I’ve realised it probably isn’t her because she’s sent me a message asking if I want to have sex.’

I told her how to delete a friend.

Mum left Dad just over a year ago. She posted a video titled ‘Moving Home’. In the video she was sitting in her car. She said she had spent a long time considering it and had decided to quit her job and move back to her hometown. She was going to move in with her sister while she looked for her own place and was looking forward to starting the next phase of her life. She didn’t mention Dad once. I liked the video.

Mum picked me up from the airport and dropped me off at her house before she had to go back to work. I’d seen a video of her new house that she’d posted when she first moved in. It was a three-bedroom villa on a quiet street. It had a small yard and a little space for a garden down the side. The fence was a trellis painted lilac which made the house look like it was owned by the type of person who collects crystals.

‘Is there anything you want me to do while you’re at work?’ I asked her.

‘There are a couple of pieces of furniture I haven’t gotten

around to putting together,' she said. 'You could do that.'

The master bedroom had her bed and drawers in it, and the lounge had a couch and the second TV she had bought a few years earlier, but the rest of the house was empty. There were a couple of big cardboard boxes in one of the rooms. There was a picture of a desk on one of them and a bookshelf on the others. I got started on the desk. The instructions said it would take two people fifteen minutes to set up. I did it alone and it took me an hour and a half. I moved Mum's computer from the kitchen table to the desk, and brought a chair from the kitchen for her to sit on.

Staying at Mum's seemed like a good opportunity to get some writing done. I set up my laptop on the kitchen table and opened a new document. I started writing a story about a middle-aged couple having a fight. The fight was about what they were going to have for dinner, but it was actually a metaphor for something deeper than that. I hadn't worked out what yet. I googled 'sources of conflict in relationships', then I ended up spending the afternoon refreshing my email inbox and on thesaurus.com clicking on all the synonyms for 'argue' (dispute, quarrel, quibble, squabble, altercation, bandy, battle).

Mum had ordered a bed for me, but it hadn't arrived yet, so I had a nap on the couch, then woke up and watched the news. For dinner I made scrambled eggs on toast. Mum came home at 10pm. She told me about how her choir had been reworking pop songs from the eighties, and they'd all gone out for dinner together afterwards. She asked how my day had been and I said I'd built the desk.

'Thanks for that,' she said. We went into the study and looked at the desk. 'Looks just like it did on the box,' she said. There were still some shelves sitting in a box, ready to be assembled.

'I can put together the shelves tomorrow,' I said.

‘One thing I’ve been thinking you can do is paint the fence. I got a quote from some local painters, but if you wanted to do it instead, I’ll give you the money.’

‘I can do that.’

‘I’ll give you a quarter of the money now, and three-quarters when you finish.’

‘You don’t have to pay me,’ I said. ‘That’s why I’m here.’

I slept on the couch. Quarter of the money arrived in my bank account the next morning.

Mum had already left by the time I woke up. I watched TV for a couple of hours. Mum only had the free channels, so I watched talk shows and infomercials. My bed arrived shortly after midday. It was a single bed with slats and a frame. I assembled it. The instructions said it would take two people half an hour to assemble. It took me two hours by myself. I found a set of brand new sheets in the hot-water cupboard. I put them on the bed and had a nap.

Mum came home at 5:30pm. She told me she usually did a cake-decorating class on Tuesdays but she was skipping it this week. She made macaroni and cheese for dinner and said she was going to have to get used to making vegetarian food. I said I would be fine with making my own dinner. Mum said she’d talked to the neighbour, who had agreed the fence was ugly, and he was happy for me to come onto his property to paint his side. I got the buckets of paint out of the boot of Mum’s car.

Mum took a video of me standing in front of the fence holding two buckets of paint. ‘Here’s the local painter,’ she said, ‘also known as my son.’ I lifted up one of the buckets of paint and waved at the camera. The bucket wobbled. Mum pointed her phone at the front fence and then turned it to show the other part of the fence, which went down the side of the

property between her driveway and the neighbour's. 'He has a lot of work to do.'

I put the paint in the shed and we went back inside and sat at the kitchen table. Mum looked at her phone and said, 'Hmmm. What happened to your Facebook?'

'I deactivated it,' I said. 'I needed some space.'

'How will we talk then?'

'We can talk,' I said. 'We have other ways to talk.'

I heard Mum singing and banging around in the study early in the morning. I listened to ambient music on my headphones and fell back asleep. It was midday when I woke up again. I had a shower, made a plunger of coffee and some scrambled eggs, and read the newspaper for an hour before I decided to get started on the fence. I had thrown away all my old worn-out clothes when I left my flat, so I had to decide which of my nice clothes I wanted to ruin. I chose the older of my two pairs of black jeans and a T-shirt of a local band I used to be friends with. I swirled the paint with a stick, like I had seen Dad do, then poured a bit into a paint tray. I covered the paintbrush with paint and spread it on the fence. The trellis was tricky. I had to paint the front of each slat, the edges, and all the bits in between. The paint wouldn't get into all the joins and corners unless I jammed the brush right in. It took a long time and the end of the paintbrush was getting frayed. If I covered the brush very thickly with paint, the joins and corners got filled much more easily. I was a quarter of the way down the fence before I got to the end of my first tray of paint. I opened up the bucket again and stirred it with the stick. My sunscreen ran off my forehead and stung my eyes. I wiped it off with my arm and got paint all over my face, so I decided to pack it in for the day.

I had another shower and went for a walk into town. I hadn't

left the property or talked to anyone who wasn't Mum in days, so I took my laptop to a café to work on my writing. I looked at the chalkboard menu and chose the cheapest item, a bowl of chips.

'Anything else?' the girl at the counter asked.

'No, not at the moment,' I said.

'I like your T-shirt,' she said.

I looked at my T-shirt. It had a cartoon cat on it. 'Thanks, I got it from an op shop.'

'Oh nice,' she said. 'That will be \$5.50.'

I gave her my bank card. 'How's your day going?'

'Good, not too busy, which is nice.'

'I bet,' I said. 'Does it get boring?'

'Sometimes,' she said, 'but mostly I'm grateful.'

I entered my PIN. I saw that her T-shirt also had a cat on it. I thought about saying I liked her T-shirt too, but it was probably too late. I kept standing at the counter.

'Your number's just there,' she said and gestured to a number on a stick in front of me.

'Thanks,' I said, and took the number. I found a table near a woman who also looked like she was working. I opened my laptop and reread what I had written the day before.

Soon after I sat down, the girl came over to me and handed me a little piece of paper with a handwritten series of numbers on it. For a moment I thought she'd given me her number but then I realised it was the Wi-Fi password. I hadn't planned to go on the internet but I entered the password anyway. She came back with my chips and I wrote another five hundred words of the argument between the couple. It was going around in circles and I couldn't figure out how to end it. Making them break up would be too obvious, so I went on the internet.

I opened Facebook without thinking and then closed the

tab. I opened a new tab and couldn't think of a single other website, so I went back to Facebook and reactivated my profile. I deleted my flatmates, everyone I owed money to, everyone who had messaged me in the past couple of months, everyone I worked with, and all of the people who were close friends with all of the people I had deleted. I deleted all my photos and unliked all my hobbies. I changed my name to Frank Grimes, my profile photo to a solar eclipse and my cover photo to a house on fire. I changed my birthplace to Kitten, Sweden and my location to Hell, Michigan. I sent friend requests to random people I found all over the world. I didn't delete any of my family. I looked at my Mum's profile. Her profile picture was still the same bad photo of me and her and Toby. She had posted a video earlier that morning called 'My Wonderful Son'. I made sure my headphones were in and watched it. It was filmed in the study. The camera was pointed at the desk I had put together, and Mum said, 'My wonderful son has come to stay with me for a while, and look what he has done with my studio.' The camera panned to the shelves, which Mum must have put together. 'It's great to have a handyman around the house.' She turned the camera around so it was pointing at her face and sang, 'Why do birds suddenly appear, every time, you are near.' I liked the video and closed the tab before it ended.

The girl with the cat T-shirt sat down at a table across from me. She had a muffin and a coffee and was reading a book I recognised. Lots of people had been reading it over summer and posting about it online. They said that it was life-changing and that everyone had to read it and that it spoke to our generation in a way no other writer had ever done before. I'd told people it was on my to-read list. I looked it up on the local library website and saw that it was currently on loan, but there was

a button saying 'Reserve Book' next to it. I clicked the button and it asked me to enter my membership details. I clicked on the map at the bottom of the website and saw that the library was a couple of blocks away so I packed up my things and walked there.

I couldn't complete my membership registration without proof of address. I said I didn't really have an address but I was staying with my mum for a while. They said that would do; they could send me a letter that I could bring back in to complete my registration. I asked if I could reserve a book now, and they said probably not.

At home, I unpacked some boxes of kitchen things that had been sitting in the corner, and made an omelette for dinner. Mum was at choir practice again and wouldn't get home until nine. I was watching a movie on TV when she came home. She went to bed.

I looked at the fence. All the paint I had put on the day before had dripped down, leaving teardrops all over the fence. I touched the teardrops and they were firm. I forced my fingernail under one and peeled it off. The lilac paint was underneath.

'You put it on too thick,' a man said on the other side of the fence. 'I had a look last night.' I looked through the trellis at him. He was bald and was wearing shorts high around his hips. He had long thin legs with very round knees that stuck out. There were patches of grey stubble at the tops of his cheeks that he had missed while shaving.

'What can I do about it?' I asked.

'Not much you can do now,' he said. 'You're going to have to sand it down and start again.'

'I'll have to find some sandpaper,' I said.

'I have some you can use,' he said. He disappeared into his

house and came back with a piece of sandpaper smaller than the palm of my hand. He passed it through a hole in the fence.

‘Thanks,’ I said. I crouched down and got started near the bottom of the fence.

‘You’re moving your arm too much,’ the neighbour said. ‘Use your wrist more.’ He came around the fence and stood behind me. ‘Do circular motions.’

I tried to do circular motions, but the slats were too close together and I kept hitting my knuckles on the wood.

‘That’s more like it,’ he said. He paced around behind me for a while and then leaned against the letterbox. I switched from crouching to sitting on the concrete, but it wasn’t much more comfortable.

‘You’ll get this done in no time,’ the neighbour said.

I made a noncommittal sound.

It took me about an hour to clear off half the paint from the day before. The neighbour helped himself to a series of plums from Mum’s tree and talked about how the council was getting rid of the car parks on the street. I wanted to finish the sanding but my arm was tired and my legs were tired and my bum hurt and the sun had burned through the clouds and was now starting to burn my face.

‘I’ve got an appointment,’ I said to the neighbour. ‘I’ll do the rest tomorrow.’

I went for a walk up the river. The only other people walking were old people with dogs. None of the dogs were on leads. They would run up the trail away from their owners, pause to look back and then run back to them. Whenever two dogs met they ran around each other in circles. They were so happy to see each other. I walked past a series of swimming holes, each with groups of teenagers swimming around splashing each other, throwing balls and laughing. I walked past the first three holes

before finding a fourth hole, which was deeper than the others and empty. I stripped down to my underwear and waded in. I got up to my waist and then dived under. When I resurfaced I realised I couldn't touch the bottom anymore, and I remembered a news story about a dead man they'd found up north the other day who went swimming in a river alone. I doggy-paddled back to the shallows and then sat on a rock. I could feel the current moving around my legs. A man and a woman came down the bank across the other side of the swimming hole. They looked like they were in their early forties, older than any of my friends at home, but younger than anyone else I'd come across on the path. There was no path on their side so they must have come from a private property. They dropped their towels on a grassy spot near the hole and I waved at them.

'How's the water?' the man asked. He was taking off his shirt. His chest hair had big grey patches even though his head hair was dark.

'It's nice,' I said. 'Refreshing.'

He dived into the deep end.

'I just moved here,' I said when he popped up again. 'I don't know anybody yet.'

'How are you finding it?' he said.

'It's good,' I said. 'Did you hear about the man who died while swimming up north?' I asked. 'They think he hit his head diving in.'

The woman sat at the edge of the water and lowered herself in. She kicked off from the bank and swam towards us. The man swam back and met her halfway.

I moved from the shallows to the part of the hole where it was just deep enough for me to touch the bottom on my tiptoes. I did very short laps of two or three strokes each way for a couple of minutes and then looked back at them. They

had their legs and arms wrapped around each other. I tried to do a handstand in the water but could only get one hand on the ground. They were kissing. I got out of the water. My wet underwear soaked through my shorts and my wet feet got sand on them before I put them in my socks. The walk back home was very uncomfortable.

I read the newspaper and made fried eggs for dinner. I rewrote my story so that the couple were arguing over how best to deal with their son's depression as well as what to have for dinner. The dad thought the son should sort it out himself and that they should have mashed potatoes. The mum wanted baked potatoes.

I checked Facebook and Mum had just posted another video. It was titled 'My First Win'. The camera faced a chess board and Mum said, 'After ten weeks at chess club, tonight I finally had my first victory.' She zoomed in on a black king which had been knocked over. The camera wobbled as she picked up a white bishop and held it close to the lens. 'This was the winning piece.' 'We Are the Champions' by Queen played in the background and cartoon fireworks exploded over a black-and-white still of her holding the bishop.

The letter arrived the next day. I took it to the library and they gave me a library card. I tried to put the book on reserve, but an error kept appearing and no one could work out why until we realised it had been returned. I issued the book and put it in my bag and went back to the café. The girl wasn't working but the man at the counter smiled at me when I walked in. I ordered a coffee and tried to ask him how his day was going but the coffee machine started hissing and he turned away from me so I took my table number and sat down with the book. I read for half an hour and then I walked home. I held the book

with its cover facing outwards so anyone who walked past me could see what it was. When I got home I sanded off the last of the teardrops on the fence. It was too hot to start painting, so I figured I would start again the next day.

Mum did not have any clubs or activities planned that evening, but it was Friday so I wanted to go out. I went to an expensive bar in an old church because it had a big courtyard with lots of chairs but not many tables. I got there early and sat at a big table with lots of seats around it. I sipped a pint while holding the book up so the cover was visible. I watched over the top of my book as the courtyard began to fill up.

Some young guys sat at the table next to mine; one was a New Zealander and one had a German accent. The New Zealander spoke about a Toyota Hilux he had just bought and how it was a great truck. He spoke about how changing gears was an absolute dream, there were no little tricks he needed to get used to, it felt as easy as driving an auto. He had never before in his life owned a car he felt as in control of. It was nice for him to feel so in control. The other man nodded along. A dog showed up in the courtyard. It ran around visiting tables one by one for a pat.

‘That’s a cute dog,’ the New Zealander said, and I decided I liked him. I waited for the dog to come to us. I wanted it to sit in between our tables so that I could shuffle my chair over and give it a great big pat, and the two men would come over and pat it as well and they would tell me about their trucks and I could tell them about the book I was reading and we would agree that it was a very cute dog. The dog’s owner whistled and it ran back over to the other side of the courtyard. I finished my pint and some people took some of the chairs from around my table away to other tables so I left.

I slept late on Saturday. Mum was already gone when I woke up, so I got started on the fence. The neighbour showed up after about an hour with a deck chair and the newspaper and sat on his side of the fence watching. He yelled out crossword clues to me, then yelled out the answers before I had a chance to say anything. I wiped the brush on the side of the tray until there was barely any paint left on the brush, then wiped that against the fence. The small amount of paint left on the brush only lasted a couple of strokes before I had to put more on again. I had to go over all the connecting bits several times before the paint got into all the cracks.

After a couple of hours I stood back and looked at the fence. I had only completed about three metres, not even half of one side, and I could still see the lilac paint under the white. I would have to do a second coat the next day.

‘Giving up already,’ the neighbour called from his stoop when he saw me packing up the paint.

‘Yep,’ I said. ‘Giving up is what I do best.’

I made an omelette for dinner and went for a walk. I walked through a park into some forest and around a winding path up a hill. At the top of the hill there was a lookout with a monument and an information placard. On one side you could see the town, the harbour, and across the harbour a mountain range silhouetted by the setting sun. On the other side there was a river that carved its way through a valley surrounded by rolling hills. There were half a dozen tourists at the lookout, pointing in different directions, trying to work out where they had been or where they were going to go. I took off my headphones and stood near them and watched the sun set.

‘Can you help me with something?’ Mum yelled out from the study when she heard me get home. ‘When you have time.’

I went into the study and she was standing on a chair holding a green bedsheet.

‘Good,’ she said. Her teeth were clenched around three drawing pins. ‘You’re here.’

I took the sheet from her and held my hand out for her to spit the drawing pins into.

‘I’m putting this up on the wall as a green screen,’ she said.

‘Will it work?’ I said. ‘It’s just a sheet.’

‘It’s just a bit of fun,’ she said.

I handed her the corner of the sheet and she hung it up on the wall. I managed to jump up and stick the other corner up with a drawing pin. The middle of the sheet flopped down so we stuck one in there too.

Mum spent all the next day in the study with her new green screen. I sat in the kitchen writing. I rewrote the story so that the son wasn’t actually depressed; instead the couple were arguing about what they would do if their son happened to be depressed. I decided it was better if they weren’t arguing about dinner at all.

At the end of the day Mum posted another video called ‘Just a Bit of Fun’. In it Mum was wearing a stripy shirt and standing in front of the Eiffel Tower. You could see the fold lines from the green sheet. Accordion music played in the background.

‘Bonjour,’ she said. ‘I’m just on a wee holiday in France. Wish you could be here with me.’ She disappeared off-screen to return a few seconds later, wearing a beret and holding a baguette, before she started laughing uncontrollably. She hit the sheet with the top of the baguette and one corner fell off the wall, bringing the Eiffel Tower down with it.

In the comments she wrote, ‘A friend has offered me a

proper green screen so next time you see me it will be a lot more professional.’

‘I’ve been looking at the fence,’ the neighbour told me as I was setting up to start painting it again. ‘I reckon it would be beneficial if you sanded the rest of it down too.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘You don’t think I should start painting it yet?’

‘Well, you could,’ he said. ‘But the paint underneath is getting flaky, and it will take the new stuff off with it too.’

I looked at the fence and he was right.

‘I’ll get Mum to buy me some sandpaper,’ I said.

‘You don’t need to do that,’ he said. ‘Use the stuff I gave you the other day and when that’s done I’ll get you some more.’

The piece of sandpaper was tiny and was already worn out, but I used it until the paper heated up from the friction and felt like my fingers were about to rip through it. The neighbour watched me, and just as it was becoming completely unusable he went into his house and returned with another piece that was just as small and slightly less worn out.

As I sanded, the neighbour leaned against the letterbox and talked about how the plums this year are smaller and less juicy than they used to be, even the ones at the supermarket. How you used to be able to find plums the size of your fist, and now they were all half that size. As he talked he helped himself to plum after plum from Mum’s tree. I got about halfway down one side of the fence going down the driveway. My fingers had welts all over them from where they’d rubbed against the latticework.

Dad called me. He said he was checking on how I was getting along, but then he asked, ‘How’s everything going with your mum?’

‘Good,’ I said. ‘She’s doing a lot of things. I don’t see her that much.’

‘What is she up to anyway, is she doing dance classes still, or something else?’

‘She’s been mostly involved in a choir here,’ I said. ‘I think she still dances sometimes.’

‘That’s good she’s getting involved with things up there.’

‘She seems to be keeping busy,’ I said.

‘Are you keeping busy?’

I said that I’d been doing a lot of writing and that I was painting the fence, and he said painting a trellis was hard work and most people used a paint sprayer to do it. But that wasted a lot of paint, so a brush was best if you had time. I said I had plenty of time. I hadn’t told him it was a trellis fence.

I told him I needed to get back to working on my story, and hung up. I got back to writing. The story felt like it was pretty much done. There wasn’t a resolution, but there didn’t have to be. I picked up the library book. I didn’t want to waste the time I had with the book by reading it at home, so I watched TV until Mum came home.

‘I think Dad is watching your videos,’ I told her.

‘Why do you think that?’ Mum asked.

‘He called me and was trying to get me to tell him more about your activities. It felt like he knows a lot already.’

‘Oh, does he,’ she said.

‘I can show you how to change your privacy settings so only your friends can see them.’

‘He can watch all he likes,’ Mum said. ‘I have nothing to hide.’

Mum’s videos got flirtier after that. She started wearing bright red lipstick and she talked slowly, looking directly into the camera. She ended each video by blowing a kiss. I stopped watching them.

It took me the rest of the week to sand down both sides of the two parts of the fence. The neighbour would come out for an hour or two at a time and give me tiny pieces of used sandpaper from his collection. He told me all about working on the telephone lines, and when they had car-free days in the seventies, and how his son had moved to Melbourne and now supported the Australian rugby team.

I started walking up the hill to the lookout every evening. I carried my book with me to the top and sat reading in the last of the evening light. I read the information panel again and again until I had memorised it. I always took my earbuds out of my ears before I got to the top. ‘Nice sunset,’ I said every night to a new group of tourists at the top.

Mum invited her choir around for lunch. It was a woman named Carol’s birthday and Mum had decorated a cake with her name made out of musical notes on it. The ladies from the choir kept asking what I was doing with my life. I answered the same thing each time. ‘I’m painting the fence.’

When they started singing, I escaped and set up to paint again.

All the choir ladies came out of the house and told me I was doing a good job as they went past.

‘They’ll have to find a new place to park next time,’ I said to Mum after she waved them goodbye.

‘Why’s that?’

‘The council is getting rid of the parks on the street,’ I said.

Mum and I looked at the part of the fence I had painted. The paint looked thin. ‘I think it could use another coat,’ she said.

I agreed, and packed up for the day. I went for a walk up the hill. At the top, a group of tourists were looking in the direction

of the town hall. ‘That’s the town hall,’ I said, pointing. ‘And that’s the Warehouse.’ I pointed out the big red building near the town hall, in case they needed a landmark they knew.

‘Your brush is too big,’ the neighbour said a few days later. ‘That’s why it’s taking so long. You can’t get into all the cracks with a brush like that.’

He went inside and returned with a brush about a quarter of the size of my one. The paint sank into the cracks easily.

‘Thanks,’ I said.

‘You can use that but give it back when you’re done,’ he said. He stood near the plum tree and talked about how the people who owned this house before Mum had a goat in the backyard, and when the council came to talk to them about the goat they hid it inside and claimed they never had a goat. But they did have a goat. He had seen the goat.

When I noticed people looking at the monument at the top of the hill I told them when it was erected and the meaning behind it. How the Lions Club raised money for it. I also told them about the history of the path and that it was carved out to commemorate the turn of the twentieth century. All of this information could be found on the information placard, which I was leaning on so no one else could read it.

I rewrote the story again. The couple’s son wasn’t depressed, or maybe he was but they weren’t sure. They weren’t having dinner and they weren’t even having an argument. They didn’t talk about their son or about anything. They were just sitting in a room in silence thinking about how much they hated each other.

I studied maps of the area. I learned the name of every mountain and hill and how high they were and the tracks that went around them and how long it took to walk each track. I memorised the distances and the names of the huts. I would stand at the lookout and point to the mountain range and tell tourists everything I knew. I knew where the river came from before it got to the valley and where the fault lines that shaped the landscape were. I knew all the wildlife in the area and I knew which trees were native and which ones were introduced. I pointed at birds that came out at dusk and told the tourists what their names were in Māori and English. The tourists listened politely and then went back down the hill.

I had been working on the fence for a month and had only finished painting about half of it. I had turned pink even though I wore sunscreen every day, and my painting clothes smelled like chemicals, and they and my body were constantly damp. I never got around to washing my clothes because I wore them every day.

‘This is taking forever,’ I said to the neighbour.

‘It’s because you only work for an hour a day,’ he said.

‘I have other things to do,’ I said. ‘While I’m here.’

‘Is it good to be home for a while?’

‘This isn’t my home. It’s Mum’s home. I’m just staying for a while.’

‘Where is your home then?’

‘I’m not really sure anymore,’ I said.

‘What’s wrong with where you were before?’ he asked.

‘It was just the same thing over and over again,’ I said.

‘Sometimes you have to do the same thing over and over again,’ he said. ‘Like if you ever want to finish painting a fence.’

I put my paintbrush down in the tray and sat on the ground.

‘What do you do at home?’ he said. ‘Over and over again?’

‘I don’t really do anything,’ I said. ‘Not during the weekdays. And then in the weekends I follow my friends around who know about parties happening in suburbs I have never been to before. We scull drinks in car parks or on the street so that we’re drunk enough by the time we arrive. And then at two or three in the morning I end up standing on the outside of a circle in the smokers’ area, watching other people have a conversation, smoking cigarettes I don’t want. And every time, no matter where I am, I find myself standing under a drip. Every weekend I stand there and feel it dripping on the same part of the back of my head, running the same line through my hair and down the same part of my back.’

‘Okay,’ he said. He bit into a plum. ‘That doesn’t sound like a very good time.’

‘Not really.’

‘You know—’ He paused for a moment and his mouth hung open. ‘I don’t know if this is helpful, but you know you don’t have to stand under that drip.’

The days were getting shorter, and that night it got dark before I reached the lookout. I leaned against the monument and recited the words on the information panel out loud to myself because there was no one else up there. When I got back to Mum’s, I bought a ticket for a flight back home that was leaving in two days.

I was up before Mum and was painting the fence by 6:30. By midday I had covered the rest of the fence with a first coat. I went inside and fried eggs for lunch, and by the time I came back the first coat was dry so I started on the second. The bucket of paint was getting low and I had to scrape paint off

the sides. It was 10pm by the time I finished. Mum had already gone to bed. I ate the dinner she'd left for me.

I woke up early the next morning and told Mum I was leaving. She called in sick and we spent the morning together. I decided to make us pancakes, but she was out of eggs. I had already measured out the flour and baking powder, so I found a recipe online for scones with the same quantities. I stirred the mixture and Mum sat at the kitchen table.

'Thank you for all your work on the fence,' she said.

'No worries. Thanks for having me.'

'It has made this house feel much more like home,' she said.

'I think I will need that money,' I said.

'Do you need it now?'

'Yeah. I will need it to get a new flat.'

'Okay,' she said. 'I can find some money for you.' We took the scones out of the oven and ate them hot with cream and jam. The cream melted on the scones and left puddles on my plate, which I mopped up with more scones. She took out her phone. I asked if she was going to make another video and she said she didn't have to. She put her phone away.

'What happened to your proper green screen?' I asked her.

'Well, it was blue so it wouldn't have worked.'

'I think it can work with any colour.'

'But my eyes are blue,' she said. 'It wouldn't work.' I didn't look in her eyes, but I knew from the sound of her voice that they were filling with tears.

I knocked on the neighbour's door and he opened it slightly and looked at me over a security chain, then he unlatched it and opened the door. He was wearing a dressing gown and I noticed how much loose skin he had around his neck. The hallway behind him was stacked to the ceiling with plastic

crates and newspapers.

‘I just wanted to tell you I am leaving,’ I said.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Back home,’ I said.

‘When are you off?’ he asked.

‘In about an hour.’

‘I had a look at the fence this morning,’ he said. ‘It looks good.’

‘Thanks,’ I said. I looked past him. The curtains at the back of his hallway were closed. ‘I’ve got your paintbrush,’ I said. I held it out to him. I noticed a long vein that went all the way from his wrist to his elbow. ‘Also, can you do me a favour? Could you return a library book for me?’

‘I s’pose I can,’ he said. ‘Was it a good book?’

‘I didn’t finish it,’ I said and handed it to the neighbour.

I stayed on Toby’s couch for a week and put together a CV. All it said was that I knew how to make coffee and had a degree. I said I was a hard worker and was willing to work early mornings, nights, and weekends. I didn’t put any references down.

When I got home from handing my CV out to every café in town, Toby said I should watch the video Mum had just posted that day. It was titled ‘My Last Video’. I thought it must be about me leaving. It seemed very dramatic. Her eyes were red but her voice was strong. ‘I need to tell you all something,’ she started. There had been a man. He had added her and said he’d gone to school in New Zealand for a year with someone with her name. He said he had been looking for her for years, but had only found her once she’d changed her name back to her maiden name. Mum couldn’t quite remember him, but she kept messaging him anyway. She liked talking to him. He wanted to move back to New Zealand to be with her, but all his

money was tied up in a house in America. There was a pool that needed repairs, and he needed to get the lawn professionally re-sown. After Mum sent him some money to fix those things up, he sent her photos of the house that the real-estate agent had taken, but then he needed more money to pay for advertising. It was a nice house and it needed to attract the right market. 'It did cross my mind he wasn't who he said he was,' she said. 'But he wasn't even that handsome.' She said not to be worried, and she wasn't going to do anything stupid, but she wasn't going to post videos anymore. I liked the video.

Freya Daly Sadgrove

Heron

from *Head Girl*

February 2020

saw a heron . while I was seeing the heron I was already wishing I could see the heron again

saw a rat in my skylight . from underneath . the wind was starting to blow around like it remembered itself . I saw that rat a lot over the following days

dogs kept arriving on the property . one was a bulldog . I thought it was a lady by its nipples but it turned out that didn't mean it was a lady . two other dogs came and I took them back to what I thought might be their house . I shut them in there so I hope it was their house

I thought the rat was dying from poison . it was curled up face-down in the skylight . it was holding on to its tail . I thought ' I had better stay here with the rat the rat should have company in its last moments ' . I cried but it was taking too long to die so I went away

finally touched the ginger cat . I don't even like the ginger cat . it distresses me that given the opportunity I touched it anyway

when I came back I expected to see the rat lying very still with stopped breath . instead I saw that it had gone . in the night time I woke to see it in the skylight again . it was eating

my ceiling

the heron the heron was so nice to look at . I felt calm to look at it . but I only saw it once

saw a blowfly in my skylight . did not see the rat again

seem to have made friends with the ginger cat . its eyes are so far apart . that is something I never would have known otherwise

Oscar Upperton

Dutch Instruction

from *New Transgender Blockbusters*

February 2020

for Henk and Cilia

Optimism is the idea that it not always will rain.
Leave home as soon as you are free,
for everyone comes back again—

just never board a train
without a member of family.
Optimism is the idea that it not always will rain,

that between sea and plain
will always sprout a city.
For everyone comes back again.

Do not treat land reclaimed
as you would the earth itself. Usually,
optimism is the idea that it not always will rain,

but sometimes it is a plane
in a white sky.
For everyone comes back again,

they return aboard their vessels of love. That is in translation
(from the Māori, a song). See,
optimism is the idea that it not always will rain
for everyone. Come back again.

Alison Douglass, Greg Young and John McMillan

Introduction

from *Assessment of Mental Capacity: A New Zealand Guide for Doctors and Lawyers*, edited by Alison Douglass, Greg Young and John McMillan
February 2020

This book is a practical guide to the assessment of mental capacity in New Zealand.

Mental capacity (or simply ‘capacity’) is a socio-legal construct: the judgement that an individual has the ability to make their own decisions.¹ Decisions can range from simple everyday choices about what to eat or wear, to far-reaching decisions about health care or financial investments. Capacity and incapacity are separated in law by a ‘bright line’ that determines whether a person’s consent or refusal to receive medical treatment, for example, is legally valid. Those who lack or have impaired capacity are deemed unable to make decisions for themselves, thereby justifying intervention in their lives. Decisions are then made by others based on what is considered to be in the best interests of the person with impaired capacity. So there is a need for a clear process to assess when someone does not have capacity, and if not, who should make decisions on their behalf, and on what basis such decisions should be made.

‘Cognitive impairment’ is a term that refers to the difficulties a person may have with higher brain function, including

1 The phrase ‘impaired capacity’ is used throughout this book to refer to the wide range of people with disabilities who may be considered to ‘lack capacity’ to take actions or make legal decisions. ‘Capacity’ and ‘competence’ are terms used interchangeably. See Glossary.

attention, memory, language and executive functioning—all of which are essential for decision-making. Cognitive impairment is a major feature of dementia as well as other brain disorders. New Zealand has an aging population, so conditions that cause cognitive impairment are already common and are likely to become more prevalent.² Not only is dementia becoming more prevalent, but people with dementia are living longer. Consequently, impaired decision-making capacity is likely to become a more widespread problem. A range of other conditions, including learning disabilities (and intellectual disabilities), mental illness and acquired brain injury, may also impair decision-making capacity.

People living with impaired capacity need to be able to make use of health and social services, and to do this they need to be able to make decisions about their health care, living arrangements and financial affairs. While the presumption of capacity should be the starting point, professionals involved need to recognise when capacity is impaired and provide appropriate support for people who need it. It is equally important that there is accessible information for the families of people with impaired capacity. When people are vulnerable, especially with conditions that affect brain function such as dementia, they commonly turn to their families and carers to support and advocate for them. These families and carers need information about capacity, how it is assessed and the potential legal consequences if it is lost or impaired, so they can understand better how to support their family member.

Unlike many other comparable countries, particularly

- 2 The term ‘dementia’ has been replaced in the *DSM-5* by the term ‘major neurocognitive impairment’. However, ‘dementia’ is more widely understood and will be retained in this book. American Psychiatric Association *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM-5®)* (American Psychiatric Pub, Washington, DC, 2013).

the United Kingdom (UK), New Zealand does not have a nationally accepted code of practice, or professional guidance on capacity law and practice, to help practitioners, lawyers or others involved with people with impaired capacity.³ This book aims to help fill this gap.

1.1 Legal background

In New Zealand there are two main laws that govern questions about capacity and decision-making. These are the Protection of Personal and Property Rights Act 1988 (PPPR Act), the adult guardianship law for adults aged 18 or over who lack capacity to make financial, care and welfare decisions; and the Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights (HDC Code), a set of patients' rights, including the right to give or refuse informed consent to health care.

The PPPR Act is a typical adult guardianship law and was progressive legislation for its time. It was passed in 1988, the year of the Inquiry at National Women's Hospital (the Cartwright Report),⁴ and predates significant developments in the law relating to patients' rights. The range of people to whom the PPPR Act applies and the social environment in which it operates now are very different from the late 1980s, which was the era of deinstitutionalisation, when large psychiatric and psychopaedic hospitals were closed.⁵ At that time its main

3 See, for example, A Ruck Keene (ed) *Assessment of Mental Capacity, A Practical Guide for Doctors and Lawyers* (4th ed, The British Medical Association and the Law Society, London, 2015).

4 S Cartwright, *The Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Allegations Concerning the Treatment of Cervical Cancer at National Women's Hospital and to other related matters* (August 1988).

5 'Psychopaedic hospitals' is the term used in New Zealand for specialist hospitals for people with intellectual disabilities. There were four main psychopaedic hospitals in New Zealand: Mangere closed in 1994, Templeton

purpose was to provide an adult guardianship regime for people with learning disabilities who were previously subject to mental health law.

As with similar countries, New Zealand's adult guardianship regime is likely to be increasingly utilised by the burgeoning older population, given the predicted increase in people with impaired capacity due to dementia and the corresponding growth in the aged care sector.⁶ The PPPR Act is now in need of review as it is out of step with developments in countries that have similar laws to New Zealand.⁷

The field of law known as 'mental capacity law' refers to the term used in UK legislation.⁸ It could be described as a hybrid discipline: drawn from traditional medical law (involving doctors' liability where a person is unable to consent to treatment), distinct in its purpose but overlapping with mental health law (compulsory assessment and treatment for people with a 'mental disorder'), and combined with contemporary thinking in human rights law.

The English legal system, upon which New Zealand has traditionally drawn, is in turn steeped in legal history dating back to the Magna Carta 1215. In 1270, King Henry III, as head of the feudal system, assumed control over the estates of 'lunatics' (people with functional mental illnesses, who might regain capacity) and 'idiots' (people with learning disabilities,

in 1999, Braemar in 2004 and Kimberley in 2005.

6 Dementia is a leading cause of incapacity and is expected to affect over 78,000 New Zealanders by 2026. See Ministry of Health *New Zealand Framework for Dementia Care* (2013), www.health.govt.nz/publication/new-zealand-framework-dementia-care.

7 A Douglass *Mental Capacity: Updating New Zealand's Law and Practice* (New Zealand Law Foundation, 2016), www.alisondouglass.co.nz.

8 Mental Capacity Act 2005 (UK) (an Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom applying to England and Wales), Adults with Incapacity Act 2000 (Scotland), Mental Capacity Act 2016 (Northern Ireland), and Assisted Decision-making (Capacity) Act 2015 (Ireland).

who would not). These origins of the adult guardianship law in England and Wales are a poignant reminder of the enduring significance of the ‘Great Charter’;⁹ a number of liberty rights also stem from it, including the writ of *habeas corpus* and the right not to be arbitrarily detained. The Treaty of Waitangi (Te Tiriti o Waitangi 1840) has been referred to as the ‘Māori Magna Carta’ by our recently retired Chief Justice, Dame Sian Elias.¹⁰

As noted by Senior Judge Denzil Lush, a retired Judge of the Court of Protection (COP) in England, there is a pattern in English legal history of changes to mental health and mental capacity legislation at least once in a generation to reflect trends and best practice.¹¹ This pattern is being worked out in England and Wales with proposals for reform of their Mental Capacity Act 2005 (MCA), as well as an independent review of the Mental Health Act 1983 (UK), both of which include a focus on liberty rights and safeguards for people with impaired capacity.¹² In

9 In 1215 the Magna Carta (‘Great Charter’) marked the beginning of the extensive historical process that led to the rule of constitutional law. Its 800th anniversary was celebrated in 2015.

10 Dame Sian Elias ‘The meaning and purpose of the Treaty of Waitangi’ Hui-a-Tau Conference 2015, Māori Law Review, October 2015.

11 D Lush in A Douglass *Mental Capacity: Updating New Zealand’s Law and Practice* (New Zealand Law Foundation, 2016) at iii.

12 Law Commission for England and Wales *Mental Capacity and Deprivation of Liberty* Law Com No 372 (London, 2017), although note that the subsequent Mental Capacity (Amendment) Act 2019 only took forward a limited number of recommendations relating to the ‘technical’ questions of the authorisation of deprivation of liberty: see Chapter 7. The independent review of the Mental Health Act 1983 commissioned by the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, reported in December 2018 and set out a number of ‘confidence tests’ for the potential future ‘fusion’ of mental health and mental capacity legislation: *Modernising the Mental Health Act: Increasing choice, reducing compulsion* (Final report of the Independent Review of the Mental Health Act 1983, December 2018), www.gov.uk/government/publications/modernising-the-mental-health-act-final-report-from-the-independent-review.

New Zealand, a government inquiry into mental health and addiction recently recommended that the Mental Health (Compulsory Assessment and Treatment) Act 1992 (MHA) be repealed and replaced. New legislation will be required to reflect a human rights-based approach, promote supported decision-making and align with modern recovery and wellbeing models of mental health so as to minimise compulsory or coercive treatment.¹³ Significantly, the MHA does not require an assessment of mental capacity.¹⁴ Legislative change of the MHA would necessarily involve a policy discussion of how capacity and supported decision-making principles would apply to involuntary treatment laws. Such initiatives would also place a spotlight on the need to modernise and reform New Zealand's capacity legislation, the PPPR Act.¹⁵

1.2 The aims of this book

A central aim of this book is to recognise the growing impact of human rights conventions on mental capacity law and practice. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is an international treaty that New Zealand ratified in 2008.¹⁶ The CRPD's greatest impact to date has

13 *He Ara Oranga: Report of the Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction* (Wellington, November 2018) at 189–195; New Zealand Government 'Taking mental health and addiction seriously' (press release, 29 May 2019), www.beehive.govt.nz/release/taking-mental-health-and-addiction-seriously.

14 In contrast, a finding of incapacity is part of the criteria for compulsory treatment under the new Substance Addiction (Compulsory Assessment and Treatment) Act 2017, discussed in Chapter 11.

15 *A Douglass Mental Capacity: Updating New Zealand's Law and Practice* (New Zealand Law Foundation, 2016) at 172–178.

16 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities A/RES/61/106 (opened for signature 30 March 2007, entered into force 03 May 2008). See Appendix B.

been requiring signatory states to rethink domestic laws and review best practice standards in the area of law and practice covered by this book. The aim of the CRPD is that people with disabilities, including those with impaired capacity, should enjoy rights on the same basis as everyone else. Particularly important in this context is the right of people with disabilities to make decisions about significant matters affecting their lives based on their free and informed consent.

Article 12 of the CRPD emphasises the concept of universal legal capacity. The term ‘legal capacity’ refers to a person’s possession of rights and the ability to act on those rights (to be an actor in law) on an equal basis with others without discrimination on the grounds of disability.¹⁷ Article 12 further requires states to provide the necessary supports for persons with disabilities to exercise their legal capacity, and to ensure that measures taken relating to the exercise of legal capacity respect their rights, will and preferences.

Throughout this book we examine what ‘support for the exercise of legal capacity’—more generally referred to as ‘supported decision-making’—means and how it can be realised in clinical and legal practice.

The positive obligation in the CRPD to recognise supportive relationships and participation by people with impaired capacity is consistent with our second overarching aim: to acknowledge the importance of tikanga Māori when applying capacity concepts in law and in practice. There is a need to recognise cultural diversity, and in particular the rights of Māori as tangata whenua, in all aspects of clinical practice in New Zealand. This remains true when assessing capacity; culture, language and religion are integral factors in how a

17 M Bach and L Kerzner ‘A new paradigm for protecting autonomy’ (2010) Law Commission of Ontario 196 at 16.

person makes decisions and in what decisions they make.

A third aim is to demonstrate how applying capacity law is an inherently interdisciplinary exercise that involves knowledge about the law, health care and ethics. It involves doctors, nurses, psychologists and other health professionals making a capacity assessment with lawyers and judges and applying the relevant legal test to that assessment, with assistance from social workers, healthcare providers and families, who often initiate the legal process and provide valuable information about a person's preferences. Doctors and lawyers, in particular, have common responsibilities to ensure the protection of people who lack capacity to decide specific matters for themselves, and to promote the autonomy and choices of those who may have difficulty regulating their own lives.

Our fourth and related aim is to provide practical guidance for health and legal professionals when assessing a person's capacity. Family members and informal carers of people whose capacity is impaired play an important role in supported decision-making and capacity assessment, and they too need to have some legal and health literacy to provide the necessary support or advocacy for the person concerned.

One of the consequences of New Zealand's 'no-fault' accident compensation scheme (ACC), and its statutory bar against suing health professionals for medical negligence causing personal injuries, is the absence of litigation and associated case law that might clarify capacity to consent to or refuse medical treatment. The complaints process and the Health and Disability Commissioner's opinions are limited largely to whether health providers are in breach of the HDC Code. Capacity or 'competence' is not defined, nor is there guidance on how to assess it in the Code.

There are often situations where it may not be clear-cut

whether a person has capacity to make a particular decision. In more difficult cases clinicians tend to rely on their understanding of ethics for guidance on how best to proceed. Professionals may be required to support families, who often find the conflicting imperatives of promoting a person's self-determination and looking after their wellbeing in these situations distressing. One way of providing that support is to give a pragmatic and balanced ethical explanation of the assessment process and the rationale for intervention. For this reason, the book uses case examples as a way of illustrating the ethically complex situations that may arise when a capacity assessment is undertaken, and the realities of how and when a person's capacity may become an issue in a variety of settings. This approach reinforces the principle that transparency around the assessment process itself may be as important as the outcome of the assessment. At a minimum, it aims to accord dignity and respect to the person subject to these processes and to place them at the heart of decision-making.

1.3 The scope of this book

This book is mainly concerned with mental capacity law and practice in New Zealand under the PPPR Act and the HDC Code. However, there is a wide range of legislation and corresponding case law that affects the rights and interests of people with impaired capacity. The interface between mental health legislation and mental capacity legislation is complex, and many people are subject to both. Importantly, these laws have very different aims. The MHA provides coercive powers for the detention and treatment of a person with a mental disorder, if necessary without that person's consent. It is primarily concerned with the reduction of risk, both to the

patient and to others, using compulsion where necessary. By contrast, mental capacity legislation, such as the PPPR Act, is concerned with enabling and supporting people to make their own decisions where possible. While there may sometimes be a need to use compulsion to protect people, and the law allows others to make decisions on behalf of those lacking capacity, the PPPR Act is not intended to provide coercive powers but rather to promote personal autonomy.¹⁸

The legal position for children under the age of 18 in New Zealand law is complex, and is beyond the scope of this book.¹⁹ This is especially so as the law relates to adolescents (often referred to as ‘mature minors’), who may well be able to express their choices and preferences, even though subject to parental guardianship. That said, the functional approach to assessing capacity in this book is one that can be used in a range of settings to provide an assessment of a young person’s capacity for decision-making, so long as the corresponding applicable legal test is identified.

This book is not concerned with criminal law. The law regarding criminal responsibility—insanity and fitness to stand trial—for people with impaired capacity that appear before the criminal courts is beyond the scope of this book.²⁰ There is a low threshold for capacity or fitness to stand trial under the Criminal Procedure (Mentally Impaired Persons) Act 2003: the essence of ‘unfitness’ is the defendant’s fundamental inability, because of a mental impairment, to understand and enter a plea,

18 Capacity to consent to treatment and assessment has been added recently to a new involuntary treatment law for severe substance addiction and is discussed in Chapter 11.

19 See Chapter 3 for a brief overview of the law as it applies to children and young people’s consent to treatment and health care.

20 WJ Brookbanks *Competencies of Trial: Fitness to Plead in New Zealand* (LexisNexis, Wellington, 2011); WJ Brookbanks and S Simpson (eds) *Psychiatry and the Law* (LexisNexis, Wellington, 2007).

to conduct a defence or to instruct counsel to do so.²¹ Whether the test for trial competence should rest exclusively on issues of cognition, as is the case for the common law and the current New Zealand statutory test, or whether the courts should have a wider notion of decisional incompetence, is currently being debated.²² Where people with impaired capacity are victims of crime, such as elder abuse, there has been an amendment to the Crimes Act 1961 creating a criminal offence for the neglect and abuse of vulnerable adults who may lack capacity.²³

‘Disability’, as understood in human rights law under the CRPD and the Human Rights Act 1993, is defined very broadly. It may come as a surprise to older adults with dementia, for example, that the CRPD applies to them and not just to younger adults with learning disabilities. People with impaired capacity for decision-making are often generically referred to as having a ‘disability’. The distinction between a physical disability and a mental disability is not always clear, especially where physical incapacity, such as a stroke, may prevent a person from communicating. The inability to communicate is one of the elements in the functional tests in the PPPR Act that will result in an assessment that the person lacks capacity. Similarly, Huntington’s disease, a progressive brain disorder,

21 Criminal Procedure (Mentally Impaired Persons) Act 2003, s 4.

22 *The Solicitor General v Dougherty* [2012] 3 NZLR 586, per Simon France J at [10]: ‘Decisional competence is intended to embrace the idea that not only must an accused person be able to communicate and instruct counsel, but in so doing, he or she must also be able to rationally assess what defence would be in his or her best interests, and be able to choose that defence.’ See WJ Brookbanks and RD MacKay ‘Decisional competence and “best interests”: establishing the threshold for fitness to stand trial’ (2010) 12 *Otago LR* 265; R MacKay and WJ Brookbanks (eds) *Fitness to Plead: International and Comparative Perspectives* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018).

23 Crimes Amendment Act (No 3) 2011, ss 151, 195 and 195A create criminal liability for failure to provide the necessities of life, or protect from ill treatment or injury, a child or a vulnerable adult.

may initially begin with physical symptoms but later result in deteriorating cognitive impairment.

1.4 Normative versus descriptive approaches to the law

We are working with the current law in 2019. Any errors or omissions in interpretation of the current law are the authors' own. Throughout the book we will explain how and why the law is underdeveloped in this area. We have given our interpretation of the law and standards for clinical and legal practice—from a legal, clinical and ethical perspective—and in some instances, how we think it ought to be interpreted in the face of little or no guidance from existing legislation and case law. We have also invited commentary and diverse opinions from experts on specific topics.

The legal landscape of mental capacity law in New Zealand is complex. There are very few reported cases where capacity has been contested under the PPPR Act, which is the most relevant legislation. An analysis of reported and selected unreported cases since the Act commenced suggests that extended judicial analysis of whether a person lacks capacity for the purposes of establishing jurisdiction (and intervention by the Court) has been rare and lacking in a comprehensive database.²⁴ As a result, there are few New Zealand cases with judicial reasoning about specific concepts that we deal with in this book, such as the various legal tests for capacity that apply under the PPPR Act.

As with the English law, some legal tests for capacity are not specified in New Zealand legislation and may only be found in the common law. For example, the test for capacity to make a will in *Banks v Goodfellow*,²⁵ which is applied in many countries

24 A Douglass 'Appendix A: Review of selected cases under the PPPR Act' in *Mental Capacity: Updating New Zealand's Law and Practice* (New Zealand Law Foundation, 2016) at 194.

25 *Banks v Goodfellow* (1870) LR 5 QB 549. English law also relies on the

world-wide, is based on the common law and has been applied and adopted by the New Zealand Court of Appeal.²⁶ The HDC Code does not specify the legal test for capacity to consent to or refuse health care, and this test also relies upon English common law.²⁷ In other instances, there simply haven't been published cases in New Zealand where a legal test has been discussed fully or at all.

To fill this gap we have turned to the common law—case law—which may in turn refer to English cases, as there is no equivalent in New Zealand legislation. We have also drawn on the abundance of case law in England and Wales under the MCA, which, in a number of respects, is similar to the PPPR Act. In the 1990s, the PPPR Act received express approval from the Law Commission for England and Wales in the long build up to the MCA, which eventually came into force on 1 October 2007. Both pieces of legislation are based on the prior common law and broadly reflect the same concepts, legal tests and functional approach to assessing capacity.²⁸ However, in New Zealand there is little medical law jurisprudence in this area. As noted by Professor Peter Skegg, in *Health Law in New Zealand*:²⁹

In future, the contribution of English courts to the development of this area of the law will probably be by

common law test in this case. See R Jacoby and P Steer 'How to assess capacity to make a will' (2007) 335(7611) BMJ 155.

26 *Woodward v Smith* [2009] NZCA 215 at [19].

27 See Chapter 6.

28 A Douglass *Mental Capacity: Updating New Zealand's Law and Practice* (New Zealand Law Foundation, 2016) provides a comparative analysis of some aspects of the PPPR Act and the MCA. The core legal test for capacity used in the *Toolkit for Assessing Capacity* (see Appendix A) broadly reflects the same codified common law test used in the English and New Zealand legislation.

29 PDG Skegg and R Paterson (eds) *Health Law in New Zealand* (Thomson Reuters, Wellington, 2015) at 216, fn 12.

way of interpretation of the Mental Capacity Act 2005 (UK). The [New Zealand] Court of Appeal, much less the Supreme Court, has not dealt with these issues in a medical context. Cases involving the Protection of Personal and Property Rights Act 1988 are of limited assistance in assessing legal capacity to consent (or refuse consent) generally, as that Act provides its own (in part, atypical) definitions for its own purposes.

The reform of the MCA towards compliance with international human rights conventions (some of which New Zealand shares with the UK, such as the CRPD) is current and ongoing. The English law, as it has developed under the MCA, provides a vast pool of information and experience for New Zealand to draw upon when interpreting and progressing our own law and related practice. Within the broad spectrum of capacity cases, the New Zealand Courts have expressly drawn on the MCA and associated case law, for example:

- the High Court adopted the MCA legal test for capacity being applied by medical experts in a case that involved assessing a prisoner's capacity to refuse treatment while on a hunger strike;³⁰
- the Employment Court accepted the expert evidence of a psychiatrist in finding that an employee lacked capacity to enter into a settlement agreement with her employer;³¹
- the Family Court applied the MCA legal test (as used in the *Toolkit for Assessing Capacity*), referred to as

30 *Chief Executive of the Department of Corrections v Canterbury District Health Board and All Means All* [2014] NZHC 1433 at [17].

31 *TUV v Chief of New Zealand Defence Force* [2018] NZEmpC 154. The finding of incapacity was not sufficient to set aside the settlement agreement based on the common law test in *O'Connor v Hart (PC)* [1985] 1 NZLR 159 and this decision is subject to an appeal to the Court of Appeal. See Chapter 8.

the ‘Toolkit test’, in respect of a woman’s capacity to consent to marry;³²

- the Family Court used the MCA checklist for assessing the best interests of a person under the PPPR Act;³³ and
- the New Zealand Court of Appeal applied the MCA and case law to the Court rules for the appointment of a litigation guardian.³⁴

More recently, the Victorian Supreme Court in Australia undertook a thorough analysis of the English case law under the MCA as it applies to Australian law when considering the capacity of two people with mental illness to refuse compulsory electroconvulsive treatment.³⁵ The MCA will also inform interpretation of New Zealand’s Substance Addiction (Compulsory Assessment and Treatment) Act 2017.

1.5 *The structure of this book* [Omitted]

1.6 *Conclusion*

This book aims to make both clinical and legal knowledge in this field of practice more accessible to the wide range of people who use it by setting out the legal, clinical and ethical concepts and explaining how these concepts can be applied in practice. It is not a complete guide to all aspects of the law under the PPPR Act. We are aware of the intense frustration of practitioners in

32 *OD v NW by her litigation guardian AP* [2018] NZFC 386, Judge Coyle. See Chapter 9.

33 *CA v EA* [2017] NZFC 7045 Judge Walsh at [129]–[134] and [138].

34 *Corbett v Patterson* [2014] NZCA 274; [2014] 3 NZLR 41 Randerson J upholding the High Court decision: [2011] 3 NZLR 41 Priestley J.

35 *PBU & NJE v Mental Health Tribunal* [2018] VSC 564, Judge Bell. See Chapter 11.

all disciplines working with the current law and the challenges of applying it in practice. There are practical problems with court procedure and delays in the Family Court. The increase of self-representation in courts generally, as previously identified by our new Chief Justice Helen Winkelmann,³⁶ compounds the current limitations of the legislation designed to protect the interests of vulnerable adults, who are often caught up in complex family relationships and are ill-equipped to initiate or progress resolution in court proceedings.³⁷

The law is out of date and in need of review. There has never been a public body or agency that champions this area of the law, or a Code of Practice to assist all involved with how the law could or should be applied. Our hope is that this book will encourage further discussion and debate, and contribute to shaping the emerging field of mental capacity law and practice in New Zealand. We described the *Toolkit* as a first step towards a Code of Practice for New Zealand; we hope this book will be the second step.

36 Justice Winkelmann 'Access to Justice—Who Needs Lawyers?' New Zealand Law Foundation Ethel Benjamin Commemorative Address (2014) 13 Otago Law Review 229.

37 B Mirfin-Veitch, S Gates and K Diesfield *Developing a more responsive legal system for people with intellectual disability in New Zealand* (Donald Beasley Institute, Dunedin, 2014).

Madison Hamill

Speculative Fiction

from *Specimen*

March 2020

There was a bird in Cape Town that sang often. In the evenings as I lay in bed I could hear it, and in the mornings, just outside the window of the office where I worked as an intern. ‘Hooo hooo ha ha hooo,’ it said.

‘What’s that bird?’ I asked Alexine, the intern I was interning for.

‘What bird?’

‘You’ll hear it again. Wait.’ Sure enough, it came again, an identical sequence like Morse code. ‘Hooo hooo ha ha hooo.’

‘That one.’

‘Oh, I don’t know, I’ve never noticed it.’

I didn’t understand how she could not have noticed it. But then, perhaps it’s a cultural thing, what you pay attention to. Alexine was from Belgium, which was pretty much wall-to-wall cities. One time I asked her how Belgium was formed, and she wasn’t sure. ‘Is it normal to know that sort of thing?’ she asked. And yet she was much smarter than me and almost had her master’s in clinical psychology.

That afternoon when I went home to the flat I was living in, I asked our cleaner, who was South African, what the bird was. I tried reproducing its sound for her. She thought I was very funny.

‘Eh, I never hear a bird,’ she said, chuckling. ‘You tell those girls to do their dishes.’

The bird haunted me all day and night for the two months I was in South Africa, and I could never see it no matter how

carefully I searched the trees outside the windows.

When I was a child, I looked for signs of magic everywhere—hidden doors, strange beetles, circular arrangements of fungi. I'd pick up bits of paper off the side of the road in case they held secret messages. When we were tramping I'd stay behind for a moment on a quiet patch of the track and stand very still, waiting for whatever lived there to stop hiding and return to its usual affairs. I'd say, 'Hello, I know you're watching me' when nobody was around, to catch off-guard any invisible creatures that might be following me.

In South Africa, magic was everywhere. The first night I arrived, a homeless man lifted a metal hatch in the footpath and showed me his secret stash of biblical pamphlets. He said there was a network of homeless people who kept things in the footpaths. Driving along the highway I glimpsed a group of cloaked men approaching each other at sunset in an empty field and took them for wizards preparing for a duel. And once, everybody on my train leaped from their seats in fear simultaneously, and none of us were able to name the source of our panic.

The moment my plane landed in South Africa, my nose began to bleed. Blood gushed into my hands as I waited for the seatbelt sign to turn off. As I walked across the runway, the blood dried on my face and hands. Driving from the airport to the flat I would share with other foreign interns, I saw a township for the first time. It was a dense area of corrugated sheds pressed against the roadside with a spider's web of wires overhead. Andrew, the cheerful local man in charge of my internship placement, was driving me and he said a township was like what in other countries was called a slum. These townships had been created to segregate people during

apartheid, but they remained because their residents still had no way out of poverty. I had never considered the idea that economic apartheid did not stop when legal apartheid did.

As soon as I arrived in my new neighbourhood, I went to the grocery store and discovered that my money could buy ten times as much as it could in New Zealand. Effectively, I was now rich. I did not know how to handle either the giddy freedom of being able to do or buy anything I wanted or the power it brought me. I became a target.

It began the moment I stepped out of my new flat to walk to the store and didn't stop till the day I flew home. Beggars followed me down the street, pleading. There was a woman with a tumour the size of an eggplant on her throat. She said she didn't want to die of starvation before she died of cancer, and, knowing the beliefs that tourists were likely to hold about beggars, offered to buy the food with my money as I watched, to prove that was what she was using it for. There was a woman who ran up to me crying on the street where I lived. She was crying so hard she found it difficult to speak, and I had trouble making sense of her words. She sat down in the gutter, put her baby on the sidewalk and started changing his nappy as she tried to explain that her husband had brought her here from Zimbabwe and then abandoned her with two small children and no way to pay her rent. I sat beside her and tried to listen, but I didn't know what to say. I went into my house and came back with enough money for her week's rent and the phone number for a helpline I had found by googling. But as I walked away I knew I had failed her. She didn't thank me, and I didn't want her to. I was supposed to be a psychology intern. I'd studied psychology for three years but was incapable of saying anything useful when it mattered. When I returned to my flat, upset, I told my flatmates what had happened.

‘You shouldn’t have given her anything,’ they said. ‘If you keep helping them, they’ll keep coming back here. You don’t owe them anything. You can’t help everyone.’ This was common advice passed around by tourists here, and even though I couldn’t agree with the philosophy, over time the sheer number of these encounters began to defeat me. The more that beggars followed me down the street the easier it became to ignore them, to stop thinking about them. It became easier to focus on other things. After all, there were many other voices on the streets too—taxi drivers and people selling fruit or crafts, or just shouting for reasons I couldn’t determine, as if it were Armistice Day and they were the first to know. The city had an overwhelming feeling of freedom and possibility, a sort of magic that I’d sensed from the first day, and I couldn’t detect its source. Maybe it was to do with scale. I had never been in a city this large. We had rooftop pool parties and climbed mountains where we could see the whole city all the way to the sea. We walked through markets where the crowds were overwhelming. Once, we went to a Secret Sunset, an event sponsored by a brand of coconut water, where we roared like lions in the sunset and danced with our eyes closed, each of us with headphones on so that to anyone passing by we looked like strangers screaming, but everyone who could hear the music and the instructor was transformed into something bigger. I wanted to write all of it down and keep it, everything I saw in Cape Town; they were all what were called ‘experiences’ and therefore they felt valuable in some way. Horror and wonder, when experienced from a position of safety, become difficult to differentiate.

My internship was a dead end, but I always felt that the next day would be the day something happened. Two weeks in, I’d been reassigned to a different workplace—the South

African National Council for Alcohol and Drug Rehabilitation (SANCA). My new supervisor, the clinical psychologist I'd been hoping to shadow, resigned soon after I started working there, which was why I was left interning for her intern, Alexine. Alexine was further on in her education than me, so she was qualified to meet with clients. I was not, but with the clients' consent I was allowed to sit in on some of her meetings. Alexine herself did not have much work to begin with, because her clients often failed to show up for their appointments. Most of her clients were addicts, and when they did attend it was often grudgingly, for example because their school principal had sent them to SANCA under threat of expulsion. This did not make for a high attendance rate.

We planned our trips to the shops across the road. We discussed Alexine's diet, which consisted of meal replacement shakes and lemon water. She was a stronger person than I would ever be, because on top of this inhuman diet she had a second internship in the evenings and weekends. Yet she was still fun to be around. There are certain people who have a way about them that invites unfiltered self-expression simply because they don't shut it down. Perhaps it's the therapist's knack. We compared Belgium and New Zealand. I explained about Belgian biscuits. She'd never heard of them. Once, after two no-show appointments, I suggested that I should just pretend to be a client, and she could pretend to rehabilitate me. Then I performed my own style of modern dance for her. She would have to think of a noun, and I would attempt to embody the spirit of that noun.

'Table,' she said obligingly, and I started making heavy wooden movements, my back parallel to the floor, my arms and legs lumbering, shaking, stepping back and forth in a dopey Irish jig fashion.

‘Bubble,’ she said and I leapt out of table stance and pirouetted with my arms in fifth position.

We visited the dog who was perpetually chained up by the gate. He was old and smelly, but he nuzzled my lap as I scratched behind his ear, in that hungry way of old dogs who lack attention. One day the dog wasn’t there, and we asked the guard where he had gone. The guard said he’d gone to live ‘on the other side’, only he pointed over the fence as he was saying it. I began to wonder if there was a house on the other side of the fence with a big yard where the dog was living out his last years.

I decided to write a novel. I’d never written anything longer than a short story before. I knew about the sunk cost fallacy, but I wanted the money I had already spent getting to South Africa to feel like it had achieved something. My novel would be about South Africa, in particular about a woman who worked at a drug rehabilitation centre in Cape Town.

I began by writing the world around me, so, by necessity, I began with conjecture. I imagined what had happened to the dog. I wondered whether the bird I heard was an omen. I tried to imagine the children who used to live in the children’s home before it was converted into this office space. I wondered about the cleaner, whose name was Princess. She was a tall woman with three long scars on her cheek that looked like the gouge marks of Wolverine’s claws. Princess’s job was to clean this small group of offices, and she seemed to be employed almost full-time. With some difficulty in communication, I had helped her create a Facebook account. When I returned her greeting with ‘Ndiphilile, enkosi, unjani?’ (‘I’m fine thanks, how are you?’), she was so thrilled that I was taken aback. ‘These other girls not even try to learn,’ she said. Princess had a sense of pride in her work. She moved at a leisurely pace from room to

room. She always had a duster or a vacuum cleaner in hand, leaving the spaces just dusty enough to provide work for herself in the future. Once a day, she would kick the social workers and therapists out of their offices one by one, when they had no clients, so she could clean their offices.

I wondered about the clients. Even though, in a way, it was my job to wonder about them, mostly there was so little information to latch on to that I couldn't hope to adequately imagine their lives. Like any budding psychologist I wanted a puzzle with all of the pieces already present. Sitting in on other people's therapy sessions is like participating in a low-budget crime show that you know will be cancelled before the end of its first season, except the client is both the culprit and the victim, and rather than pitting criminal masterminds against brilliant detectives, both client and therapist feel inadequate in their roles. Alexine's clients didn't give much away, answering 'Yes' or 'No', participating just enough to be considered participating. A typical case might be a boy of fourteen who'd been caught smoking weed. Even though it's not chemically addictive, we were required to treat dagga (weed) with the same intervention techniques as if it were alcohol or Mandrax or tic (meth). This boy might have been smoking dagga since he was eleven, and heavily since thirteen. He didn't get upset or express any strong emotion. He didn't mind being there, answering 'Yes' or 'No', writing the little exercises that Alexine gave him, but he didn't want to quit smoking. He smoked because he was bored, he said, and he didn't like his friends. He had dropped out of his sports team and said it was because his shoes broke, but Alexine suspected that smoking had affected his breathing. We'd never find out, as he didn't return after his third session.

At first, I thought my main character should be a white tourist,

a foreigner. It was the only real perspective available to me. I didn't know how to think like a South African. It would be a convenient way to work with all the South African material I had been gathering. This character could visit South Africa, get caught up in a plot that would entangle them somehow in a strange new community, a web of magic and threat. Mysteries would unravel with answers revealing themselves at the end. Then, I supposed the only thing to do to my protagonist short of having them get lost in South Africa and never find their way home would be to have them learn something and then go home a different person. I had hopes that by the time I was flying home to New Zealand I would know what the protagonist had learned. It would be like planning an Easter egg hunt in a stranger's garden, discovering each secret of the landscape just in time for your egg-hunter to discover it after you.

My sandals were breaking apart. I had worn the same shitty pair for a month and a half, and I had taken to not wearing them at all. I was growing hard callouses on my feet. They could withstand the temperatures of almost melting tarseal. I had read that you absorb nutrients from the soil by walking barefoot, and I was convinced that eventually my feet would become as durable and as sensitive to information retrieved through the soil as the paws of great cats. When Alexine and I decided to walk to the mall on our lunch break, I left my sandals in my bag and pranced off down the gravel driveway to the road.

'You're crazy,' said Alexine.

'Yes,' I said, 'but I'm free.'

South African tarseal is not the most nutritious of substances, even if my theory were true, but there was a certain toxicological appeal to feeling every hardened smear and

strange shiny residue press against my toes.

When we returned, Princess and the receptionist, Nombequ, saw me in my bare feet. They started laughing.

‘I think this is a white people thing,’ said Nombequ. ‘Black people always wear shoes.’

‘Why is that?’ I asked.

She took a minute to answer. ‘A white girl walking without shoes is one thing, people will just think you are crazy. If a black girl were to walk around without shoes like that though, those same people will assume she is too poor for shoes.’

I decided to take myself out of my novel. Maybe scrubbing off any sign of my own perspective would allow South Africa to take my place as a character and speak for itself. I knew that my perspective wasn’t enough to see what was really going on, but maybe the problem would be solvable, if only I could zoom out enough from where I was standing.

One day I noticed a boy in the waiting room. He was five or six years old, and he was eating a bag of orange cheesy chips that looked like Cheezels. There was a smattering of fine orange powder on the carpet around him. His mother sat behind him, picking her nail polish off chip by chip, waiting. I stored up Cheezel Boy in my head, and for some reason, he stuck. In my novel, Cheezel Boy’s mum, Mbali, is addicted to Mandrax and comes to the clinic regularly for drug rehabilitation counselling. I invented a counsellor named Camille, who is very stressed because her sister, a recovering addict, has asked her for money and won’t explain why. Camille is increasingly unable to relate to her clients. Sometimes, when she looks at them, she can only see her sister. She feels a secret, uncontrollable rage towards her clients; she can’t help thinking they are simply weak, despite what she knows about the processes of addiction.

Mbali says she doesn't want to stay in the new state house that Camille has spent weeks fighting for her to be given. It is safely distant from the drug ring that Mbali has been involved in, and her best chance to stay sober.

'I don't like it there,' she tells Camille. 'It's too quiet.'

At this moment, Camille, who is sleep-deprived, has an almost hallucinatory moment, believing she is speaking to her sister, and she says something very unprofessional. Mbali is upset and leaves with her son.

The next day, Cheezel Boy wakes up and his mother is missing. Feeling guilty, Camille spends the weekend trying to help the boy track down Mbali.

The problem began when the world of the story had to expand beyond these precipitating events. I could imagine what might occur in some version of the counselling clinic where I worked. But my characters all came from the townships. I had only been in a township once, during my previous internship posting in a guarded hospital facility. I had left the compound only once, and only for a few minutes when I had forgotten my lunch. Most of what I knew about the townships was gleaned from driving past Khayelitsha on the highway.

I didn't know what the inside of a shack looked like, how people who lived there talked to one another, how people found their way around without roads or how people showered. I didn't know how people travelled to their jobs, what happened when you went to see a sangoma or traditional healer, how religions were actually practised, what schools looked like or what slang sounded like. I knew from driving past that in many cases toileting facilities were a line of communal portaloos along the fence, but that most of the shacks were set up with satellite TV. I knew that small herds of goats were guarded by children on the strips of grass beside the motorways. I knew

that a sangoma could cure impotence and I knew the phone number for a hairdryer repairman. Beyond these facts, the world my characters stumbled through was a hazy void into which pieces of New Zealand took up residence. When I wrote Camille's childhood, I saw her hiding on the roof of the bike shed at my first primary school and sneaking through the gap in the hedge that I remembered bordering my own school. In my childhood, on the other side of the hedge were the grounds of the Anzac Memorial garden and the church where my dad had preached. In my novel, the other side of the hedge was a piece of rubbish-strewn wilderness, like something I had seen on the side of a motorway. I was constructing my fictional South Africa from the corners of highways sewn together with my own memories. Camille, as a teenager, had a friend who invited her to his house and showed her his father's gun, and, in a box under the couch cushions, something secret and very old that had been inherited. I didn't know what this would be when I began writing the scene, but when Camille reached in her hand to feel what was in the box, she felt feathers. She lifted out something stiff and feathery, and in my head it was a cloak, a green and brown feathery cloak, like that which might belong to a powerful Māori chief.

I decided to set the book in the future instead, in a fictional future Cape Town. I was retreating into the future, where the facts were sure to loosen their grip.

Cape Town is an island. Table Mountain takes centre stage in the island, and the water is encroaching, each new tide washing out more of the townships. The rich have taken ownership of the mountain and built houses on it to protect themselves from the floods, which shrink the island slowly, creating new waves of homelessness and overcrowding. When

Camille is a child, she lives in an outer township area. Her father tells her the myth of Table Mountain—that it is a giant who was sent to guard the southern corner of the world. The giant died and turned to rock, and now is watching over them all, making sure the sea monsters stay away.

I returned home to New Zealand. The plane trip took two days, including twelve hours in the Dubai airport in the early hours of the morning in which I became so muddled in my decision-making that I paid sixty dollars for a thirty-minute massage from a mechanical chair. By the time I was back in the Dunedin airport I barely remembered who I was. I had been in an airport for my entire life. It was raining in Dunedin and I couldn't handle the change of temperature. The whole world was shrinking and becoming stiff with frost, and I was stranded, two days and thousands of dollars away from anywhere worth being.

A few days later I heard that Andrew, the man who had organised my internship, a friendly bear-hugging South African guy I had hiked with in the Cederberg Mountains, had been hit by a car while walking along the sidewalk, and died. I began to realise that my experience in Cape Town, which had been soaked in a sense of opportunity and magic, the feeling that anything could happen, was an experience I had bought. It wouldn't have existed without the company that had organised activities for me and the people I had lived and explored with who had come from their own countries with the same ache for adventure. It dawned on me that magic is just anything that doesn't have a logical cause or explanation. Cape Town is magic to foreigners because we can't see the explanations. This isn't really magic; it's a sort of blindness.

I felt it all evaporate. I was unemployed. I didn't have anything to show from my internship and I had nothing in

my future apart from what I could create with my own mind. I threw all my energy into the novel.

In the story of Camille's childhood, her dad loses his job, becomes depressed and stops speaking. The sea advances further and the township where Camille lives is forced to evacuate, but her mother refuses to move. Instead they build a second storey on their container house and live up there, as if on a houseboat, climbing down and wading through the floodwaters in gumboots every morning to go to school. Now, the island nation was run by gangs with complicated methods of extorting people to turn against their friends and families, and chains of assassins who report to other assassins, with no one knowing who they were taking orders from. The world I was creating became grimmer with every page. It wasn't the world of possibility in the face of hardship that I had encountered in South Africa, but something more cynical.

Sitting in the university library without access to the internet, since I was no longer a student there, I pushed my characters onwards in their journey through their dystopian city. Camille, having developed a sharp pain in her gut from something she later discovers is a tumour, and having not slept in a week, falls off a train, leaving Cheezel Boy to fend for himself. Camille's sister is found to be a member of the gang who kidnapped Mbali. Drones whizz overhead.

I tried to plan the methods of a notorious gang of assass-ins. Waking up in the middle of the night, I had an epiphany. These gang members would work by using drones to find information on others, which they'd use to threaten them. They would send an anonymous email telling the recipient that they had to recruit new members by using their own surveillance on their friends and neighbours. It was a pyramid scheme of gang membership that had infiltrated every community on

the island. No one could trust anyone. Meanwhile, Camille's coworker would discover that Camille hadn't handed over the boy to the government for placement in the foster system and was about to inform the gang. My protagonists were in a dire situation and I didn't know how to save them.

I had interview after interview for customer service jobs I was unqualified for. I began avoiding human contact. There were days where I didn't leave my flat and only left my bedroom in the dead of night to sneak downstairs to the fridge. As a last resort I would put on a coat with a hood and walk to McDonald's or to the 24-hour dairy, careful not to look at anyone, believing that they believed me to be everything I suspected myself of being. I dreaded standing there alone at McDonald's at 2am, when only groups of drunk students were about, and all the time I imagined they pitied or were disgusted by me. As soon as I got my food I would walk fast back along the road, head down, hiding the food under my arm and taking it quietly into my flat and upstairs to my room, where I would eat it secretly in my bed, which I had built on stilts as a mezzanine floor above the sea of mess below. My room was about the size of a walk-in wardrobe.

When I was fourteen I waggged school with my friend, an exchange student named Sara who lived with my family. We went back home and snuck in while my dad worked at the computer in our hallway, oblivious. We snuck past into our room, and I set myself up in my wardrobe with Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, a Marmite jar of water, an axe in case of an emergency, a torch and a pillow. This wardrobe was a creaky plywood cupboard with four wooden feet and a bolt on the door and just enough room to sit down in. The door could only close when it was bolted and the bolt could only be

shut from the outside. Sara locked me in, went back to school for the next four or five hours, then came home and unlocked me at the end of the school day. The idea was that I would be completely hidden if my dad should for whatever reason want to look in my room. So, for the rest of the day, I read Harry Potter and was perfectly happy. Magic is the experience of being in suspense, in suspense of disbelief, in suspense of knowledge or explanation. You might really be in a cupboard, but inside that suspense anything could happen. A letter could be addressed to your very cupboard and delivered by a mysterious bird, summoning you to a world where love might conquer death.

Disappearing from real life to read about people watching their friends being murdered by cloaked wizard-Nazis is called escapism. Cloaked teleporting murderers are easier to deal with than real life, in the same way that travelling to a foreign country is easier than figuring out what to do next in one's home country. There is an incredible sense of safety in someone else's country. It's as if nothing can really get you when you have a home to go back to. But my novel wasn't someone else's country. It was no longer an escape for me.

I continued to throw conflict upon conflict at my protagonist. Maybe one day, if I wrote enough chapters, my protagonist would start making her own decisions, or the magic of Cape Town would kick in with a solution. I had heard of it happening—characters coming to life like imaginary friends for their authors. But Camille was too tired to help me out. She was wandering robotically through the streets of a futuristic island of fear and isolation with a pain in her chest and an exhaustion that made her barely capable of basic functions. She wasn't a person. She was a set of characteristics, life events and places. Was the problem that I had made her too different from myself? But the problem was larger than that. I had tried

to return to the magic I'd felt in Cape Town by creating a system of explanations. In doing so I had destroyed the magic and replaced it, not with knowledge, which I did not have, but with myself. I wasn't Camille. I was the island which wasn't Cape Town. I was the dead giant of Table Mountain, looking out at the sea of monsters, watching it encroach. Trapped in my dwindling ecosystem, my characters didn't have a chance.

Mikaela Nyman

from *Sado*

March 2020

The morning after, when the silence threatens to become oppressive, Cathryn drags her body across the hallway and begins to crank up the cyclone shutter. Outside there's still a whole world waiting, bruised and muted. Crinkled iron sheets and criss-crossing wooden beams block her line of sight. She puts her weight against the sliding door in an attempt to pry it open but it won't budge until she leans into it with hip and shoulder. Unexpectedly the door gives and she's spat out. A sharp stab in her hip whips tears into her eyes.

With robotic movements she navigates the obstacle course that is her patio, her breakfast spot in a previous life. Her mind is scrambled with white noise. Sleep is what she craves: to sleep and forget. It's as though she's been submerged in a water tank, passed out from exhaustion, until the moment her brain decided to switch on and reconnect with her body. An imperfect connection to say the least. Placing both hands on her temples she rakes her fingers through her hair, accidentally yanking a few flaxen strands as she scans the braille of lumps and bites on her scalp. No sores, no mysterious swellings. She rolls the silky strands between her fingertips, noting how wrinkled they are—as if she's spent the past hours in a bath—and drops a neat hairball on the ground before turning around and slipping back inside.

Tarn is snoring in the hallway to the bathroom, their safe haven for the night. The urge to confirm that her son is all right wins over the thought of leaving him to enjoy his dream hunt.

'Hey, wake up.' She tugs at the tangle of sheets, struggling to

free him from the damp cocoon of bedding as he curls up and turns over. ‘Come on, Tarn, get up!’

Together they wobble out through the sliding door into what Pam has left behind, gasping for fresh air, their bodies and brains as bruised as their surroundings. The rain is but a whisper: silvery strands patting the battered earth. Cathryn blinks away the raindrops, relishing the tickling sensation of them sliding behind her ears and down her neck, the cool air in her lungs. They’re both here, no bones broken. If only Pedro were here with them too.

Pedro. Five letters with as many hooks and possibilities that all lead to nowhere for the moment. She checks her phone and finds the last email update from the Auckland office before all communications lapsed. Resisting the urge to hurl the phone over the cliff, she lets the words and figures race towards her. It can’t be right. Even if it’s the United Nations, the claim that 44 people died last night on the island of Pentecost must be a mistake. She’s tried Pedro’s number several times, but the line to Pentecost went dead shortly after nightfall.

She must have made a noise because Tarn is suddenly watching her with a mix of curiosity and concern. She shakes her head and studies the chipped nail polish on her toes. Party blue. Only last weekend, too.

Turning over the facts in daylight doesn’t render them any more believable, yet she can’t imagine the UN would report it unless it was true. It’s like a sandfly bite—the more you scratch the more it itches. Before the fear has managed to slice through her skin, she changes tack, reassuring herself that Pedro knows what to do. He’s weathered storms before. But that’s hope and wishful thinking, not fact, she corrects herself, reeling at the thought of what he might have faced over the past twelve hours. If only . . . If weren’t for their latest row over money he might

have stayed in Port Vila.

'If-only is What-if's prettier sister,' her mother used to scold her when she was a child. 'She's the mean one, who laughs at your poor decisions and foolish desires. Don't entertain her.' Yet here she is, asking If-only to take back what shouldn't have been uttered in the first place.

The sky is hanging dense and low over the islands, the clouds whipped into molecules and atoms that do nothing but hold on to other molecules and atoms before they can start shaping themselves into proper clouds again. She sends a silent prayer into cyberspace, into the cosmos, to a god she doesn't know if she believes in anymore. Please let Pedro come back to us, she pleads, please keep him safe. As if God, if she or he exists, wouldn't see through this tissue-thin excuse for a prayer.

Carefully, Cathryn and Tarn shuffle towards the edge of the cliff where the fence used to be, but there's no trace of either poles or mesh—only a colourful salad of croton leaves at the bottom of the scarp, along with a few cubic metres of dirt and coral rubble. Every tree within sight has been stripped of its leaves. The rolling hills on the other side of the lagoon are shorn from shore to horizon, revealing roads and houses, wrecked concrete walls and rusty vehicle carcasses previously hidden under a dense canopy. The village below splayed out and dissected in the unflinching light. A giant house of cards, collapsed. Scattered pillows, clothes, pots and utensils, toys and schoolbooks the only evidence of human life. A village devoid of its usual soundtrack: no roosters crowing, no dogs barking, no children laughing.

There's a sharp puff in her ear as Tarn lets go of his breath. She glances at him sideways. He's so pale, his body pitched forward as if he wants to make sure his eyes are capturing the shapes and broken lines. Are there tears in his eyes?

‘Where’s everyone gone?’ The shaky vowels give him away, all the teenage cockiness drained out of him. Gently she places an arm around her son’s shoulders and gives him a squeeze before trusting her vocal cords not to betray her.

‘Somewhere safe, I hope.’

Neither of them is willing to voice their dread. Whatever the worst is, in this moment it’s in their power to name it. It’s like the way the UN’s words and figures, stamped with officialdom, become the truth, she thinks, wondering what version of truth is served for breakfast in New Zealand. Somehow she needs to find a way to let her mum know they’re fine.

Below them the road to Pango is lined with bent and uprooted power poles pointing in all directions, a tangle of power lines lassoed around organic and human-made debris, sealing off the road.

‘It’s so quiet. No cars, no quad bikes, no boats . . . and look, you can see through Erakor island,’ Tarn says.

He’s right. The trees anchored on the belly of yellow sand that only yesterday was an attractive wedding venue now look like stick figures ready to leg it across the water. Even the iridescent eye of the lagoon is muddied.

‘Maybe people are waiting until it’s safe to come out.’

‘Well, is it?’

‘What? Safe?’ She wonders if he appreciates what a burden he places on her by asking for this reassurance. When he was little she wouldn’t have hesitated to comfort him, whatever the price. Now she knows that kind of reassurance is not hers to give. But he’s only fifteen; it’s not fair to refuse. Taking a deep breath, she says, ‘Yes, I’d say it probably is. It’s over now, Pam is gone.’

Tarn twitches and doesn’t seem convinced. Just as she’s about to ask him what the matter is he beats her to it. ‘Do you

think Reimon is all right? We should've asked her to come and stay with us.'

'I did ask her, but she wanted to stay in the village with her family. She said they were too many, that they'd be fine.' Even as she's speaking she realises it doesn't explain why Reimon left a bag with them for safekeeping. Maybe she should have insisted on taking them all in. But would they have been any safer here? 'They're not by the lagoon, they should've been more sheltered.' Despite the logic she can hear how lame it sounds.

'Bananas are down, too.'

It's too much, she thinks, stumbling over her unformed thoughts as she takes in the garden: the slain banana stalks, the savagely lopped lychee, the bulbs of unripe avocados on broken branches, thick as a man's thigh, among the uprooted frangipani trees. If this is our garden, if this is what's left of the village—what does the rest of the country look like?

She wishes she could speak to Faia or James. With their web of local connections they're bound to know more.

'Right, we'll need to save the bananas,' she says with more confidence than she possesses for the sake of having some concrete action to hold on to. 'I'd say it will be some time before the market is back to normal.'

From where they stand, the neighbour's house appears to be on its knees, the roof and upper part of the boundary wall partly caved in.

'Is she all right?' Tarn looks at Cathryn as if she could conjure up a ladder or a functioning phone line.

'How would I know?' she snaps back, and instantly regrets her tone as her son's face takes on the guarded look that she knows only too well. That's the problem with reassurance: they keep coming back for more. 'Why don't you yell out to her? You know she doesn't want to have anything to do with us,

or anyone else, for that matter. At least she ignores everyone equally, I suppose.'

'She's not that bad, just ancient.'

'You go, then. I haven't seen her since we had that fight over the rubbish she kept throwing over our fence. She seems to think she's still running a business empire. I'm sure her sons will check on her as soon as they can get through.'

It's when Tarn turns his back on the crumbling boundary wall that he comes to face their house. His head tilts back as he focuses on something above her head.

'Mum . . .'

Cathryn already knows: the look in his eyes says it all. Up until that moment they have combed through their surroundings, circling their own house, consciously or unconsciously postponing the inevitable. She folds her arms across her chest and turns, bracing for the truth.

If the neighbour's house is a plane with two broken wings, their house is flying on one wing. Half the lounge roof is ripped off, and the remainder of the roof questionable at best. Twisted iron beams and timber frames protrude like broken bones from the body of the house and garden, a curious array of metal shards firmly embedded in a couple of cyclone shutters.

This time it's Tarn who takes her by the shoulders and leads her towards the house. Gingerly they tread their way through the debris on jandalled feet.

'I guess we should have opted for sturdy shoes,' is all she can say as a red flower blooms on her big toe. The intensity of the colour amazes her; the sting hits like an afterthought. Her eyes drift from toe to hip, where a coin-sized dark spot has leaked through her shorts. Clearly the neurotransmitters are still not up to scratch. She wonders if there will be some lasting damage.

Because she hasn't told Tarn the scariest part yet. It wasn't

the sheer effort it took to open her eyes this morning. It was when she realised that her eyes were already wide open and had been trailing, for some time, the shafts of grey light shooting through the roof and shifting across the water puddles on the cream tiles. A map of water and light. For how long she'd been in this semi-awake state she couldn't tell. She couldn't recall being knocked out by falling debris. Swivelling her head left and right, three times, four times, she felt no pain, just thirst. Thirst, and the memory of sounds she'd rather forget.

Bush knife in hand, Tarn runs along the fallen tree trunk spearing the fence and disappears towards their neighbour's warped gate. Planting her feet in the river of leaves and tree limbs that used to be their street, Cathryn inspects the damage to the fence. It will have to be a priority. In the distance she spots a group of men slashing their way through the greenery. Men and desperation and opportunity. She retreats back into her own yard, wondering if it would be possible to fashion a palisade out of crumpled wire and dead wood. A palisade sounds too grand for what she has in mind. A screen, then, a cover-up.

'She's upset but she's okay,' Tarn reports when he returns twenty minutes later. 'At least she can now get through the front door.'

'Sounds like she's her usual self. Did she even thank you?'

Cathryn's mind travels back to the moment when the primordial instinct to flee kicked in: skin and heat as inseparable as sound and mind, one leaking into the other; the roof creaking like a ship coming apart in rough seas. Anywhere else seemed safer. They had already abandoned their bedrooms by then, for fear of the rattling windows caving in, and sought refuge in the lounge. Not anticipating that it would be the more

perilous choice. When she flung the front door wide open, she found herself leaning into a wall of darkness, the driveway transformed into a tearing river at her feet. She still might have opted to leave, had it not been for the inexplicable crash-bangs, the flapping of gigantic wings.

‘Death by a million knives,’ Tarn mutters as he struggles to dislodge a foot-long spear of corrugated iron jammed into a crack in a bedroom shutter.

The way he says it makes her shift her weight from foot to foot, but that does nothing to dispel her unease.

‘Can only hope no one had to spend the night outside.’

Tarn doesn’t even bother to reply.

Inside, the house is airless and dank, the walls still weeping. They remove the plywood boards barricading the kitchen windows, struggling under the soaked weight of them, and crank up the cyclone shutters in the lounge to knee height. It’s a relief to feel the breeze sweeping away the stale remnants of fear.

‘Let’s leave the rest of the shutters for now.’

One of the last email alerts she received before the network went down warned of another newly formed cyclone swirling nearby, following in Pam’s wake. This one’s named Nathan and still deciding where to go, whether to greedily gain mass and embark on a rampage, or fizzle out. Surely one is enough? Cathryn wipes her face on the front of her T-shirt as she inspects the lounge in the unforgiving daylight. Sweat beads already re-forming on her forehead, a slick second skin wrapping her limbs. At first she can’t comprehend what’s happened in here. The walls and floors are plastered with white pulp. Roof plaster, perhaps, or some kind of filling washed out of the ceiling.

‘Oh, no, my magazines, my books!’

She wipes a handful of paper mush off the coffee table and flops down on the couch, its soaked sponge sucking in the weight of her bones and flesh. Gooney and soft, perfect consistency for papier mâché, better than anything she's ever managed to produce in the art workshops. Why on earth didn't she pack away the books in plastic bags?

'Oh, wow.' Tarn slides towards her, graceful as an ice skater, his mobile phone extending from his hand like an artificial limb. Miscalculating the treacherousness of pulp and rain on ceramic tiles, he ends up on a precarious backwards lean, his arms flailing through the air, before his free hand clamps on to the edge of the coffee table and he manages to steady himself.

'Ew.' He flicks his hand. White specks land in Cathryn's hair.

'I should've cleared them away, bagged them up. How stupid of me.'

'You couldn't know.'

Her face scrunches up and she manages a crooked smile, yet her voice is a traitor. In the bookshelf the crimped pages of *The Luminaries* open up in a mocking peacock tail next to a swollen paper concertina that once was *IQ84*.

'I had borrowed those, can't get them here.'

Resistance in every step as she moves through the kitchen and the three bedrooms, inspecting the material disaster that is their home, her hands clenching and unclenching a ball of paper porridge, the rain still dribbling through the lounge roof. As the volume of the patter on tin increases, the water starts gushing through, forcing them to scramble for mops and erect cordons of sodden couch cushions to prevent the water from flooding the rest of the house. In that moment the cruel reality of natural disasters hits her: it's not over yet. What was she thinking? The thirst returns with fearsome strength.

‘The cyclone, Tarn, they thought it was heading towards Tanna last night. That’s where Eslyn sent her children. To safety, she thought.’ They look at each other, horrified.

The mop clatters to the floor as Tarn disappears into the kitchen. She can hear him dropping one mobile phone after another on the kitchen bench, checking the landline again, fiddling with the radio in an attempt to connect with the outside world. *There’s nothing we can do*, she wants to tell him, but doesn’t have the strength to name their powerlessness.

‘We can only pray and hope,’ she mumbles, surprised at the earnestness of her words—since when has prayer entered her personal life?—while the radio scrapes and blips through the white noise until it bursts into glorious pop music transmitted from a station in faraway New Zealand.

Breton Dukes

The Swimmers

from *What Sort of Man*

Final proof, forthcoming April 2020

Eric held the door and Russell went through. Eric followed. They both had sports bags. There were damp patches by the long wooden benches where other men had stood after swimming, but the changing room was empty.

‘Here we go,’ said Eric.

‘Yep,’ said Russell.

There was a faint echo. Cold came up off the concrete.

As always, they put their bags on the same area of benching. Some hooks around the tiled walls held jackets and pants, but most played it safe, carrying their belongings poolside, leaving them in the cubby holes there.

Eric and Russell swam every Tuesday. They had for twenty-five years. At the end of each swim, they raced. Freestyle, one hundred metres. Eric had never lost, though what he’d kept from Russell was that over that long period he’d taken swimming lessons, trained with weights and done lots of extra swimming to make sure he kept hold of his winning streak. Eric’s other big secret was that something had once happened with him and Russell’s wife, Alice.

‘Morning!’

It was the one-legged cleaner. A pool-issue polo, shorts, his metal above-the-knee leg.

‘Morning,’ said Eric, in his clipped ex-principal’s voice.

Hands worrying his bag’s zip, Russell stayed quiet.

Eric always urinated before his swim so he followed the cleaner out of the changing rooms and into the shower/toilet

area. With all the winning he did, this was his domain. In other domains Russell might have been in charge—after all, before his retirement, he'd been high up at the university, but here, in the pool, the changing rooms, the showers, even out in the car park, Eric felt in charge.

At the urinal he unslung and, after a moment or two, it started.

Alice—her face round and shiny as a cherry—was dead now. So too Una. And the kids were long gone. Russell's three in places like Hong Kong; Eric's in Christchurch and Auckland. Russell had a small unit at Summerset; Eric still lived in the family home. They both drove. They both had other interests. Didn't Russell attend a French-speaking class? Or was it cooking?

Eric juggled and waited. Juggled again and waited. No rush. Russell took ages getting changed, rotating, arms out, around his sports bag like some police robot dealing with a suspicious package. Eric bounced at his knees to get the last drips and then zipped.

'Okay,' he said.

No way would he admit it, but week to week this was his highlight. This was him most alive. Beating Russell—he never tired of it.

'Guess who's got new togs?' he said, walking back to where naked Russell was stapled over, bringing his yellow shorts over his feet. Staying bent, Russell worked the shorts past his knees and up around his waist. Last week he'd brought the wrong bag down from the cubby holes, getting as far as putting on the other man's trousers before realising. 'I don't think these are my clothes,' he'd said, taking what looked like a calculator from a pocket.

Eric had laughed so much he worried he might break a rib.

Wouldn't happen to him. He knew his clothes and kept them

clean and up to date. Track suits or, as today, jeans, an open-neck shirt and a colourful jersey—the jam-coloured one he now brought up over his head and folded neatly beside his bag.

The memo finally received, Russell said, ‘New togs, eh?’

Concerning, actually, collecting the wrong clothes. Who would Eric race if Russell lost his marbles? Without winning, swimming wouldn’t be fun. Taking off his shirt, he folded it beside his jersey. Una, she’d always liked the pride he had in his appearance. It wasn’t so common back then. Men nowadays with their tattoos and hair gel! Too much by half—tidy with a hint of style was as far as you needed to go. Taking out his towel and new togs—red drawstring, designs like lightning bolts in a wide-framed strip down the thigh—Eric filed the folded clothes into his bag.

Una, ah Una, the times they had together!

‘The good times, the *good* times,’ Eric found himself saying as he pulled on his new togs.

Already Russell wore his goggles high on his forehead. ‘Right?’ he said, getting a hold of his bag.

Eric gathered his gear and they went out of the changing rooms and past the showers where one-leg was using a hose.

‘Good swimming, gentlemen,’ he said.

Smiling at the cleaner, getting ready for the handrail, Russell switched his sports bag from one hand to the other. Ahead, Eric started on the stairs. The colourful waistband of the togs biting into wrinkled, hairless skin. The bluish kidney-level mole. Eric.

Taking the handrail, Russell started. One foot onto a step, the other onto the same step. Back to that first foot. The sound of the pool—school kids, aqua-aerobics music. Wet, ribbed tiles under his feet. Thinking about boarding planes. Up steep stairs from the tarmac. Momona’s cold wind. Him and Alice

off on some trip. With the kids, without them, some work-related junket. Looking up Russell found Eric gone—always so keen to get a lane! Eric, laughing so much about that clothes mix-up he'd ended in a crouch.

'Ended the colour of beetroot,' said Russell.

He never thought about Eric. Especially not since that Northland trip they all took. But even before that. Vanilla's a way you might describe him. His conversations. About driving Dunedin—all the traffic, all the road works. And pizza toppings that froze well and reheated best. But swimming with him was a habit and Russell liked those. Thursdays he discussed movies with George. Sundays he cooked for Edward and Tina. Tuesdays he swam. And what wasn't to enjoy about the racing? It was good to feel his heart hammer. He never won, but so what? You had to be realistic, you had to be rational. Eric had better technique. He was fitter—clearly, he swam other days. Also, it amused Russell how serious Eric got—huffing and puffing and scowling around at the water before they took off. *Ready, go!* like the Olympics.

Being underwater was good, the way sound came in with the oxygen when you breathed, the feeling of really needing breath, not taking it so much for granted. Had Alice once said something like that? How it brought your lungs to the fore. Alice. A permanent ponytail. Short and shiny with the light of the world in her eyes. Like a figure atop one of those old sports trophies.

Emerging into the cathedral—high-ceilinged, huge clocks, Rod Stewart for the aerobics ladies, the Danyon Loader mural—Russell headed towards where Eric was carefully settling his bag in a cubby hole, getting it just so, as if someone from a decor magazine was poised to photograph his folded clothes.

Eric surveyed the pool. Aerobics, school kids getting lessons in the far lanes. A disabled man with a helper ploughing up and down the near lane. And, unusually, the middle lanes busy with swimmers. In the far end of the pool—it was divided by a central wall—people in miniature kayaks practised Eskimo rolls. Eric made big circles with his arms. Here came Russell, watching each step as though it was ice he was on. What about the diving pool? It was twenty-five metres long and three lanes were kept for swimming—Slow by the side of the pool, Medium, Fast. The rest left for the aqua-joggers to make their circuits. Darker with the depth, and warmer than the main pool, Eric swam there sometimes when he was by himself, but he preferred to race in the main pool.

Russell, *finally*.

‘The diving pool?’ asked Eric, switching to a triceps stretch.

Russell nodded, going to the cubby holes with his gear.

Leaning on a pillar, Eric attended to his quadriceps. Didn’t the togs feel good! Firm as rubber bands around his thighs and rump. He couldn’t wait to get in, couldn’t wait to race. Rearing up out of the water, making strong beautiful shapes with his arms, his legs the propeller powering him along. Russell bobbing there in his wake, Russell there like laundry—hard racing didn’t involve friendship, during hard racing competitors were your enemies, they were your victims.

‘And for Christ’s sake, Russell, remember where you put your bag,’ said Eric in a hard loud voice, and to emphasise his words he slapped his chest, bringing out a faint mark that had faded by the time he stormed to the head of the Medium lane and dived out over the deep water, glorying in the pre-penetration moment.

Eric had bossed him before, but this chest slapping stuff was

new. Was Russell a child at one of the primary schools Eric used to rule? Included with the new togs were there instructions on being an arsehole? Packing his bag away he examined his humiliation. A slick sensation out his armpits over his skin. His dry tongue pressed hard against his teeth. No, he wouldn't take it.

Turning, he prepared to use some language against Eric but too late, the prick was flying out over the pool, grinning as his hands arrowed the water.

A froggy sound came up out of Russell's throat. He tried to camouflage it with a cough, because a woman in togs—tattooed arms, a sympathetic look—carrying a toddler was there.

The mum looked ready to speak. She'd obviously heard, but what would she say?

How dare he talk like that to you.

Or, directing outrage at Russell: *Why would you let him talk like that?*

Eric's tone was way worse than what he'd said, and what he'd said was bad enough.

Russell made a broad smile for the woman, who swallowed whatever was on her mind and moved off. And so, finally, he got himself going towards the pool, to where, from the side of the pool, the ladder went into the Slow lane. Turning, finding the first rung, his hands around the uprights, the water around his feet, now shins, now knees, now flooding his groin. Getting old ate shit. That's what Alice said. Not being able to get things to work. Medical situations. Leakages. But activities and social interactions you'd chosen weren't supposed to include humiliation.

Russell took a breath, went under, found the back wall with the balls of his feet and kicked off. Bubbles streamed from his nose as he surfaced and made two strokes. Then he breathed,

bringing his arm over, kicking, feeling better in the water than usual, feeling his anger at Eric translate to extra strength, giving him the idea that maybe he was up for today's race, giving him the idea that today's race might present an opportunity for a little revenge.

And, as he tilted his face at the ceiling's great struts and filled his lungs, nearing the end of the first of his twelve warm-up lengths, his thoughts flew back twenty-five years. To that week in Northland. Because if rage at Eric was the fuel his swimming needed, was there another time to consider?

The talk had been of an overseas trip, but in the end the women picked Kerikeri. Vineyards, beaches, waterfalls. There was a chocolate factory, tennis courts, the possibility of trips to Cape Reinga, the Mangonui fish and chip shop and Waitangi. Or maybe, as Una put it, they would just sit around drinking gin and tonic.

She'd just got the green light after a cancer scare. Russell and Alice's youngest was finally on his OE. Health and freedom, that's what they were celebrating. And they were doing it in style. Una had booked them into a sprawling restored villa set on a hill surrounded by paddocks where silver horses grazed, grapes grew and pheasants flared, backgrounded by the most beautiful sunsets Russell had seen.

Smiling Americans owned the place. They greeted the two couples, gave them iced flutes of champagne, carried off their luggage, and then came back to take breakfast orders and show them their rooms. Russell and Alice were in the main house. A king-size bed. A marble, two-person, walk-in shower. From their private deck a view over a grand lawn, kōwhai bubbling with tūi, and a narrow opening between two huge rhododendrons to a path that led through a citrus orchard to Eric and Una's fully appointed cottage with its large outdoor

bath tub you heated by lighting a fire underneath.

At that stage, Russell and Eric had been swimming for five years. After dinner on Tuesdays. They talked more then. Mostly Eric. Policies he'd put in place at whatever school he was head of. Teachers he'd hired and fired. Weekends the women would sometimes bring them together for drinks or dinner. Una and Alice had nursed at Queen Mary in the late Fifties and stayed in touch since. It was them who'd suggested the men—neither of whom was exactly festooned with friends—do their little swimming thing together.

Russell worked hard back then. Lecturing, publishing papers, overseeing a gaggle of PhD students. Quietly ambitious. Quietly stubborn. 'Quietly a bit of an arsehole,' Alice had once said to him.

Anyway, he'd have preferred not to holiday with Eric and Una. Eric was a blowhard. Eric with his leather jackets, thin ties and bad taste in food. Eric shifting in his seat to take in Alice's arse. Una was okay. Funny when she'd had a couple of drinks and started needling Eric. But Alice was the only person Russell ever wanted to holiday with.

No way, though, was she having any of Russell's just-the-two-of-them stuff. 'I'm not spending my holiday listening to endless talk about your precious department.'

Marvellous Alice, mother-of-the-twentieth-century Alice. Her vodka on ice, her political views. Marching down George Street, marching on the Octagon. No Nukes. No Tour. Alice wearing that underwear she'd buy through a catalogue one of the boys found once. Dead now, and Russell had never recovered. He'd never been the same. Just to cook for her one more time, to hear her voice break at the beauty of a plate he'd set for her. 'Oh, Russell? Oh, golly fucking gosh!'

Golly gosh. Russell stopped after his sixth length and took

off his goggles. Up the vacant Fast lane's rope two joggers chatted. Sun cut through the tall windows looking over the car park, its glare making the end of the pool all but disappear. And here, out of that sun, came Eric. The big dome of his head, the strong arms windmilling, hitting the wall, eyeballing Russell, turning, plunging under, surfacing, churning back up the lane.

A few years after Northland, Una's cancer came back and she died. They'd stopped seeing them as a couple, but Alice had kept up with Una and she'd grieved. But death didn't touch Russell. His kids he cared for. And Alice. But really, no one else. A cold streak then, and within a cold streak there's usually a cruel streak. Everyone has negative traits, though. Being some wrinkly widower doesn't change that.

Russell farting about as usual. Stopping every length. It annoyed Eric to think other people might mistake him for his training partner. Slumped over the lane rope as though he'd had a stroke. Emphasising his energy, Eric hit the wall and turned, sank deep, bent his knees and blasted off, surfacing but not breathing for three, four, five hard strokes. These two ducks for example, jogging up the outer lane rope, what would they think? Head down, he powered past, taking in the rotations of their lovely thick legs.

Tall, bony Una. Her clavicles. The edges of her shoulder blades, knee bones like little turtle shells, long pianist's fingers. The care she took of her fingernails. Playing the piano in the spare room when he got home from work. In there with the heavy red wine she drank. Getting angry at him that time at the hospice for never having done her the respect of entering and listening. 'What if I'd been playing naked? You'd have bloody well gone for that!'

Her suddenly laughing at that. Him laughing too, her dying

and him not even able to explain he was shy to be so moved. That, and having no words to describe the beauty of her music

...

Eric was a doer. A leader. He talked with great sweeps of his long arms. He used volume to impose his will. He was, by the time he retired, Dunedin's most respected principal. He'd got awards from the mayor; he'd had an annex at Grant's Braes School named after him. Direct, strong, a missile from a U-boat, swift S's with his hands, roiling the water behind him, smashing into the end wall, glancing at the pool's timer—it told no lies, he was *on* today—plunging back, eating up another length.

Surprisingly, it was Una who'd made all the big decisions. Houses to buy, cars to buy, renovations, holidays. Eric was impatient. No one ever asked—and no one ever would—but if they did, he wouldn't be too proud these days to say he dreamed about her every night. Playing her piano, nailing him with her sharp tongue, cuddled up beside him, her morning Milo, the way she cut her toast. He'd been a good husband. To her, he'd mattered.

Ahead, Russell was gesturing at him to stop.

Alice that time in the outdoor bath. Russell's Alice. Not that he, Eric, had been a saint.

He stopped. 'What?'

'Why don't we start racing?'

Eric cleared snot. The sun had gone and everything had dimmed. He turned. Here were the aqua-joggers. Glasses, bobbed grey hair. He drew his hand down his face. 'Morning!'

The women nodded. The one in lipstick showed her teeth. Eric's deltoids and pecs throbbed. Given the choice he'd be in a school hall somewhere, in just these togs, in front of a crowd of women, rotating slowly on some raised podium. Winning

their admiration. Well, why not? Nothing wrong with his bloody libido! Nothing wrong with admitting he missed the way Una used to appreciate the shape he kept his body in.

‘Racing?’ he went in a loud voice.

‘I feel good today. Let’s have two races. A sprint, plus a longer one.’

Eric exaggerated surprise. ‘Overdo the Metamucil this morning, Russell?’

Russell stood on the low wall at the head of his lane. Rod Stewart had stopped. On the pool’s corner, with its view over this pool and the main one, two lifeguards were swapping posts. Cornering in slow motion, the aqua-joggers watched as Russell bent, making his arms loose as tentacles, creeping his toes to the edge of the wall.

‘We’re having a diving start?’ said Eric, sounding genuinely surprised.

Russell couldn’t stay down long—his hamstrings drawn too tight, some of his internal organs pinched. ‘Might as well,’ he grunted.

‘Ian Thorpe, eh?’ said Eric in a voice loud enough for the joggers and even lifeguards to hear. But now he got himself into a crouch.

Russell glanced at Eric’s feet—wrinkled skin, a pachyderm’s toenails. Not that Russell could talk. Not that this was the time to be comparing feet.

‘Ready?’ he asked. Right away, he dived, ‘Go!’ he shouted, sailing over the water.

‘*Bastard*,’ he heard as he hit.

Wanting to give the impression of determined racing, he pulled hard for a few strokes, but Eric must have made a good long shallow dive, because he was level already. Then he was

past, stirring the water in Russell's lane, making it harder to get good purchase, not that that mattered to Russell, because, wanting to conserve energy, he'd already slowed right down.

Eric hit the wall and came up fast, badly needing air. Proper sprinting was anaerobic so he'd done the twenty-five without breath. Clinging to the pool edge he pulled off his goggles. Light spots pocked his vision, the sensation of something milking acid came from his gut. He blinked at the calm water between his chest and the wall. Chlorine. Pinching on his upper nose where the plastic joining the eye parts of his goggles bit. Water dripped from his armpit hair. His breathing didn't ease—came instead in heaves, like throwing up in reverse. A car accident. Cancer on the cancer ward. Here even, being fished out for a bit of CPR. As long as it didn't happen at home, on the kitchen floor while his Sunday night toastie pie cooked. Smelling that, while dying under the ceiling Una painted every couple of years. Not having a face, any face, there as you died. That's what had scared Una. Now it was what scared him.

But suddenly the tension in his diaphragm eased—that sprint must have created a major oxygen imbalance—and his vision cleared. Coming back to himself he turned. Russell trying to get him at the start like that! Russell coming on, slower than a bloody dugong. No one was dying. Not today. Dying of boredom, maybe. Because, here, finally, Russell touched, turned, and lifted up his goggles.

'Fast today, Eric,' he said. 'Must be those togs.'

Vulnerable, still feeling a little fear, Eric said, 'You're looking okay out there.'

Russell didn't seem to hear. Already he had his goggles down. 'Let's do a two-hundred—gives you no excuse not to lap

me. Ready?’

And before Eric could suggest a delay, before he could try to engage Russell in conversation to extend that delay, before he could even get his goggles on, Russell said ‘Go!’ and kicked off the wall.

The joggers were watching. There was nothing else to do. Putting his goggles on, he took a breath, sank and kicked off.

Russell settled into his stroke. The grid of square blue tiles and, when he breathed, the diving boards’ different levels. Water’s sound in his ears. The ragged breathing back there. Eric’s red head a siren. Was tricking him into this urgent racing state dangerous? Other than its age, was there anything wrong with Eric’s heart? Russell didn’t know. His sole goal was inflicting a little psychological pain. He had controlled people in the past—playing one department head off against another, other times bringing certain key players in close to guarantee funding. Times were, on an evening walk, Russell would be elaborating on some work situation and Alice would stop and just look at him, the tips of her fingers light on her hips.

‘What?’

‘You don’t see?’

‘A bit manipulative?’

‘A *bit*?’

Now Russell sensed shape beside him and after two more strokes here was Eric. Level already as they closed on the first length. See, nothing wrong with him. What damage could Russell do? An old bastard like him. Eric had juice, and juice was inarguable. Who knew how many lengths he did through the week! Probably he’ll lap me easily, Russell thought, watching as Eric hit the wall, turned and came at him. ‘Indecent,’ Alice had said, ‘a man your age with a physique like that. What is it

you eat for breakfast, Eric?’

It was the last day of their week away, the four of them lunching at a local winery. Champagne to start, then from white to red. By Alice’s breakfast question Eric was having whisky in his coffee, sitting there in short shorts and a short-peaked cycling cap Russell remembers being unreasonably envious of.

And with a real sharky look about him, Eric said: ‘*Viagra*, Alice.’

Twenty years. Still Russell remembers them all, pre-lunch, watching waterfowl zigging and zagging on a man-made lake. The texture of his whole barely cooked snapper, the delicious mango and chilli salsa the fish came with. Figs and honey they’d shared as a starter.

‘Viagra? Una, did he say Viagra?’ Alice was drunk. They all were. Celebrating, genuinely, a great week. Walking to a waterfall every morning pre-breakfast. Swimming there and swimming later at different beaches. Sandy, salty, Russell and Alice would shower together and then while Alice snoozed Russell would walk to the township for food to barbecue.

Una made friends with the hosts and two afternoons running they’d lounged on the lawn sharing icy jugs of vodka and tonic. Una who, eyeballing Eric, had said, ‘Speak up, Eric. Tell the other children what you said.’

Russell didn’t have many other memories of Eric on the holiday: the cycling cap; the time, standing by Russell’s barbecue, he reached in, unbidden, and turned a lamb cutlet. Probably what that meant was Russell and Eric had fitted together okay. That Eric hadn’t got as far up Russell’s nose as expected.

Eric, who now swam towards Russell. Arms stirring, legs hung there kicking. Once he’d passed, Russell kicked a little harder and tried to get his own arms over at a better rate,

dragging at the good water, pressing along.

‘Doesn’t Una know how to rip the balls off *her* man.’ Returning from the lunch, he and Alice had adjourned to the cool quiet of their room. Fresh fruit, folded towels, a line-up of boutique teas. Alice stood afoot the freshly turned bed Russell lay on and from their positions in that tableau Alice made her castration comment. Russell, of course, laughed. Though he’d always seen himself as straight down the middle, he loved his wife’s crudity.

But then things soured. Alice’s approach to an argument was to dip Russell in her sharp good humour and then come up, teeth gnashing. Relaxed, Russell had been drunk and amused by what Eric had said. So, laughing with Alice, he was already letting his mind slide towards what could go on the grill for their final meal when his wife tipped forward on the bed frame and started in. At least Eric paid some attention. At least Eric talked.

‘We’re holidaying *together*, but you think more about steak than me. Next time you want to go away, why not put one of your precious pieces of porterhouse in a frock and take it to Noosa? I’ll stay home, dusting your little degrees.’

Then the attack expanded. Did Russell realise how he’d devalued their relationship?

‘Working, working, working. You’re barely with me when we’re together. Guaranteed, you don’t think of me when we’re apart. I’m not some goddamn trophy you won and can now forget. Ever heard of a loving gesture? Breakfast, bed? Flowers? Look out the window—they’re the colourful things with the bees going in and out.’

Eric started his fourth. The rest of this length, then four more. The nausea was gone. Maybe he felt a little sluggish, but, hey,

no surprise—look at the mess he'd made of Russell in the sprint! Russell who, quarter of the way through his third length, wasn't actually looking so bad. Eric closed, watching forward before he breathed. Yep, higher in the water, kicking with intent, making good shape with his arms. Had he been practising? It didn't matter—he could look like Dawn Fraser and Eric would still lap him.

But credit was due. A sprint and now a longer race. Maybe that clothes thing had got Russell wanting to blow out some cobwebs. That was Eric's approach. Difficulty getting out of his La-Z-Boy one evening meant the next morning you'd find him doing squats while watching the news on morning telly. Ageing was something to war against. Same with Russell. Putting up a fight today, eh? We'll see about that!

Heading to the wall, Eric moved serious water. The chest tightness coming on, that would be the extra strain on his pecs. If he was burning a little, imagine how Russell must be suffering!

Turning, sinking, Eric kicked into that fifth length. Mind games—getting the most from yourself. He always deployed them. Training alone, he'd imagine Russell was in the next lane, actually competing, while Alice stood poolside, watching them work out, watching Eric annihilate her husband.

Alice. Jesus, just the thought of her was motivating. A perfect woman. He'd said it to her that last full day of their holiday, Una and Russell floundering around beneath the waterfall, Alice drying her legs with these long strokes. He lost himself around her. His throat ached. In Kerikeri he woke up hard against the mattress, his muck making little speech-bubbles on the bone-coloured sheets Una had thought so much of. Anyway, standing tall, the towel behind her neck—holy moly, her *arms*—Alice had looked square in his eyes and laughed.

Pleasantly, but also in a way that stopped Eric saying more.

Breaching, he breathed, thrashed his arm over, hauled it back, rotated, whumped up white water with his kick, and thrashed his opposite arm over. Laugh at this, Alice!

But, hold on, what? Russell, coming already? Eric had eaten way less of his lead than expected. Closing on each other . . . was this right? They'd meet only a bit further down Eric's lane than last time? Was Russell matching him? Level now, they breathed in unison, and there he was. Russell. Cold, stern, unfamiliar as an emperor.

This was racing. Really, in comparison, all Russell had ever done was extend his warm-up. But now he understood. Tempo, it came down to sustaining tempo. Could he keep it another five—make that four—lengths?

Sure as shit. That's what she used to say. Sure as shit, he could do it!

Hitting, not bothering to breathe on the turn, he kicked hard, coming up with a hurricane in his sails.

Three lengths for Eric. He whipped his arms over, kicking out a heavy rhythm, the breath on every stroke a gasp. Buck Shelford losing his nut in Nantes. Fitzzy, in Jo'burg, holding off the Springboks for the series. Una's dad had been a rugby man—and well, why not? Yes, as an educator Eric couldn't condone the thuggery, but nor would he ever disregard the heroes, the bravery, Meads with his arm that time. When things got hard, men stepped up. They held.

And here came Russell. Splashing as though a crocodile had him, the noise when he breathed a lion's roar. Firing someone—*letting them go*—Eric always experienced this internal lurch just before they entered his office. If it was a matter of over-

staffing, maybe he could back down and shuffle some hours to keep them on. With performance-related failure could he cut some slack, could he offer a second or third chance?

Passing Russell, he'd felt it—doubt, doubt he'd always interpreted as fear. Back then his response was anger. Why, in *his* universe, was he experiencing fear? And Russell's determination, his wild animal act, had that same effect now. Fear into anger into resolve. So now, bearing down on the end of his sixth, with it in mind not to back down, to give everything in order to lap Russell, Eric decided on a tumble turn. He'd been practising—often they came off like silk—and when they worked, they took seconds off his times. And so, after one last big stroke, he raised his head, rolled on the vertical, found the wall and, rotating around the horizontal, powered back into battle.

Lisbon—the little European tour Russell and Alice took once they'd agreed the kids were old enough to cope with long-haul flights and unpredictable food. Lisbon—its dry heat, aquarium, and bica. Little cups of invigoration, Alice called them. Waking early, jet-lagged, she'd buy them from a vendor near the hotel, returning with two tiny, super-charged coffees—the perfect prelude to holiday love-making. Closing on the wall—three more after this one, but really it was only the next that mattered—Russell could taste it, the coffee on Alice's breath, her tongue heat, the dirty, delicious taste as they kissed.

But, pushing off, that wasn't where his focus was supposed to be. The largest aquarium in Europe. White-bellied manta rays, their undulating wings, flowing smoothly over the dome he and Alice, hips touching, stood beneath. Dawn, the kids asleep in the adjoining room, the slow rotation of a ceiling fan, her perched over his hips, sitting back inch by inch. Or was all

that an earlier, even sweatier, holiday in Apia?

Not that Russell believed that in trying to hold off Eric he resembled the beautiful menace of those creatures. The thing in common, the only thing, was that they both moved through water. Acknowledging that, allowing for the wayward arrowing of his brain—Alice, foreign capitals, sex, sex, sex—Russell suddenly felt wrong. His arms didn't want to work. His legs failed, hanging like noodles. On his next stroke, something parted in his shoulder and his arm went so askew he did no more than knock his goggles up his face.

In April, his heart and lungs were eighty years old. His left hand was eighty too. Raising his head, he watched it wobble into the lane rope. A stroke? Could he even go straight? Was he racing any more?

Other than his bleeding nose, Eric was dynamite. And someone had just lit the fuse, because Russell was *gone*, winging around near the lane rope. Hitting the wall, bonking. That's what they call it, Russell. Mate, you want to look at your nutrition. Feeling blood string from his nose, wanting to amplify the magnitude of his victory, Eric dug harder. Chumming up the dive pool—good nothing hungry is lurking in the depths!

Lapping Russell was a formality. And as usual at this time on a Tuesday, with another crushing victory confirmed, Eric allowed himself to admit he liked, admired, even envied Russell. His status job at the university, his elegant home, the easy way he related to his children, his wife. *His wife*.

Eric breathed towards the side of the pool. The one-legged man was watching. Liking the attention, Eric tried to raise his stroke rate. Deep below, the dark lines of the pool trailed away. Russell and Alice. Always so tight, always so intelligent. Alice that time, turning up at the outdoor bath while Una slept. Split

wood smouldering beneath the tub. Stars, but no moon. A night bird calling nearby. Eric naked but for a cold Steinlager.

‘Nice night for it,’ he had said.

Just above her right knee was a bruise. A new one. Obvious to the man who’d spent the whole holiday mapping the different curves of her legs.

She hadn’t answered him—she often didn’t. Had just stood, swaying a little, as if down in the vineyards a band played.

Next time Eric breathed pool-side, one-leg had been joined by a lifeguard. Must be they were aware of the racing. Ahead was Russell, beyond was the wall, and with a crowd hadn’t Eric better pull another tumble turn? The last one had been so smooth—with people watching an athlete was obliged to entertain.

Bringing his right arm through, getting great traction, he breathed this time towards the diving boards. In the Fast lane, in goggles and a white swim cap, a woman. Breast-stroking up and, as though going downstream, cruising past. The powerful spasm of her frog-kick. Her tense little feet . . .

Perhaps his physiology *was* failing a little. Not surprising given the intensity of the racing. The sensation in his torso . . . with the speed of his swimming was something about to fly apart? That bit in the disaster movie, just before the crash, when the rivets holding the plane’s wings start to come loose. Not that it would be his ticker. Or lungs. They were organs he’d cherished—exercise, nutrition, anti-smoking long before anyone else. Probably it was a cold. Though over his career he’d taken no more than a couple of sick days. What did he hear Una say to their eldest that time? ‘Your dad’s harder to kill than Rasputin.’

Married so long and still Eric couldn’t differentiate a compliment from a slight.

Passing Russell now, who was what? Dog-paddling? These people—more were watching, that chick in the Fast lane—would they believe Eric was eighty-three? Not after this tumble turn! And here he raised his head, drew breath and plunged deep, rolling, blindly trying to find the wall with the soles of his feet.

Russell had given his best, but no way was he holding Eric. Having quit the freestyle his body had come back into itself a little. His hard breath still rippled the water by his chin, and his legs weren't really working, but his arms were sort of okay. So, with the help of the rope—he had it like a banister, as though the lane was steep stairs he was going down—he hauled himself along. Towards the far end of the pool, away from the people back there, talking about Eric bleeding into the pool.

First of all, Russell felt implicated, but having checked his vents he could confirm it wasn't him. Not that they'd asked. Paralysed, hyperventilating—must be they saw some real hopeless cases using the Slow lane. Anyway, all down Eric's lane bloody strings of snot hung—witches in the rafters shaking out their hair.

Russell had lost his goggles too. Still moving he groped for them with his left hand. Though would they be needed again? Had he broken Tuesday swimming? Had he broken himself? The feeling in his body was of a fuse shorting. And where was Eric? Not out ahead. Russell looked back—no—and then down. There, wriggling about in the depths. The man from bloody Atlantis! So what if he'd been an arsehole about the clothes and stuff? So what if he'd desired her. Who'd blame him?

Had Eric ever hit Alice? Russell had. Punched her in that nice room in Kerikeri. A dead leg—that's the way they talked about it much later—when he'd salvaged things, as if the

playground term made it better.

From that wisecrack about bees going in and out of flowers, she'd shifted to: 'You'd better watch Eric. He kissed me this morning.'

'What?'

'By the waterfall. The principal's a real Casanova.'

'Bullshit. *Bullshit*, Alice.' But from experience, Russell knew his wife liked to underline any point she was making with an act.

'Johnny Viagra's got some sweet kissing lips.'

In the Fast lane, here was the breast-stroker, punching through the water with such force she was like an ice-breaker.

Drunk, humiliated, Russell had bum-shuffled to the edge of the bed and swung, catching her just above the knee. He owned it. He'd always owned it. But of course, he also always blamed Eric—if Eric hadn't kissed her, if Eric and Una hadn't been on the trip . . .

The fire burned in a steel box beneath the tub. There was a long narrow gate with a clever latch you used when you needed to feed the flames. Eric stood and the water from his body rained onto the steel, hissing.

'Alice,' he said.

Swaying away in one of the villa's white cloth bathrobes, 'Yes, Eric?' she'd said, mocking his serious voice.

Needing to get to her, he'd sort of fallen out the bath. The Steinlager abandoned. His dick thwacking about on the gravel, the little toe of his right foot stuck, cooking for a moment on the steel box, but all those sensations were forgotten as he reached his arms around her shins, pulled his vibrating self up, and pressed his lips to that bruise.

Like a fish she'd caught—there, wet at her feet. You'd think,

with that much desire pumping, his next move would've been obvious. But he couldn't go further. He didn't trust Alice to give herself—just as likely she'd squash him with some humiliation. Plus, Una, his Una, asleep only metres away in the cottage. And then there was the respect he had, even back then, for Russell.

Una dying. Their wedding in Ashburton. Eric Jr's birth. The time the Accord, with him in it, ended up in the harbour. Making that speech in the Octagon to the striking teachers. Eric's big moments. Eric, who was still closer to the bottom of the diving pool than the surface. At the critical moment in his tumble turn his heart had batted itself out of rhythm and instead of kicking towards the surface, his disorientated brain had kicked him down, and so now here he was, flapping about in the depths, watching his life pass.

Ugly husks—people didn't touch the old. Russell saw the kids once or twice a year. A handshake from his sons, a quick hug from his daughter. Alice, if she'd been around, would have made them give him a good squeeze, but if she'd been around it wouldn't have mattered. And these days the grandchildren were too old to go for contact. To them he smelled like dung—to them he was as relevant as a shoe box. Friends? Even the close ones engaged in the same formal way they always had.

One thing you could do was get your hair cut. Russell did it every three weeks. Lying back letting them shampoo and condition, sitting there after in the big chair, with them doing all their lovely scissory fiddle-faddling. But no one at the salon ever gripped him in need, ever held him with love or in sympathy. Never just pressed in to share animal contact. He ate alone, showered alone, woke at night alone, her ice-cold shape beside him.

But here were real people, grabbing a hold. Eric and then the breast-stroker. Her breathing hard, her sort of pressing Eric into Russell and then yelling about an ambulance. 'What were you lot doing? This man's drowning!'

Eric had Russell around the neck. Russell had one arm in Eric's armpit and the other over the lane rope. It was as though Eric was very short and they were dancing. Badly, because their legs were all tangled. Eric's mouth was blue. The breast-stroker was treading water in the middle of the lane, reaching back with her hand as if to make sure they didn't go anywhere.

Now she was using a sarcastic, pretty-please type tone. 'Anyone available to help?'

'Eric?' said Russell. 'Eric?'

Eric's eyes were open. Muscles in his face moved.

Russell could feel the weight of Eric's lower body. It was like holding one of those cause-and-effect steel balls on a string. 'Eric?'

Then there were other bodies in the lane. Other hands around Eric and Russell. 'Grab hold, sir.'

The cleaner was at the side with a pole thing. Russell unravelled from Eric and took hold. The man leaned back against the weight and pulled.

Eric watched one-leg drag Russell to the side of the pool. His feet didn't feel right. He was thirsty. They'd call it a draw.

Michele Amas

Home Town

from *Walking Home*

Final proof, forthcoming April 2020

There are only so many times you
can return to the city of your birth
I do not know the number but with each journey
there is a wariness that travels with you
and you hold your breath—will it hold
this bridge or have you pushed your luck too far
Every trip home you are running the gauntlet
one will be the final return
one will join up the circle
so you rush around trying not to be tagged
to get in and out as quick as possible
knowing that in this place of birth there is a caveat on you
Run run if you feel
a breath on the back of your neck
the grip of long grass at your ankles

When I was a child the road up
to Auntie Thelma's was impossibly steep
that corner the blind one where my mother always closed her eyes
The dark places were pitch and the light places endless
the primary school full of things I could not reach
Like a giant now I look at my home town, a diorama
with patches of painted green and sandy deserts

Home town I think of now
is the place where I made a home

for you, not me, mine was already made
with the steepest streets and the blindest corners
Your memories will be giant when you return
That is growing up
you move fast over the familiar places

Natalie Morrison

from *Pins*

Final proof, forthcoming April 2020

The first thing you took with you:
elephant lapel pin, thumb-sized, grey
except for the terrified whites of its eyes.
When I told the detective sergeant this
she gave me a freshly laundered
sort of smile.

*

Exclamation mark: sudden disconnect
of the pin previously stuck in paper.
Extraordinary!

*

You didn't think I could ever name one hundred pins
without taking a breath.

The second thing you took with you:

The Lord of the Rings, the entire trilogy in paperback.

When our mum told us that the tiny holes in the pages were not pinpricks at all but microscopic beetles, you listened for the beetles when she left the room, ear to the cover, to see if you could hear them chewing.

*

It is possible to read fortunes with a pin:

three pins are held between the lips and by the angle at which they point away from the face, one can tell whether the person will find true love.

*

In your edition you've exchanged the word 'ring' for 'pin', an impressive alteration: in Tolkien's trilogy the word 'ring' occurs 338 times.

I can just about trace the birth of your fascination.
We were cordoned off from the fireplace with a moveable
copper façade. Nana was stitching one of Grandad's
socks. We didn't have any clothes on,
were still dripping slightly from the bath.
You picked up a pinch of metal
and in the dim light tried to see what it was
you were holding. I continued reading Beatrix Potter
with a damp index finger. Nana told you to be careful:
What you have in your hand is very sharp.

*

Caution: where there is a pin
there will be puns.

*

One must love a sister in the same way one must love
jabbing oneself in the foot halfway up a flight of carpeted stairs.
Our parents told you I would be a nice surprise.

If all the pins in the world were gathered together they would fill 3000 Olympic swimming pools.

*

The rolling pin is perfect for flaky pastry. It weighs the same as a head going over the top.

The replacement wallet photo:
the photo was taken by Mum who
was walking behind us. You were
trailing my wrist as you stooped
into the car. It must have been the
winter highlights coming slant-wise
that made the elephant brooch
stick out like a sore point of starlight
from your jacket collar. It came out
in the photograph as a spot of bright
white. My own constellation spot
appears to come off the side of my
glasses. From the picture, one can't
make out your nails in the tender portion
of my inner wrist. Days later, I still had
the smiley face marks.

*

This is the ratio: the blue whale is to the human as
the party frock is to the pin.

Ian Wedde

from *The Reed Warbler*

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A little weak evening sunshine splashed across the flagstones. Josephina stopped mopping and listened. Yes—this time it was true. The birds had gone. She stepped outside and looked towards the town. The warblers weren't swirling around in crowds over the fjord. Their fussy little songs weren't coming from the reeds at the bottom of the slope by the river mouth. All she could hear was the whispering sound of wind in the dry stalks. The whispering sound had a swirling rhythm because of gusts blowing down the fjord towards the sea. The reed stalks had a rhythm, too, a ripple that went along the shore and repeated itself, over and over. In the pale blue sky above the fjord, also, it was as though the streaky clouds moving away in the direction of the sea at Laboe were making a whispering sound, like the wind. They made the blue-green Nikolaikirche steeple over the other side of the fjord seem to be toppling across the sky. A score of small coasters were anchored along the channel, along with two broad larger vessels waiting for lighters. They were all pointing up into the wind, and the small ones were nodding a little together as the waves pushed their bows up and down. What would it feel like, one day, to turn with the wind and the tide and go easily down the fjord, almost silently, once the sails were set and had stopped snapping at the clouds beyond Laboe?

She wiped away the loose strand of hair that had blown across her cheek, and with it the tears. The little Rohrsänger had gone, the twittery songs of their hundreds had stopped; they weren't there in the sky swooping about in formations,

they weren't in the reeds by the marsh, their songs had gone away with them for the winter.

'They practise,' her mother had told her. 'They come and go for a while. Then, one day, they don't return and so you know that winter's coming certainly.'

'Where do they go?'

'Somewhere nice and warm, so the sailors say.'

'But where?'

'How should I know?'

'Do oranges come from there?'

'So they say.'

That was when she was a child.

Now Mutti was standing in the doorway, narrowing her eyes against the late sunlight so that her expression said, But now you're not a child anymore. 'So, have you finished?' Mutti said. She had on the faded blue cotton cap she liked to wear when washing new linens; her hair was all drawn back, and her face looked pale and severe.

Josephina could tell that her mother had seen she'd been crying. She still had the salty taste of the tears in the corners of her mouth and perhaps their snail-trails were still on her cheeks. But why should she hide them? When they were true?

'Yes, finished,' she said, and turned back to the view across the fjord. Finished what, exactly? Mutti's silence was stiff, like the freshly washed linens that would freeze if you left them out too late in the coming months.

Below the meadow the evening train tooted three times as it slowly approached the mill station. Its smoke was blowing away in a long streamer in the same direction as the clouds. The stationmaster would already be getting important and putting his official cap on. This he did three times a day. He had his whistle, of course, and his flag.

Yesterday as usual there was time for her to run down the hill to catch the morning train before it went back to the town. She'd passed her sister milking the cow, her face red with displeasure.

'Spoiled brat!' shouted Elke. Really, she didn't mean it, only the other cow was waiting with its bulging udder. It lifted its tail and, with a flopping sound, released a pile of shit. Josephina's mother had allowed her to wash with the lavender soap, and she was wearing the blouse with Bohemian buttonhole stitching at the neck. The pattern was of a vine with leaves and flowers, and it went all the way around. Josephina didn't mind that it was a little scratchy because it reminded her to hold her neck up straight, and so her hair too, under her 'town bonnet'. As well as that, it was her own work. She held her bonnet straight with one hand and in the other gripped the bag with her finished work for Junkfrau. The nightgown had a high neck with the same Bohemian pattern as her own blouse, long sleeves with cuffs embroidered in pink silk thread, and a button-up front scalloped like a waterfall. The cloth was fine white cotton but the buttons were stitched over with the same pink silk thread as the cuffs. When she'd wondered how anyone could sleep in it, Elke made the scornful clucking sound that meant, What do you know? But what Josephina meant was, How could anyone sleep in something that fine?

The stationmaster had his cap on, and his blue uniform jacket as well, and was standing in his best cavalry manner, his legs bowed as if he had just dismounted from a horse; he had his furled flag resting on his right shoulder like a sabre.

'Good morning, Lieutenant,' said Josephina, knowing he liked to be called that.

'Good morning, Miss Josephina,' said the stationmaster,

clicking his heels. 'And what is the purpose of Fräulein's town visit today?' His smile was false as usual because, she supposed, he was jealous of her visiting the wives of 'die adelige Preussen Offizieren' over there by Kieler Schloss, as he liked to say in his best 'proper' German. Also, she was standing too far away for him to bow and kiss her hand, as he rather liked to, pretending she was still a child.

'It's something for Junkfrau von Zarovich.' Josephina was looking past the stationmaster's red ear where it stuck out under his cap. Over by the station gate the mill owner's portly wife was advancing along the platform. She, too, had her 'town hat' on, but hers was black with a fancy lace trim around the front, some ostrich spads angled backwards and a great pile of black chiffon cascading past her shoulders from the crown. Behind her came one of the mill-hands pushing her trunk on a squeaky barrow. Frau Tiesel was out of breath and Josephina knew better than to delay her meeting with the stationmaster. Also, she would look at Josephina's embroidered collar with her sour expression that meant, And who do you think you are? 'Just into town,' said Josephina, so the stationmaster would know what ticket to put on her father's account, as her mother had instructed her. Also, here she was, going to town by herself, for the first time—the stationmaster had surely noticed that. She was going to stay the night with her aunt and come back with her papa in the sprung cart in the morning. She liked staying with Tante Elizabeth because they would all sing together after supper and then she would sleep with her little cousin Mathilde who said she loved her 'more than stars' but that she also loved the stories about Puck Puck the special chicken, could Josie please tell her one?

'Ah,' said the stationmaster in a knowing tone, 'one of those new young ones, that Zarovich.' He knew all about the

Prussian officers ‘over there’. He touched his fingers to the brim of his cap for Josephina, but he was already preparing himself for Frau Tiesel—stiffening his back and so forth. Josephina saw that he’d carefully flicked his cigar stub away. Its nasty smell lingered, though, and a wisp of smoke came out from the dark space between the carriage and the edge of the platform.

She climbed up and took a seat facing the way the train would go when it returned to the town, on the side facing the water. Sometimes they would ask her to sing ‘Wie traulich war das Fleckchen’ by the strange poet called Groth who lived over on Schwanenweg. Tante Elizabeth said the melody was by the famous composer Brahms from Hamburg who was ‘one of us’ even though he lived in Vienna, and what’s more his wife was a seamstress ‘just like you’, but Josephina had seen the poet in a long flapping coat in the Schlossgarten and thought he was too odd for such a famous composer. Mathilde liked the song about a cosy spot, though, and sometimes Josephina would sing it to her very quietly once they were in bed, instead of a Puck Puck story. Then Mathilde’s breathing would begin to slow and soon she would be asleep.

Josephina’s face was reflected in the carriage window with a glimpse of flickering water beyond, and she mouthed the words of the song about the cosy spot surrounded by leaves and flowers, thinking how nice she looked. Then Frau Tiesel heaved herself into the carriage and lowered herself with a grunt into a seat at the back. Josephina stopped mouthing the song and sat up straight, turning her profile to the miller’s wife. Beyond her nice window reflection some little Rohrsänger were flitting about in sunshine above the embankment—surely they’d be going soon? Some boys from the mill jumped on at the last minute, shouting noisily, but then began to whisper. The stationmaster blew his whistle at last, the train tooted,

and the birds all fled across the fjord in a crowd. They must be happy, surely, to be going soon to the warm place that smelled of oranges and not of the stationmaster's nasty cigar stub.

But now they really had gone; it was almost evening and beginning to get chilly, the pretty little twittering birds hadn't returned to the reeds along the river bank. When the evening train tooted to signal that it was leaving for town for the last time there were no crowds of birds fleeing away across the darkening water; all that remained from yesterday morning was the cigar smell, not of the stationmaster's stub flicked away into the horrible dark gap by the platform, but of the fresh cigar Hauptmann von Zarovich was getting alight over by the tall window with tasseled drapes and pink stained glass at the top, so that his enthusiastic puffing blew a cloud of smoke across the shaft of rosy sunshine coming into the room.

'Ah! Our little seamstress.'

Her mother had gone back inside but Josephina didn't want to follow her, as she was perhaps expected to. Yes, she was 'finished', but there would be more to do, though not sewing.

There would be no more sewing, her father shouted at Tante Elizabeth. Not that sort. Who did the girl think she was? Look what she did.

'And what did *she* do?' Tante's face was red, and little Mathilde was pulling at her dress and crying. Josephina wished very much she could have stayed at their house, but that morning she sat up on the sprung cart's seat as ordered to by her papa, while he and his sister argued right there in the street. 'She wouldn't even sing,' hissed Tante, pushing her face close to Papa's, 'can you imagine that? Our precious songbird. Yes, of course there was something wrong. What do you think I am?

Stupid?’ She was trying to keep their argument quiet because the neighbourhood children were beginning to notice. ‘She won’t talk to me,’ said Tante in a loud whisper, so Josephina would hear. ‘She won’t tell me what’s wrong, but something is. This isn’t our Josie.’ High up on the sprung cart’s seat, where everybody could see her, Josephina sat very still with her hands in her lap.

‘Yes, Elizabeth,’ hissed Papa, also trying to keep the argument quiet. ‘I do think you’re stupid, because what if your precious songbird costs me my business?’

‘Ah, so that’s it,’ said her aunt, stepping back. ‘*Meister Hansen!*’ Then she spat right at his feet and used the bad word Josephina had heard the mill boys call each other, ‘*Meister Scheisskopf!*’

Her father and Tante Elizabeth just stood there with their faces quite close together. Josephina could see them out of the corner of her eye. Then one of the neighbourhood boys let out a loud guffaw and shouted something—Josephina couldn’t hear what he said and she didn’t want to turn around and look for who he was. But then with a clatter of clogs a dozen of the children ran yelling past the sprung cart where she sat looking straight ahead. They didn’t stop where Papa and Tante were glaring at each other, because just up the hill a horse had lost its footing and the carter had jumped down to put blocks behind the wheels. The horse stood with its head down, its flanks heaving and flecked with froth and streaks of blood from the carter’s whip. It was defeated, it just wanted to stop, to be free of the cart’s weight. The cart was overloaded with barrels, it wasn’t the horse’s fault, but the carter was cursing it anyway.

Then they were rattling along. Papa had loaded some fresh poplar planks and he would use them to make plain coffins, not the special ones that cost a lot.

‘Stupid,’ he said, looking over old Gunnar’s nodding mane and the wilted bunch of wildflowers under his collar. Did he mean Tante Elizabeth or the carter? Or Mutti, for not coming with her? Or did he mean her? What had happened wasn’t her fault. What happened on the hill by Tante’s house wasn’t the horse’s fault, and what happened in Junkfrau von Zarovich’s house on Faulstrasse wasn’t her fault. She wanted to lean her head on Papa’s hard shoulder and breathe in his neck-smell and the nice smell of sawn timber in his coat, and with her right hand reach around his shoulders and hold the big lobe of his ear between her finger and thumb, which would make him growl down in his chest without opening his mouth. But he sat looking straight ahead, as did she, while Gunnar clopped along as usual, as if only the horse knew how things should be and the proper way to ride home in the cart. What Josephina knew was gone; she sat there with her pain on the cart’s hard wooden seat in an awful hollow space with nothing familiar in it, and the world went past her straight-ahead gaze like a shadow play.

‘Did he pay you?’ said Papa, adding ‘von Zarovich’ after a cough.

Inside her hollow space she was all at once both freezing and burning. Pay her for what? But she couldn’t say it.

‘For the needlework,’ said her father as if he’d heard what she didn’t have words for. And then he roared the words again, lurching forward on his seat. ‘For the needlework, girl, for your precious goddamn needlework!’ And then he did turn towards her, and she saw that her papa’s eyes were completely red and his lips were shaking. ‘Did the bastard pay you?’

But still he couldn’t reach for her and for her misery, as if the happy loveliness she’d felt in herself the day before, and seen in the stationmaster’s eyes, and in the morning train’s carriage window, and in Frau Tiesel’s spiteful look, and in the

housemaid Clara's head-wobble and up-and-down smiling assessment of her at the servants' entrance to Junkfrau's house—as if the loveliness and happiness she'd felt that morning had been impregnated by a filthy smell, like a stale cigar, that everyone would notice.

Josephina reached into the bag in which she'd delivered the fine nightgown with her best Bohemian embroidery work, and brought out her little purse with the coins in it. She put the clinking purse on the seat between herself and her father without looking at him, without moving her eyes out of the strangely echoing tunnel in which Gunnar's nodding head was pushing forward past noisy huddles of buildings and then past silent trees and meadows that she seemed not to be among.

'Hmm-hmm,' said the housemaid Clara. Her eyes went up and down Josephina's dress and blouse. She leaned with one arm across the doorway and wobbled her head from side to side, taunting a little. She was a big, strong girl with dark hair and thick eyebrows—she made her eyebrows go up and down as she did her inspection of Josephina's appearance.

It was chilly at the back of the house, which was not one of the grand ones, since Hauptmann von Zarovich was a junior; it was a narrow four floors in a row of others curving around on Faulstrasse, with a shared yard and stables that you entered through an alleyway. That morning there was fresh horseshit in the alley and Josephina worried about getting some on her shoes. It was a good place to start, her mother had said when they came the first time; word would soon go 'upstairs' to the rich senior officers; best to start with clean shoes.

Josephina liked Clara's admiring look and even the teasing head-wobble and eyebrows, but the *hmm-hmm* was annoying. But then Clara stood aside with a mock curtsy and Josephina

went into the kitchen. There was an appetising, strong smell of coffee and hot bread, and the cook was filling a basket with freshly baked Rundstück. A plate of sausage and cheese stood ready on the broad table.

‘Good morning Josephina where is your mother?’ said the cook in a joined-up way, and then, ‘Get a move on girl!’ She meant Clara, who was putting the breakfast on a tray.

‘Junkfrau isn’t here,’ said Clara. ‘She’s visiting.’

‘She’s away,’ said the cook.

Then they were both staring at Josephina.

The cook was a very tall, thin, peevish woman with a pointy nose at the top, strangely wide hips halfway down and, at the bottom, long, turned-out feet in felt slippers with bunion bumps—Josephina’s mother called her ‘the Stork’. On their first visit, she and Mutti had a whispering talk in a corner of the kitchen before showing Josephina’s samples to Junkfrau upstairs in her bedroom, and Josephina heard the Stork say that Junkfrau was very young and very vain and that she liked to stay in bed while Herr Hauptmann was out at morning parade, and also that she liked to go to her family in Vienna quite often, which put her husband in a bad mood, because, you know.

But now the Stork’s mouth wasn’t in that thin, peevish line. Instead, she was trying to smile at Josephina, her mouth making different shape attempts, until she gave up and waved her big red bony hand at the breakfast tray.

‘What are you waiting for take the man his breakfast.’

‘But I’ve got the work for Junkfrau,’ said Josephina, adding, ‘the nightgown she asked for specially.’

‘Not you what are you dreaming?’ snapped the Stork.

Clara made a show of straightening her apron and bodice, and of pushing her hair up under her cap. Then she picked up

the breakfast tray. ‘Why don’t I ask Hauptmann von Zarovich if it would please him to see, hmm-hmm, the nightgown,’ she said, with an unkind emphasis on ‘the nightgown’, making her thick eyebrows go up and down.

‘Please, Clara, thank you,’ said Josephina. She was hot with blushing, but what was she supposed to do? This was her first time on her own. What would they say at home if she came back without showing the nightgown and without the money for it? This was her chance to be known ‘upstairs’. And perhaps she’d be able to tell them, after she’d told Tante Elizabeth, that she’d shown the nightgown to Hauptmann von Zarovich himself, because his wife was away, far away in Vienna perhaps, so she just had to go ahead and do it all by herself.

The maid hooked the door shut behind her with her foot. The Stork was looking at Josephina with her lips in that peeved line. Then, with a deep sigh, she said, ‘Sit down girl have some coffee you’ll have to go soon.’

But a shaft of bright, clear light came suddenly into the kitchen from a window high in the back wall—the sun must now be in the stable yard. It was already late morning, then; the morning muster over by Kieler Schloss was finished, the fresh horseshit in the alley meant that Hauptmann’s horse had been stabled, he was now having his breakfast—and here she was, in the warm kitchen with its nice smell of freshly baked rolls and coffee, with a cup in front of her that the cook was about to fill. Surely she would be allowed to show her work? Surely, after the parade, he would be in a good mood, and he’d be thinking about his beautiful young wife, and missing her, and thinking what a nice surprise it would be to have the nightgown ready for her when she came home from Vienna, tired after her long journey, glad to see her husband, grateful for his thoughtfulness, and loving the Bohemian needlework

and the pink silk thread on the buttons? ‘So this is all your own work, Fräulein?’ he would say to Josephina, noticing also her own collar with its vine and leaves. ‘So beautiful, your mother and father must be very proud of you!’

Josephina could see that the Stork was making a show of looking at how her hand trembled as she brought the coffee cup to her lips—her peevish mouth turned into a V-shaped grin in which her large top front teeth stuck out.

‘Now you listen to me girl,’ she began, but then the kitchen door banged open and Clara hurried in.

‘Another cup for the seamstress, and please to bring the work.’

Then neither of them said another word. Their silence pressed in on Josephina like the narrow dark stairway she and Clara were going up, Clara in front with the fresh cup and saucer, and Josephina following behind with the nightgown in a bag. Clara’s smell was quite strong, from her morning’s work, no doubt, and Josephina was glad Mutti had allowed her to use the lavender soap that morning.

Then Clara opened the door to a large bright drawing room into which rosy light was coming through the stained-glass panes at the top of tall bay windows, where Hauptmann von Zarovich stood puffing a cloud of cigar smoke across the shaft of sunlight.

‘Ah! Our little seamstress.’

Her face was pressed into Elke’s strong, breathing back. Her sister heaved and made an annoyed groaning sound, almost words but not quite. In Josephina’s dream there had been a loud shout that woke her up—had she shouted or had someone else? She’d been trying to push through darkness that was thick with a moire shimmer. It was like a narrow alleyway or

passage. Her face pressed into it. It was hard to breathe or make words. Then, suddenly, the loud shout. Then she was awake and trying to speak. There was Elke's nice strong warm back. She could feel the vibration of Elke's words on her cheek, and the hum of her steady breathing.

'A bad dream, Josie?' Elke was waiting for Josephina to say what the dream was about. Usually they would do this, taking turns. Last time was Elke's turn; her dream was about a crowd of sausages marching along being soldiers while a wolf followed behind, snapping them up one by one and singing *eins zwei drei!* What a boring dream, Josephina had said, it just means you're hungry.

Early morning sunshine came into their room through the trembling leaves of the aspen—pale light flickered on the ceiling, the fluttering leaf shapes were like the signalling flags and bunting on ships coming into harbour, the flags and leaves were words the wind spoke, but in a few more weeks the yellowed leaves would be gone and the low winter sunlight would be still and silent and the ships without their talking flags would have sailed away down the fjord and then the loud shout of her dream would be gone as well.

Soon she'd have to get up and stoke the stove fire and the one in the fireplace, and Elke would have to milk the cows. 'We have to get up,' she said.

'What about your dream?'

'It was nothing,' said Josephina.

Elke turned over with an angry heave. 'Why don't you talk to us?' Josephina could hear that her sister was about to cry—her voice was wobbly. Then Elke grabbed her by the hair and gave her a shake. 'Why don't you talk to *me*, to *me*. I'm your sister, Josie, what's the matter with you?'

'I told Mathilde a story when I was at Tante Elizabeth's,'

said Josephina, taking Elke's hands out of her hair. 'But I didn't want to sing. That's why Tante got annoyed.'

Elke sat up in bed and shook her fists in the air. It was what she did when she was fed up. 'Tilde's five,' said Elke, taking big breaths. 'And you're my little sister. My Schwesterchen. My *bébé!* I used to sing to you. I told you stories.' Now she was crying—some big tears ran down beside her nose and she licked them off her lips with a quick, impatient flick of her tongue. 'All right, then, get up. If you can't trust me. If you're so high and mighty now.'

Mathilde's little head was against her shoulder. They had a candle, and Josephina was making a Puck Puck the chicken shadow with it. Puck Puck walked across the wall and then faded away into darkness. 'All right, now,' said Mathilde. 'Now you can sing it.'

'*Wie traulich war das Fleckchen, Wo meine Wiege ging,*' began Josephina very quietly, but then her voice just stopped. A big lump rose up in her throat and choked the words. Mathilde poked her with a sharp, bony little elbow and then gave her a kick. But she couldn't do it.

'I'll tell you a story,' she said. 'You love me more than stars, remember?' The child was quiet. 'How shall we begin?' whispered Josephina. The story was there in her mind, all joined up in a pattern, like the cascade of vines and flowers down the front of Junkfrau's nightgown. 'Once upon a time there was a cosy spot where a child lay sleeping in her cradle. By day, the trees and flowers and vines sheltered the child from the rays of the sun. Beautiful songbirds perched in the branches of the trees and sang to each other about the child who was laughing with pleasure to hear their songs. Beautiful butterflies . . .'

'You've already used that word,' said Mathilde, but she was

almost asleep.

‘... colourful butterflies alighted on the flowers and vines and fanned their wings above the child in the warm breezes. In the evening, when the stars began to appear in the sky and a big yellow moon floated up out of the sea, dragging her shining sleeve across the water, the child would sometimes spend an hour before bedtime looking up at the stars and the heroes and animals twinkling in the heavens.’

‘Tell me a hero,’ murmured Mathilde, ‘or a Puck Puck story,’ but then her voice turned into some lip-smacks and she began to snore.

One night, as the child lay looking up at the stars, a hero with a sword came down from the sky. He chopped away the vines and branches that were protecting the child and pushed his way into the cosy spot. And then he shouted in a terrible voice, *Ah . . .*

Elke was pulling her clothes on in a huff. ‘Please yourself,’ she said. ‘But he did something, that Junker, otherwise why all the fuss and bother?’

‘He told me not to come back,’ said Josephina.

Now Elke was giving her that big-sister look. ‘But why? Why would he do that? If he liked the work?’

Josephina wanted to say, Why don’t you go into town all by yourself and drink a coffee with Hauptmann von Zarovich and ask him why he said that, but she didn’t. She turned her back on Elke and put her bare feet on the chilly floor.

From the kitchen their mother called out angrily that they were late. Josephina knew Mutti blamed her for spoiling their chance to go ‘upstairs’, but did she also feel bad about not going with her to the von Zarovich house? Well, if Mutti wouldn’t say so, why should Josephina talk? She’d gone into town on the

train by herself, she'd walked from the top of the harbour all the way over to the Hauptmann's house in Faulstrasse, she'd shown him the nightgown, she'd got the money, she'd gone all the way back to Tante Elizabeth's house over towards Gaarden, now she was home again. That was all.

Josephina put her chilly feet and legs back under the eiderdown. *So, are you finished?* Yes, she was. Now she was finished. When her mother didn't call her again, or come angrily to the bottom of the loft ladder—or come up the ladder to say she was sorry and give her a hug—Josephina closed her eyes.

Finished.

The ships lined up in the harbour roadstead all had long cords stretched fore and aft from their masts, with dozens of pretty flags strung along them. Josephina went fast along the harbourside where the lighters came in to unload at the jetties—it was rough and noisy, but couples were promenading there and looking at things some of the sailors were offering for sale. One of the sailors was about Josephina's age; he looked as though he'd been baked, his hair was almost as white as Mutti's sun-bleached linens, and his face and arms were as dark as coffee. On a dirty blue neckerchief by his feet was an enormous trumpet-shaped shell with whorls going around it. When he saw her look at it, he picked the great shell up and held it out to her. His smile was terrible, with only a few black teeth left.

'Hold it to your ear, Fräulein,' he said in thick Lübsch dialect. 'This one can talk. It can tell you where it came from.' He put it to his ear and stood with his head on one side and his eyes closed. The fourth finger of his right hand was missing and so was the lobe of his ear not covered by the shell. 'Ah, what a

place,' he said, opening his eyes again. 'So beautiful. Like you, Fräulein.' He held the shell out again.

Josephina hurried on. She'd have liked to listen to the wonderful shell but the young sailor frightened her—he looked half crazy. What would he do when she told him she had no money to buy his treasure?

Some of the well-dressed townsfolk were exclaiming over a new three-masted steam-yacht with two slender funnels on top and mighty paddle-wheels on either side, like hips. It was just launched, people were saying, it was for the King of Portugal. It was steaming slowly down harbour as if being displayed. The crew, dressed in white uniforms, were lined up along the deck facing the town. One of the well-dressed spectators watching the King of Portugal's steam-yacht with its well-turned-out crew would surely buy the young sailor's beautiful shell. And one day they would surely want to buy her embroidery, which they would have heard about from Junkfrau von Zarovich, or seen, perhaps, when Junkfrau was looking at a royal steam-yacht while wearing an outdoor promenading outfit with a high-collared blouse embroidered in the Bohemian manner by Fräulein Josephina Hansen.

Josephina looked back as she turned away from the harbour towards Rathausstrasse and Nikolaikirche and the streets that led on down to Kieler Schloss and the garrison houses, but she couldn't see the young sailor. The old church sat weightily on the ground and it was hard to imagine how its tall green spire could seem to fall so lightly across the sky as the clouds went past. It was like a signal, and Josephina sent a message through the open door asking that Junkfrau would please admire her work on the nightgown, adding could someone please buy the poor young sailor's wonderful shell. Then she closed her eyes and imagined the tall steeple pointing to heaven and waving

her message.

It was as if she then opened her eyes again to find that the Nikolaikirche steeple had indeed sent her message, because there was Hauptmann von Zarovich smiling at her with his big teeth stained from cigars, in his shirtsleeves and riding breeches and, which gave her a shock, on his feet a pair of embroidered green tapestry-cloth house-slippers with red and white roses done in cross-stitch—she saw the slippers as, following Clara's hand signal behind her back, she bent to curtsy, and as she straightened and met the officer's examining stare she saw the ends of his moustache twitch and knew that he'd seen her noticing his slippers. Her heart was beating quickly, at first because she was nervous, but next because the Hauptmann's unexpected embroidered slippers were like another encouraging sign from the steeple.

He had thick fair hair and a moustache turned up at the ends Hussar-style; when he showed his big teeth in a grin the waxed ends of the moustache stood to attention.

'Very comfortable slippers from *Gujarat*,' he said, barking the strange place-name. 'Do you know where that is, Fräulein?'

'No sir,' she said, feeling the blush rise up out of her collar.

'Nor do I, Fräulein!' He was laughing at his joke and waving for Clara to leave the room. There was a careful clatter as she put the extra cup on the tray with the Hauptmann's unfinished breakfast, and then an equally careful click as she closed the door behind her. 'Nor do I,' repeated the man, 'my wife chose them as a present, she loves that sort of thing,' adding '*Gu-jarat*' with exaggerated movements of his lips. 'But then,' he said, continuing to stare at Josephina, 'everything beautiful comes to Kielerhafen in the end, wouldn't you say, Fräulein?'

Josephina thought of the poor young sailor's great whorled shell that could speak where it came from, but instead she said,

‘I like the sweet oranges, sir.’

‘Ah, the sweet oranges! I too like them.’ There was a silence while he continued to look at her. What was she expected to do? Then, inclining his head at a chair by his breakfast table, he said, ‘And the stupid girl didn’t even pour our coffee—would you mind, Fräulein?’

Outside by the main door, Papa’s journeyman Franz was planing coffin planks. The regular panting sound of the plane came into the house and as far as the back where Josephina and her mother sat at opposite ends of the big table with the shroud between them. It was one of the fresh new linens and smelled of sunlight. They were doing a border of blue crosses. Because they were not talking to each other anymore, the sound of Franz planing was like words going back and forth, mixed up with the clucking of hens looking for grains near the fodder stall. Mathilde now had Josephina’s old linen scrap treasure with the picture of Puck Puck the special chicken she’d embroidered on it, but Josephina sometimes told herself Puck Puck stories in the silence of her work with Mutti, and remembered the warmth of her special chicken against her chest when she was little, and its occasional pecks. When Mutti wanted to move her section of the border she rapped with her knuckles on the table. Soon it would snow, and Papa and Franz would keep their work inside for winter. Then they would all be there together: the two cows and old Gunnar in their stalls, the chickens, Franz or whichever worker stayed long enough, Josephina and Elke in their little loft, the trestles with unfinished coffins and tabletops on them in the space between the stalls, and Papa and Mutti by the fire arguing about how to get established in the town.

But ‘the Oma’ wasn’t there—her grandmother’s sampler

that was Josephina's now, covered all over with stitches making pictures of flowers and houses and animals in different coloured threads, and a snowy mountain with a little deer on top, that spoke the names of the stitches and also had Oma's voice in them, in the stories that each stitch told—little words for big stories that Oma told over and over and especially in winter, starting when Josephina was too small for sewing anything but Strikkelise, and when the birds made footprints that were like stitches on the snow by the big door and told the stories of the birds' songs, how they were cold now, not like those lucky ones that knew how to fly away somewhere nice and warm. Oma died after her husband was killed in the Danish war at Dybbøl Mill—he was buried over there by the marshes, along with the other 'fools', including two of his sons who thought it was a great thing to shoot at Danes with wonderful Prussian rifles because otherwise they would take all the farms and smallholdings like theirs. Josephina was seven when Oma fell down dead after making a sweep of her arm to scatter grain for the hens outside in the yard—she heard the old lady shout 'Hein!', which is what she called her husband, and then she fell down flat on her face like a plank. She was too angry was what Mutti thought, angry with the 'fools' who marched off to get blown to pieces for the Prussians, it was anger that killed her. But Josephina could remember Oma's stories, which were not angry; and when she was twelve Mutti gave her 'the Oma' to look after so she could properly learn the stitches that told the stories that told the stitches and that, after a while, began telling Josephina who she was: that she was a young woman now, that she could be proud of her skill, that she had value. But now the Oma was locked away in the big dark chest in her papa's and mutti's room, and Josephina couldn't have it back until she began to talk again.

Mutti rapped her knuckles on the table and then gave the shroud cloth a yank. Josephina was snipping a thread and the yank made her hand slip; the scissors pierced her thumb and some blood flicked on to the white linen.

It wasn't her fault, and when her mother said, 'Now look what you've done you stupid girl,' Josephina stood up and walked down between the stalls and out the big door past Franz who stopped planing to smile at her and make a little bow—it was going to rain, he'd be coming inside, he said—and down the hill as far as the gate. An inky black storm cloud quivering with lightning was stalled out over the sea. She stopped and let the great sobs burst out.

When as requested she came back into the Hauptmann's breakfast room with the nightgown on over her shift 'to show off your handiwork'—was it wrong to do that, it wasn't proper, she was ashamed, but perhaps it was what was expected?—she didn't know he would at once open the front of his breeches where his hand was already busy inside to make his big thing jump out, that he would push her face into the back of a sofa and tear at her undergarments, thrusting himself against her and then with a loud *Ah!* into her. There was blood on the nightgown when she changed back into her street dress; she left it on the floor and went out by the front door as ordered to. *And don't come back you little whore*—he threw some coins on the breakfast tray and left the room, and she just went out and walked. First she walked the wrong way over towards Ratsdienergarten, but there weren't enough people and voices to hide her, the lake was full of glaring light like a mirror and the hissing swans had left their filth all along the bank, so Josephina walked back across the town to the harbour. It was crowded and noisy so she stood near the place where the young

sailor had been, she could buy his shell with the Hauptmann's money, but he'd gone, and so had the King of Portugal's grand wide-hipped steam-yacht. When a man came and stood too close to her for a while and then said, 'So, Fräulein?' she walked away quickly and kept going all the way until she got to Tante Elizabeth's place and the huddle of houses, workshops and gardens there at the edge of Gaarden. This was where her papa planned to be 'established', but Josephina wanted him to come with good old Gunnar and take her away back down to the Schwentine where the town looked small and distant across the other side of the fjord and where the sky spread out and was almost white like silence above the sea beyond Laboe.

Mutti was excited and happy the day she and Josephina went to show samples of needlework to Junkfrau von Zarovich; she was imagining when they'd all move into a proper house in the town or at Gaarden—maybe even a house like the one on Faulstrasse where the Hauptmann lived, it wasn't so grand after all. The housemaid Clara didn't go *hmm-hmm* or make her thick eyebrows go up and down that time, because she was respectful of Josephina's mother—but, before opening the door to Junkfrau's bedroom, she put a finger on her lips and whispered that the Hauptmann's wife was not feeling well this morning, she'd had peppermint tea but nothing to eat for breakfast. Mutti nodded as if she understood the significance of the peppermint tea. Then they went in.

The large bed had a canopy supported on dark wood-turned spiral columns that Josephina thought her papa would very much like to see, and perhaps he would, one day soon; and there was a fine chaise longue with a lion's head carving on the back and tapestry covers depicting colourful birds where Junkfrau von Zarovich lay shielding her face from

the windows. She was wearing a loose, long-sleeved dressing gown in a lightweight material the colour of pale milk-coffee; it had ruffles down the front and pale-blue bows at the cuffs. A pair of embroidered slippers peeped out from the hem. She had a childish triangular mauve crochet shawl with slip-stitch edging around her shoulders and some strands of fair hair hung below her small white lace cap. She didn't get up to greet them, not even Josephina's mother, who spoke to her in her best German, calling her 'gnädige Frau' even though she was not much older than Josephina. She liked looking at the samples, though, running one finger over the stitches while looking at Josephina; but she didn't talk to her, only to Mutti. She especially liked the Bohemian vines and flowers, and she held out the ruffled cascade on the front of her dressing gown for Josephina to look at. Then she lay back and turned her face away; she hadn't once spoken to Josephina.

Clara was waiting outside the door and Mutti said nothing to her but in the kitchen she proudly told the cook that Junkfrau liked Josephina's work very much and wanted her to make a special 'lie-in' nightgown. The Stork was busy and in an irritated tone told Clara to show them the door.

'Old vinegar-face,' said Mutti once they were outside, but she and Josephina sang on the way home from Tante Elizabeth's with Papa in the cart; she'd told Tante how much the very beautiful young Frau von Zarovich (Mutti was no longer calling her Junkfrau) had loved Josephina's work and how she'd asked for a special lie-in nightgown to be made with a cascading ruffle front, which meant she was probably going to have a baby and there would no doubt be special baby clothes and comforters to make, and word would get around when other officers' wives saw what Josephina had made, they'd be jealous of Frau von Zarovich, and they'd also certainly hear

about the fine wood-craft work of Meister Hansen—and that night at home everyone was so happy, even Elke, who still had to get up and milk the cows after Papa said Josephina could leave the coffin cloth work for a while and make the special ‘lie-in nightgown’ for Junkfrau von Zarovich. He was smiling at her and his eyes had filled up with tears—from too much brandy perhaps but also because he was proud of his youngest daughter; he was very proud, very proud, he said so several times before it was time to go to bed, and he kissed her on both cheeks before she went up there with Elke. Then Elke was snoring a little; it was nice and warm; there was an owl.

Brian Easton

from *Not in Narrow Seas: The Economic History of Aotearoa New Zealand*

Final proof, forthcoming May 2020

Not in Narrow Seas borrows its title from Allen Curnow's pioneering 1939 work, a collection of great poems evoking New Zealand's isolation and fragility. 'In your atlas two islands not in narrow seas / Like a child's kite anchored in the indifferent blue,' says the opening poem, 'Statement'. New Zealand is seen as 'cringing' beneath a cold wind from Antarctica, 'Two islands pointing from the Pole, upward / From the Ross Sea and the tall havenless ice'. Curnow famously suggested that the inhabitants of these remote islands were still not sure who they were: it was 'a land of settlers / With never a soul at home.' And his next collection (*Sailing or Drowning*, 1943) concludes with the endlessly recycled lines 'Not I, some child, born in a marvellous year, / Will learn the trick of standing upright here.'

Curnow's poetry is a gift for an economist. It captures certain brutal truths about our country. If the land mass later known as New Zealand had sunk beneath the waves 23 million-odd years ago, the history of the world would have been little different. If the tyranny of distance and global insignificance gave life here a particular edge, its economic effects were profound and permanent. Curnow's 'anti-myth' about the anxiety and uncertainty of the nation's people perhaps bred the familiar counter-myth described by historian Keith Sinclair as the LBW syndrome: New Zealand 'leading the bloody world' or sometimes 'lagging the bloody world'. In fact New Zealand usually ranks in the middle of the bunch of the 30 or so rich

countries. Global interconnectedness is more complex and subtle than LBW supposes.

As for New Zealanders' recurrent obsession with their identity, this too has deep economic roots. Once the European settlers exposed New Zealand to the world, it had colonial (or neocolonial) status. As Britain's imperial reach shrank, New Zealand's ties to Britain loosened and it began to engage with more of the world's economy. Because it is small, it remains a 'neocolony of the world'; in a globalised age most economies do. Hence Aotearoa New Zealand's constant preoccupation with nationalism and national identity. Even the common nineteenth-century idea that New Zealand was a 'better Britain' articulated some sense of national uniqueness, however subservient it might now seem.

Aotearoa New Zealand's story is about immigrants and how the newcomers coped. Each wave of settlers arrived with a great weight of cultural baggage, accumulated over generations. We can't understand our history unless we understand something of the migrants' back-story. So it is necessary to consider where the proto-Māori came from, to delve back into the seventeenth century to understand nineteenth-century British immigrants, and to describe the last two centuries of the Pacific Islands whence came New Zealand's Pasifika people. In each case the immigrants had to adapt their inherited ways to life here.

The islands they came to were not passive; they interacted with the humans, each shaping the other. The earliest settlers, having made a heroic 3000km ocean journey from east Polynesia, found that some staples of their diet (notably kūmara) would grow here but others would not. These migrants were truly on their own in the new land as climate change made the journeying back too difficult. It was perhaps inevitable that their economy was based first on mining the

country's resources, starting especially with the most easily available: the staggering riches of the sea, the lumbering meat larder of moa, seals, and some of the native birds.

This is the economy of the quarry, and it would be replicated by the European settlers. In each case the result was the same: depletion and even disappearance of resources that could not readily be replaced (cleared forests and dying species; the moa and the whale are totems). At a certain point the problem of resource sustainability had to be faced, and it was then that the now-celebrated Green Māori appeared with the hard-won strategy of the rāhui, a ban on the taking of depleting resources. The European settlers' quarry economy, of course, caused a much greater devastation and the effects are all around us. Fishing quotas, native forest protection regimes and even the measures to combat global warming are modern versions of rāhui.

Many historians have told the Aotearoa New Zealand story before; but an economist uses a particular lens and, I would argue, helps us to see our nation's history in a new way. Too often we take the hard economic core of our history for granted, or we give it merely fleeting attention. Sex is notably absent from the Victorian novel; the economy is almost as rare among recent novels and histories. To give an account of a society without paying attention to its economic underpinnings is about as sensible as telling a love story without sex. It can be done, of course, but certain vital facts of life are left out.

The biographies of some of our most famous politicians, for instance, rarely consider the economic environment in which they lived. The Liberal Premier Richard John Seddon and Labour Prime Minister Michael Joseph Savage governed in periods of prosperity, and it is partly for that reason that they are remembered. Contrast them with two equally important

but far lesser-known politicians who led their country, Harry Atkinson from the nineteenth century and Gordon Coates from the early to middle twentieth. Both were important precursors to the two great progressive leaders Seddon and Savage, with Atkinson an early advocate of the welfare state and Coates of a more active form of economic management. But they were long undervalued and remain inadequately remembered, partly because they both held power during economic depression and stagnation. Politicians who live in hard times tend to get a bad press, if any.

Or consider the much celebrated political break-up of the great settler farming estates by the Liberal Government at the end of the nineteenth century. This was a major political and economic reform. The great sheep stations represented a hierarchical, class-bound society; the much smaller family farms created by their dismemberment symbolised a more egalitarian, family-based and less formal one. But the changes were driven by economic factors and would probably have taken place anyway, and the political reform was much less important than the economic drivers that helped make it possible. Refrigeration and the rise of the meat industry made the break-up more profitable for the estate owners. They had good economic reasons to dismember their vast holdings.

Or take the role of the gold rushes in the quarry economy and the rise of the cities. Histories of my own home town of Christchurch, for example, tend to take its early prosperity as a given. That contrasts with most other settlements which, after an initial boom, lapsed into depression. The difference with Christchurch seems to have been that about the time it should have gone through the same down cycle, the Melbourne goldfields opened up (in 1851). Christchurch prospered, as did other regions, by supplying the miners with food. So economic

facts neglected by historians throw a new light on the city's story.

Similarly, Britain's entry into the European Economic Community in 1973 is often seen as a major break in New Zealand's history. This, so the story goes, shocked New Zealand into diversifying its export market and its economy more generally. It would have to sell to the world and not just the mother country. The reality is rather different. In 1973 the diversification was already underway. The Britain export market was already in rapid decline. It was certainly still a major buyer of farm products such as butter, cheese and lamb; but by then these made up only 30 percent of New Zealand's total exports of goods. So the diversification was driven by the market rather than British politicians. A far more important change to the economy was the almost permanent collapse of the wool price at the end of 1966, effectively ending the political economy which had reigned since 1882.

An even more important economic event in New Zealand's history was the introduction of refrigerated shipping in 1882—and other related technologies—which substantially reduced the tyranny of distance. It enabled the country to sell meat and dairy products to markets—Britain above all—on the other side of the world. But it also made possible a more sustainable economy in a land whose quarry economy was being exhausted and which increasingly looked as though it could not pay its way in the world. It transformed the political economy to one where the family farm was at its centre.

Modern Aotearoa New Zealand is a market economy which sells its products to the world; this fact is so familiar that we tend to forget how important the non-market economy has always been. The economy of the Māori was based on Polynesian gift exchange, where the transaction was more about mana than

profit. Similarly, European settlers sprang from pre-market or even feudal Britain. Nor did they entirely leave that pre-market when they came to New Zealand. Much of their small farming was self-sufficient or near-subsistence. While family farms had become commercial operations by the end of the nineteenth century, subsistence farming (supplemented by some off-farm sources of cash income) continued in Māoridom until well into the twentieth century.

Economic activities in the home occur largely in the non-market economy. Changes there, driven by new technologies and changes in family size and composition, led to big changes in the story of Aotearoa New Zealand as well as of the economy. The entry of women into the workforce, partly freed from the household by labour-saving devices, changed everything. The largely invisible half of the workforce—traditionally not even included when workers or the unemployed were counted—could no longer be ignored.

Modern Aotearoa New Zealand is politically centralised. The line between direction by the market and by the state has shifted over the years, but compared with other economies with similar standards of living, the state has played a very central role in the economy. Part of the reason is that government preceded European mass settlement. In other former colonies such as the United States, settlement began 150 years before a federal government was formed. This meant that American society produced deeply rooted social institutions with which the state had to negotiate or contend. New Zealand, by contrast, was a ‘hollow’ society, without independent entities to mediate between the government and individuals.

The implications for our development are many, not all of them positive. The state developed a commanding presence and could powerfully affect economic development. But the

state could also create institutions which were mere creatures of statute and without statutory support might weaken and even die. The history of trade unionism is a case in point. When unionism lost its state sponsorship with the introduction of the anti-union Employment Contracts Act of 1991, the unions withered.

Some powerful economic myths have played a major role in the history of New Zealand; one is the claim that it is an egalitarian country, where Jack is as good as his master and wealth and incomes are evenly spread. It is hard to judge how much truth there is in the myth. There is some evidence for it in colonial times, when British farm workers had the opportunity in the colony to become small farmers. And in the 30 years after the Second World War there is strong evidence of a reduction in inequality of incomes. However, inequality grew markedly during the top-down economic revolution (1985–1993) known as Rogernomics.

The argument about inequality also raises the spectre of New Zealand as ‘the land of the long pink cloud’. Much of our history has indeed been written from a leftish perspective. However, the pink cloud obscures the total story of New Zealand’s development. The history of the labour movement, for instance, tends to focus more on its militant wing—perhaps inevitably, since that was the one whose activities were so controversial—than on the quieter working majority.

The left perspective sets out a tension between the pink progressive governments and the blue conservative ones in which the former win in the long run despite being out of power for two-thirds of the time. However, many of the blues were also progressives—National governments have a tradition of accepting the reforms of their Labour forerunners—but with a different agenda. Aotearoa New Zealand may be the land of

the long white cloud. But it is a green land nestled in blue sea and sky.

This takes us back to the ‘colonial cringe’. The mistake of the pink cloud thesis arose from taking well-established foreign theories but failing to adapt them to local conditions. Rather than thinking through the local problem, those suffering from the cringe grab whatever is going off a foreign shelf. This is a long-standing habit in New Zealand. At the heart of Rogernomics, for instance, was the application of an extremist form of free-market theory to New Zealand as though the country were an idealised United States. The result was a deep and self-inflicted wound to the economy unique in our history. The period of stagnation between 1986 and 1993 was the result of the influence of ideology, unlike previous recessions and depressions, which were generally caused by contractions in our overseas markets.

This history falls into six parts.

The first covers the physical development of the islands and the economy of the first Polynesian settlers up till the arrival of the European settlers. The proto-Māori and Māori economy was a subsistence one, but subsistence did not mean starvation. Their gardens and fishing grounds provided adequate food, and economic surpluses went into artistic creation and community-building activity. The people generally lived the good life. Tsunamis and earthquakes could cause sudden devastation, but the effects were usually local and limited. When the Europeans arrived Māori life expectancy was probably not much different from their visitors’.

Economic exchange in pre-European times was typically of the ‘gift exchange’ variety, where the focus was on the transactors rather than the transaction. ‘Gifts’ brought an

obligation of reciprocity sooner or later, an obligation not captured in the English word. The relative values of the goods or services exchanged, moreover, were well understood. Some of the exchanges amounted to bartering. This meant Māori were experienced traders, and they quickly became expert at trading with the European settlers.

Māori attitudes to land, however, were unlike those of the Europeans. The idea of permanent alienation of land through sale—the dominant European idea—had no place in traditional Māoridom. If land was transferred, it was to cement marriage and diplomatic ties, or as a result of conquest in war. There was a gulf in values and in understanding between the two cultures, and it helped lead to war. The European musket had already devastated the Māori world; it turned limited hand-to-hand traditional conflict between tribes into mass slaughter (perhaps 20,000 Māori died). Its economic effects were also large; Te Rauparaha was said at one point to have had 2000 slaves preparing flax to trade for guns.

As Part II explains, the Europeans brought the market economy to Aotearoa, and its inevitable pattern of boom and bust. The first boom, partly the result of a sudden inundation of settlers, was quickly followed by the first bust. Within a year of the arrival of the *Tory*, the flagship of the colonising New Zealand Company, the new colony sank into depression. There was not enough land for the colonists, and with a continuing wave of ships arriving there were too many workers and wages slumped.

And already there were signs that the new European-based quarry economy could not last. By 1845 the whale catch had fallen till it could no longer carry the colony. But what would? In the short run there was the stimulus of war. Wellington became an armed camp by the late 1840s; feeding the soldiers

fed the economy too. The New Zealand Wars of 1861–72 helped create an economic infrastructure (roads, bridges, and ports were built for invading soldiers); and the vast confiscation afterwards of Māori lands provided the fertile farmlands the settlers craved. Gold rushes in the 1850s and 1860s provided another source of income, although inevitably a temporary one.

Wool turned out to be a staple commodity of a longer-lasting economy. But by 1870 many of the fruits of the quarry were disappearing while the wool economy had not yet fully launched. Help arrived in the shape of Julius Vogel, the most significant early example of the Borrow-and-Hope, Think-Big politician—a type which would recur. Vogel’s overseas-funded development programme kick-started the economy and built valuable infrastructure. But there was no export staple to pay for it, and his Think Big programme could have led to disaster.

This very nearly happened, because the long depression of the 1880s and 1890s in the Northern Hemisphere soon spread to New Zealand. A hardrock gold mining boom and its trade with the Australian market helped see Auckland through. But the fundamental risks and dangers of the colonial economy were now clear. How could New Zealand make its way in the world?

The answer was through refrigeration, as Part III explains. The first frozen lamb was shipped in 1882, leading to a boom in sheep farming; a dairy boom, also based on refrigerated exports, came a little later. Family farms provided the meat and the wool and stimulated jobs in service industries and towns. Society changed as towns grew into cities with a recognisable working class; politics reflected the change, with the rise of the Liberals, the early welfare state, and then the Labour Party. Women became a more prominent part of public life.

But boom times under the Liberals turned to a long period of stagnation as overseas prices fell; depression struck in the early 1930s. Recovery from depression, the result of rising overseas prices and Keynesianism at home, flagged in the late 1930s; but world war brought another boom.

Postwar New Zealand, as Part IV explains, brought a long-lasting boom and unprecedented social transformation. Class structures were changing and so was politics. Labour Cabinet Minister Bob Semple said ‘the bastards walked to the poll booths [in 1935] to vote us in, and drove to them [in 1949] to vote us out’. Increasing affluence brought increasing conservatism; National proved to be the more enduring party of government. Society was changing fast: Māori flooded into the cities and Pasifika people into New Zealand; mothers flowed into the labour market. National embraced the welfare state after condemning its launch by Labour; it continued to administer an economy heavily controlled by the state, with import licensing at the border and a centralised system of wage-fixing.

The whole system started to unravel in 1966 when wool prices collapsed. After a brief recovery in the early 1970s, wool prices never returned to their real postwar levels. A major prop of the pastoral economy was undermined. Economic growth slowed; farmers could no longer generate the overseas income the country needed. In a protected and centralised economy the losses were passed on like an economic version of ‘pass the parcel in a Belfast pub’, where the bomb of a real income cut was passed on via price and wage hikes to the next person. Unemployment rose and inflation soared. Robert Muldoon, despite being the most aggressive politician in New Zealand history, could not make the changes desperately needed.

The revolution in economic policy known as Rogernomics

is the focus of Part V. The aim was to modernise the economy and find an alternative to a framework which had clearly broken down under Muldoon. Undoubtedly a more-market approach to the economy was needed. Import licensing, launched by Labour in 1938, had by the 1980s become a barrier to economic development, locking the manufacturing structure into the past and entrenching manufacturing interests opposed to its dismantling. Unions, similarly, were locked into an inflexible system: compulsory unionism delivered members to often small unions enmeshed in a complex steel web of relativities. The external economy had rapidly diversified; the sclerotic internal system held it back.

Rogernomics recognised the failures of the system, but its remedies were extreme and often ineffective. The consequence was a rise in social inequality and a rolling back of the welfare state, which was only possible because the ‘hollow society’ could not resist it. Labour’s revolution—continued during National’s first term—sparked a populist revolt which upended the front-runner (winner-takes-all) electoral system. While Rogernomics was broadly a failure, however, the political debate about it continued.

In Allen Curnow’s ‘Out of Sleep’, the newly awoken poet tries to make sense of his surroundings: ‘[A] gust in the damp cedar hissing / Will have the mist right off in half a minute. / You will not grasp the meaning, you will be in it.’ An historian contemplating very recent history faces a similar difficulty. But the attempt must be made; Part VI tries. There has been a renaissance in Māoridom, with the new MMP system giving Māori much more political power. Treaty settlements have also given Māori much more economic clout, though the extent of that new wealth is often exaggerated.

The increased power of business represents a fundamental

change in the political economy. At some time in the late 1990s, however, the business community began concluding that neoliberalism (Rogernomics) no longer served its interests. There was a return to the traditional partnership with government, a revived form of NZ Inc. But what this meant in policy terms remains unclear. We are still trying to decide what to do with the legacy of Rogernomics, and in particular the hefty rise in inequality—and poverty—which it has left.

The Clark–Cullen Labour Government wanted to reverse the extremism of Rogernomics, but had trouble thinking through alternatives to the neoliberal structure. The Key–English National Government’s pro-business approach included elements of crony capitalism mixed with policy inertia: the politics of ‘mañana’ or, to use the Kiwi version, of ‘she’ll be right’, an approach all too familiar in New Zealand’s history. Jacinda Ardern’s Labour Party did not expect to be elected in 2017, and was hardly prepared in policy terms for government. The resulting coalition government continues to grapple with the implications of promises without policy and a formidable backlog of unmet social and economic needs.

Under the Ardern–Peters Government, as under those before it, Aotearoa New Zealand is constantly renegotiating its role in the global economy. No man is an island, John Donne said, and no economy is either, even an economy of remote islands set in the vast blue sea.

Hinemoana Baker

How to Survive on a Plinth

from *Funkhaus*

Final proof, forthcoming May 2020

I asked a number of horses and hanged dictators
of history and some of the big-name gods
and goddesses, the dog who waited on that train platform,
a statue even then among the commuters.

When all I could find were fountains
I asked the thing with the tail and lifelike scales
glinting in the water's fall and the small children
emptying that same water from pots and urns

and seashells and their own bladders
for centuries into the seasonal air.
I asked the woman at the top of the composition
who named the whole place

and the one whose dress is a lace of language
and the rugby team, the graveyard angels and
their loyal pigeons, silent lions.

I asked a gryphon, a huntaway, a bear,

the man squinting his open eye into his camera
and the other man who walked accidentally into shot.
The soldiers with quiet bayonets
pointing at their acres of paving.

Pip Adam

from *Nothing to See*

Final proof, forthcoming June 2020

‘Huh?’ Greta was lying on Peggy’s stomach.

‘Everything seems so dark,’ said Peggy. They were both reading. They’d gone to their room with the intention of reading. ‘We’re just going to read,’ they’d said to their flatmate Dell. But for the last half hour or so they’d been staring out at their room over the top of their books. They were just learning how to spend time.

‘Like everything,’ Peggy said.

Greta was sleepy. They’d been up too late. The cold and heavy of the Sunday evening was settling down.

‘When I think back to what we did this week or last week or the week before. It’s all so dark.’

‘We’ve been up a lot at night,’ Greta said. She put her book on her chest.

‘Yeah.’ Peggy turned round so she could see out the high window above their bed. Greta’s head moved with the change in Peggy’s position. ‘You’re right.’

They sat like that for a moment. Peggy wound round to look up and out the window, watching the grey sky. Greta staring at the ceiling, book on her chest, and head, precarious now, on Peggy’s stomach.

‘We should get some food,’ Greta said.

‘Yeah,’ said Peggy. ‘Do we have any money?’

Greta scratched her head. Her hands were swamped in a long jumper and she scratched her head through the sleeves. Her dark, short hair stood up. She wiped her nose with the sleeve of the jumper. ‘Not much.’

‘Enough for tom yum?’ Peggy’s voice lightened a little.

‘Yeah?’ Greta said. ‘How much is tom yum, again?’

‘Eight bucks,’ Peggy said. She was getting up now. Greta fell off her lap. ‘Eleven, if you have noodles. The noodles are three dollars. If we have the noodles we only need one bowl of soup.’

‘What’s the date?’ Greta said.

Peggy shrugged. ‘Like, the sixth?’

‘We should be golden.’

‘Can we get spring rolls?’ Peggy asked. They’d both put on heaps of weight since they’d stopped drinking. A few weeks ago, Peggy worked out that if they took more Antabuse than they were supposed to it gave them diarrhoea. The counsellors at rehab were dark on dieting or vomiting but Peggy was pretty sure they’d get away with it now they were out. Except, Greta pointed out, if they both kept taking more than they were supposed to, they’d probably need more Antabuse sooner than they were supposed to.

‘What date does rent come out on?’

‘Like, the fourteenth?’ Peggy was pulling on their Converse All Stars. She pulled a floral dress over a long-sleeved top and leggings. The dress had been bigger. She was looking around for their fisherman’s rib jumper. Then she stopped. ‘But . . .’ She rubbed her eyes and the black eyeliner left over from the day before smeared more. ‘We can’t fly too close to the wind,’ cause it’s not like if we spend the rent it’ll magically come again from somewhere else.’

‘How much do we have in cash?’

Peggy started going through the pockets of the jackets and trousers on the floor.

They’d gone to a budget advisor. He hadn’t said much and had mainly looked at the pieces of paper their case manager had sent. He’d cut their credit card up in front of them—while

they were still sitting there. They'd looked in the rubbish bin at the fragments of plastic while he moved on to other things. He rang the gym that had sent their debt to a debt collector, and worked out 'terms'.

They were on a sickness benefit, but every now and then they'd sleep with men for money. The counsellor at rehab said if they sat in the barber's chair long enough they'd get a haircut, which as far as they could tell was true (the others from rehab were falling like flies), but sometimes the rent was due and it wasn't like anyone would give either of them a job. A job that still left time to go to meetings and counselling and doctor's appointments. 'That's what the sickness benefit is for,' the counsellor said as he signed the forms for them before they left rehab. 'So you can concentrate on staying sober.'

They wanted to stay sober more than anything. They sat up late into the night talking about how much they wanted to stay clean. How much they wanted to start a new life. What they'd do to stay away from a drink. 'If I was like . . . if I thought I was going to drink, I'd fucking . . . I'd go to the police station and say "Arrest me" and if they wouldn't, I'd break a window.' 'Yeah,' they'd both say. 'Yeah.' They went to a meeting every day—most days they went to two meetings. They were making friends. They got invited to go tenpin bowling. They got sick together and they'd get well together.

'Three dollars,' Peggy said. She was resting the combination of coins in her hand—they had small hands.

'Well,' said Greta, who was still lying on the bed. 'That's the noodles already. Like, in your hand.'

'There's so much fucking money,' Peggy said. They'd pissed a lot of money against the wall. Things were tight now, but they had a roof and some clothes and they had enough for noodles without even checking their EFTPOS card.

‘Fucking love being sober,’ Greta said.

‘Fucking *love* being sober,’ Peggy said.

‘I’m going to check the wallet,’ said Greta, and she grabbed their canvas army surplus bag and pulled everything out until she found the wallet. There was a five-dollar note. Greta looked up at Peggy with a smile so broad her face might come apart at the seams. ‘We’re fucking loaded! We’ve got like’—she counted it—‘eight bucks!’

‘We must have three in the bank?’ Peggy said.

Greta looked at her.

‘For the noodles.’

‘For the noodles,’ Greta agreed.

It stopped them for a minute. How lucky they were, and they just stood and looked at the wall and basked in the luck.

‘Shouldn’t we be happy with just the soup?’ Greta asked.

‘Like, finding that eight bucks—that’s pretty awesome.’

Peggy thought about it. ‘I think god would want us to have noodles.’

Greta wondered.

‘God didn’t save us from drowning for us not to have noodles on the shore,’ Peggy said. ‘God wants us to have a noodle life.’

Greta laughed. Peggy did, too. It was okay to joke about god a bit. It wasn’t that kind of god. It was like a small ‘g’ god. Their counsellor at rehab had made them look at the hills surrounding the rehab buildings. ‘Are the hills bigger than you?’ ‘Yes.’ They were never surer of anything before in their life. They couldn’t stop drinking and the hills were big.

Their flatmate Dell was in the lounge. She was reading too—staring at the wall, book in lap. They didn’t have a television and the days without drink were long.

‘Are you guys going to a meeting?’ she said. They’d all moved

in together after rehab. It had seemed safe but it really wasn't. Their other flatmate, Heidi, had started drinking again—or maybe she hadn't. She was never home, or maybe she snuck in and out without them realising. None of them liked to be left alone.

'We're going for tom yum,' Peggy said. 'We went to a meeting this morning.'

'And at lunchtime,' Greta said.

'Oh.' Dell looked at her watch. 'I think I don't have time for dinner. Carol's picking me up.'

'For the one over that way?' Peggy asked, pointing in the direction she thought the meeting was.

Dell nodded. It was a pretty great meeting, but Peggy and Greta had already been to two meetings and they were hungry and they'd found the money. Just before they left rehab, they'd been told to go to meetings, they all had. Peggy and Greta wanted to be sober more than anything, so they did what they were told. The meetings were weird. Peggy and Greta had no idea what was going on. They had been about to give up going to meetings when a woman called Diane came over to where they were waiting for their bus home. Diane had been coming to meetings for a long time. Diane hadn't had a drink for a long time. She gave them her phone number, written on a small piece of paper in blue ballpoint. 'We don't know what to do,' Peggy said as Diane was walking away, and Diane stopped and came back. 'What do we do?' Diane said she didn't know what Peggy and Greta needed to do, but she could tell them what she did. Diane said that to begin with she went to daytime meetings on Sundays. Sundays were hard and Peggy and Greta often wanted a drink. Diane said maybe they could go to daytime meetings, and on Sunday nights they could get ready for Monday. Routine was good.

‘Will you get something to eat?’ Greta asked now. ‘You have to eat dinner.’

‘Oh yeah,’ said Dell. ‘There are some baked beans and I can make some toast.’ Now Peggy and Greta felt like they should stay and have baked beans on toast too. Should they save the eight dollars for buses and savings? What were they supposed to do? If they went out for tom yum would they drink again? If they stayed for baked beans would they drink again? Diane had told them not to overthink things. Carol was Dell and Heidi’s Diane. She seemed a lot more loving than Diane. Diane never picked them up for meetings. She told them to pick up ashtrays at the end of the meetings, to talk to newcomers, forget themselves. Carol told Dell and Heidi to treat themselves like their best friend.

Peggy and Greta wanted to stay sober. Wanted to stay sober more than they wanted their old life back. Their old life had been rape and beatings, and drinking had stopped helping, stopped working—completely. The people they knew from rehab who had started drinking again told them that some people could drink, and that was true, and Peggy and Greta and Dell tried not to have an opinion about whether Heidi was one of those people, but they all knew to their core, just right now, that none of them could drink safely again. Every now and then a thought would sneak in, but when they talked about it they could see what their mind was up to. So, they decided not to have a drink just for now. Just now they wouldn’t have a drink, and now, and now, and now, and then it was another day and today it was ten months and three weeks and two days.

‘Well, we’re going to have tom yum,’ Greta said. Peggy nodded.

‘Cool,’ Dell said. ‘Have a good time.’ Dell was way chiller than Peggy and Greta. It was like she knew more, or understood

more, or was older. It was one of the things they stayed up late talking about. Maybe it was Carol. Maybe the whole 'treat yourself like your own best friend' thing made Dell feel like she had everything she needed. That there was no need to be sad, or angry, or anxious. Maybe it was easier to accept baked beans on toast for dinner when you were looking after yourself well.

Greta and Peggy fought everything. Everyone said, 'Let go.' Anything Peggy and Greta let go of had teeth marks in it. They laughed about that as they walked down the street. The heavy dusk was falling in. It felt like they were walking underwater. It was all so heavy.

'It's so dark,' Peggy said.

Greta nodded. She was kicking a stone in an obsessed way like their life depended on it. The road they lived on was busy. Where were people going? It was five o'clock on a Sunday.

'Dark,' Peggy said.

'Yeah,' Greta said.

When they were tiny, like, really small, there had been a very hot summer and all the mothers took all the babies to the paddling pool in the Botanical Gardens. The story went that everyone was sunburnt before they reached the end of their street. The pushchairs were all made of metal, they didn't even have cushions in them. They weren't adjustable except the back of the seat could be dropped to lying down. Being a baby wasn't meant to be a cakewalk. Neither was being a mother. Peggy and Greta weren't particularly wanted. When mothers like theirs were angry this is what they would tell daughters like Peggy and Greta. 'I never wanted to have a baby. But I did my best.' And they did, except when they didn't. Mothers like Peggy and Greta's were not happy about Peggy and Greta getting sober. Neither were fathers like Peggy and Greta's, or brothers like theirs, or any of the girls at the parlour or the

married men they'd been sleeping with before they got sober. Greta and Peggy felt very alone. 'If it wasn't for you,' they'd say to each other as the sun came up. As they got on their knees and begged for one more day sober, as they picked up ashtrays at the meetings in the old stone building by the grassy square. 'If it wasn't for you,' with their eyes, with their heart, to god—to say thanks. 'You've taken almost everything,' they'd say in their braver moments to something that was powerful and terrifying, that they couldn't understand, something like the big hills, 'but thank you for giving me her.'

When they got to the wide avenue at the end of their street, Greta slowed. She looked down the tree-lined footpath. 'We could go to the Krishnas?' she said. 'It's heaps cheaper.'

Peggy thought about it. 'All that fucking chanting, though.' 'It's not that bad,' Greta said. 'It's good for us. Probably.'

'I really want tom yum. We're sort of all prepped for tom yum.'

'Yeah,' Greta said. 'But we should go to the Krishnas next week.'

'If we're alive.' Peggy pushed the button on the traffic light so they could cross. 'If you and I—or one of us—is still alive next Sunday we'll go to the Krishnas and eat prasadam and chant like motherfuckers.'

'But not get married,' Greta said. A woman they knew had gone into the Hare Krishnas and been married to a man, and then she'd left the Hare Krishnas. Every woman who married this man left. They left and the Hare Krishnas found him another wife. No one had seen her since she got married. Peggy and Greta had no idea if she'd left the Krishnas, they just heard from someone. There was a lot of that—gossip, intrigue. Things were boring without drinking.

'Agreed,' said Greta. 'No marriage, just prasadam.' She

looked behind herself because she'd lost the stone she was kicking. They were both like that. Acutely obsessed and wildly distractible. Peggy looked around, took a step and picked up a small, round stone. She dropped it at Greta's feet and Greta smiled. She patted Peggy on the arm to say thanks. If it wasn't for you.

They couldn't walk straight through the grid system to tom yum. There were a couple of houses that still held a bit of a pull. It was best to avoid them, especially on a depressing Sunday night. One day it wouldn't tempt them. One day they'd joke and say, 'There's not enough alcohol in the whole wide world to satisfy the deep hole in us, so why start?' But there were men in the houses, and where there were men there was the illusion that Peggy and Greta could get what they needed. A habitual idea that the men could give them enough alcohol and drugs to satisfy the deep hole. They'd been raped in both the houses. Lots and lots of times. Once on a terrible night towards the end—smashed in the face and smashed apart by all the men in the house. To an amateur that would seem like enough to put them off. But when they first got back from rehab a week before Dell and Heidi they'd found themselves outside the house, thirsty, starving, telling each other how it wasn't that bad. Not really. On balance. Compared to not having a drink or a taste ever again. The sun set while they stood there. The lights had come on in the house, they could see the men walking around in the windows. The guy who'd pissed on Peggy and Greta while they lay bleeding and naked in the lounge came out onto the deck because he thought he'd seen them from inside. 'Peggy,' he'd shouted. 'Greta, is that you?' and they'd stood and looked at him without answering. Looked at how much bigger he was than both of them. Realised, again, like they always did, that they didn't stand a chance against how much

bigger he was and how he had all the others on his side. Still, they thought, maybe. Maybe it'll be different tonight. Maybe they could get in and get what they needed and then leave. Maybe just steal money—or ask for money. Ask for money for all the times they'd fucked him for free, for drugs. Like debt collectors. And then he walked to the front gate and shouted at them again. And they'd said, quietly, in something only slightly louder than a mumble, 'No.' No, it wasn't them. It was someone else. And they'd walked away realising it wasn't a lie. They were someone else.

They weren't sure they could do it again, so they avoided the house and walked a strange elliptical route to the short mall where the Thai place was.

'Hello,' the woman at the counter said. 'One tom yum soup?' They both nodded. 'With two noodles?' she asked.

'One noodles,' Greta said, and the woman nodded and Peggy and Greta sat down.

The hot soup always made their stomach play up. Peggy thought it was the mushrooms but Greta said she was dreaming. 'It's really spicy,' Greta said. 'Our stomach sucks.' They'd spent a lot of time vomiting. Vomiting because they were piss-crook, vomiting because they drank too much, vomiting because they were too fat. How could they expect their stomachs to work properly, now? Especially when they poured spoonfuls of fiery hot soup into them.

They sat at a table near the door and Peggy played with the chopsticks.

'Did Dell say Heidi had been home?' Greta asked.

Peggy shook her head.

'I wish she'd come home,' Greta said.

'Me too,' Peggy said. The guy Heidi was with was dangerous and awful. His name was Ian. He lived way out in a place that

was like the country. In a house on a big swathe of land. Ian was in the meetings but he always shared about how much he hated them. How men didn't like him. How he thought everyone else in the meetings was fake. The first time they met him, Peggy and Greta raised their eyebrows at each other. They knew men like Ian. Staying away from men like Ian was a big part of how their new life was going to be different. Peggy had seen him come up to Greta after the meeting. She was across the room picking up ashtrays. She shouted, 'Greta, we've got that thing.' And Greta said, 'Oh yeah,' and apologised to him and went to help Peggy. He'd cornered both of them at a meeting a few days later and told them he knew what they were up to with the whole 'We have that thing' routine. Peggy looked at the ground the whole time he got in her face, telling her if one of them wanted to talk to him, they could talk to him, telling them they didn't own each other, despite what it looked like. Diane had a word with him and he had never spoken to either of them again. Diane was hardcore. They both said it to each other. Like, she wasn't perfect, no one was perfect, but she was pretty fucking awesome—for someone who didn't drink.

The other men in the meetings tried to talk to Ian but he said they were ganging up on him and jealous. Men like Ian thought everyone was against them and that if there was a real victim in the situation it was them. Peggy and Greta could see it in Ian's body and hear it when he talked—above everything, this was what made him the most dangerous.

At another meeting, Ian started talking to Heidi. Peggy and Greta yelled, 'Heidi, we've got that thing.' But it didn't work—Heidi waved at them and smiled. Then Heidi didn't come home for four days and the three of them, Dell, Greta and Peggy, sat round the table and tried to talk each other into calling the police. 'He could have killed her,' Dell said. And while they

wanted to say ‘Don’t be ridiculous’, Peggy and Greta knew men like Ian. Women were killed like that all the time. Women they knew were killed like that. Stabbed, strangled, left in rivers. Sometimes Greta and Peggy thought they were overreacting, that they’d seen too many movies. They used to live in a big city further north, before there were two of them. One morning, they woke up and looked around the room. There was a gun by the door and a safe, and men had come the day before to ask where the money for the drugs was. They were lying next to the man who had offered them as payment, and it hit them hard and immediately that this was not a movie. It was their life. They crept out of bed, too scared to get their boots. Too scared to look for their cardigan, and they snuck out and walked the two kilometres back to their flat. There were too many guns in the city, they decided that morning, and they moved south and then before they knew it—maybe four weeks later—they were in a room with a gun and a safe and another terrible man. If they were going to make a change, it had to be more than geographical.

Heidi turned up with Ian on the fifth day. She said they all needed to stay out of her life. That her life was her life. Especially Dell, Dell could stay the fuck out. Heidi and Dell hadn’t met many men like Ian. Greta and Peggy saw it on that day. They had rich parents who sent them to private and expensive counsellors and self-improvement courses before they went to rehab. It was possible Heidi and Dell had only met nice men. It was possible that Heidi thought Ian was a nice man under a big barrel of sadness and that if she could wash away that sadness she’d be left with just the nice man. Then Heidi started coming home with bruises on her arms and then just to get clean clothes and then with a black eye and with the sharp tang of vomit on her. Peggy and Greta and Dell

watched her go back and forth from the laundry to her room to the kitchen, pleading with her. Then she said if they really wanted to help, maybe they could loan her, like, twenty bucks, and then everyone started shouting and Dell punched Heidi and Heidi threatened to call the police. Dell and Heidi were already on parole for drink-driving, so Peggy and Greta gave her the twenty-eight dollars from the jar by the oven they'd saved for the electricity bill, and then Heidi left and Dell, Peggy and Greta sat in silence and worried about how they would pay the electricity bill and whether Heidi had moved out. But she hadn't. She still had a key and they were sure she was sneaking in when none of them were there.

'You'd think we would have seen her.' Peggy looked intently at the chopsticks and the fork she was balancing them on. 'Like, in town.' The chopsticks fell off the fork and almost rolled onto the floor before she could catch them. 'It's small here.'

Greta nodded. 'Maybe she just stays at his house now. With Ian.'

Peggy nodded. 'Maybe.'

They saw Ian all the time. He was at most of the meetings they were at. Ian hadn't drunk. Ian was still sober. They fucking hated Ian. But they needed to realise Ian was a sick person—they all were. How could you hate a sick man? Otherwise, Ian had the power to really fuck them. To ruin everything. No amount of hating Ian was worth dying or being raped for. That's what they thought, as long as they went to lots of meetings and stuck together. If either of them was by themselves they hated Ian so much they dreamed about taking a large, strong swing with a softball bat at his face. They played it over and over and over and although there was some relief in it, it really just tied them to him. It just gave him power. That's what Diane said. They doubted Diane knew what the fuck she was talking about,

but they had nothing else. So they kept telling each other that if they hated Ian they'd drink and if they drank they'd die—or worse. But sometimes, when they were in the shower or walking home when it was cold, they rehearsed it again in their heads. One strong, even, beautiful swing breaking almost everything in his face.

'We're all just walking each other home,' Greta said, and they laughed, disgusted at the bullshit of it all, and the soup arrived.

James Brown

Metro

from *Selected Poems*

Final proof, forthcoming June 2020

I

We tried roses
and found them guilty. We tried laughter
but were still sad. We went away somewhere

where we could be
really ourselves. The shelves
were full of crime and mysteries.

But there were also the long walks
and we took them—the sky
rushing up to meet us.

After dinner we sat back
chewing each other's fat,
trying to talk ourselves into

our own words. It was
a dark and stormy night,
full of straw people and masquerades

with their buckling freedoms of choice.
We made lists and waited. Life,
we wrote, is often listing.

II

Too much, too much,
cried the man in the next room
over and over.

Through the reduced options of a
speech impediment he recounts the war
as a time of clarity and focus.

‘Keep your losses in the cross-hairs,’
his talk bubbles burble before him.
He would like them to take him away

but instead is offered home help and
a range of services, then left revolving
in the peeling wallpaper of his own voice.

III

You’re falling. Every day of your life

up through the film of conversation
—already vapour and evaporating
to the horizon.

The necessary epidiastic arrogance
of things which stand in for things
that can only negotiate their presence

through loan. So that in this world
nothing can be only itself,

and everything dead is buried alive.

VI

In a station, of the Metro
the sky rushed up
to meet us. As always

the bow-wave of air before
the volumes of hesitation. Then
there was the trick question

everyone always got right,
and the never-never ending
you could never work out

either.

Rata Gordon

Vagator

from *Second Person*

Final proof, forthcoming June 2020

A hot room is slowly leaning in.
A monsoon is arriving on heavy legs.

Tension is burrowed in the lengths of my arms.
It has something to do with being naked.

Not the naked of that woman's body made of lumps of flesh trying
to escape each other.
Naked in a quiet way.

The way this girl appears beside me in my wealthy sleep and asks
me for my water.
She gulps it back.

Is it me who is embarrassed?
Is the sea embarrassed at its weight?

Inside it are slops of cow poo, plastic bottles and thousands of
years of dust—
flaked off, stood on, casually kissed by thousands of humans' skin.

I am not naked in the water.
My cuts and grazes gape to the universes that swirl there.

This is not a competition.
A monsoon is arriving on wounded legs.

Craig Gamble

The Rule of Twelfths

from *Monsters in the Garden: An Anthology of Aotearoa New Zealand Science Fiction and Fantasy*
edited by David Larsen and Elizabeth Knox
Uncorrected proof, forthcoming July 2020

Northland, 1973

Libby's up early. As he leaves the house he hears thumping from below. Grandad's already outside. Down the steps beside the house, shells crunch under his feet. The basement is tight and shadowed, stacked with cans of paint, coils of rope and fishing gear. Sacks curtain off a space at the far end. There's no light rigged there, just a dirt floor and spiderwebs thick across the walls. Libby avoids it.

Grandad's at the long workbench bending over an outboard motor—the Evinrude from his boat. His wide brown hands work at the propeller. One's missing a finger, sliced cleanly away by a flailing steel cable, the stub still raw and red even now. But its loss does nothing to hamper his skill.

'I need to grease the crankshaft,' he says, addressing the outboard more than Libby. 'But this prop won't cooperate.'

Libby grips the shaft of the outboard so Grandad can use both of his hands on the spanner. There's another thump as the outboard rocks on the bench and the nut that holds the prop comes free.

'Ah.' Grandad pulls it clear and turns to Libby. 'It's today then?'

Libby nods.

'Have you seen the tide?'

‘No,’ says Libby.

They make their way outside to the lawn of kikuyu grass Grandad’s carefully nurtured into a mat of springy green. At its edge a rock wall juts out like a miniature jetty. Grandad’s lent a hand in building other walls further down the bay. They hold the sand in, he says, make beaches where there weren’t any.

The tide is green and clear and enormously high. It’s pushed right in around the wall and makes a gentle slapping like the beat of an impatient dog’s tail.

‘King tide,’ says Grandad. ‘And still coming in. Couldn’t be better.’

Libby’s chest tightens.

‘Thought it might be coming,’ Grandad says. ‘Rule of Twelfths, you learn that in school?’

Libby shakes his head.

‘Show you when you get back, better get breakfast in you.’

After they’ve eaten, Grandad helps Libby load the dinghy. It’s an old, much repainted flat-nosed boat made of marine plywood. Once white, it’s now mostly yellow.

Grandad carefully coils the anchor rope. The anchor’s made from three rusty, welded pieces of reinforcing iron. Libby fits the iron rowlocks into their slots, and Grandad helps him slide the oars through, laying them neatly along the inside of the dinghy’s hull. Three bench seats—one along the stern, one amidships and a small one in the bow—sit above the pool of water in the gunwales. The leaks aren’t bad enough to worry anyone. When Grandad rows, he moves the dinghy along with barely a pause. Libby tries for the same grace, but he can only manage it sporadically.

Libby’s going out alone for his twelfth birthday. He’s making a voyage of it, along the shoreline towards where the

inlet opens into the wider bay. He's walked that way dozens of times. But by boat—with the water green and deep and the beach almost hidden by the high tide—everything familiar becomes undiscovered country.

His grandmother's given him a packet of sandwiches and some lemonade in a glass bottle. There's a place around the coast where he can run the dinghy in and anchor. He stows the bag of food on the rear seat next to a satchel with paper and pencils, in case something needs to be drawn.

'Are you set?' Grandad says.

'Ready.' Libby seats himself in the middle of the dinghy and readies the oars for the first stroke.

'Off you go.' Grandad's voice is muffled as he bends to grip the stern and shove it. It comes clear of the sand with a long rasp that rumbles up through Libby's feet. Grandad holds the stern and wades until the dinghy's in deeper water. Another push, and he lets go. Libby slides away, and before his momentum dies, leans forward into his first stroke. Grandad raises a hand and turns back.

Libby pulls steadily past the orange buoy where Grandad's motorboat is moored, keeping his course straight. He's not far from the shore, but still the line of beach houses has shrunk beneath the big macrocarpa trees crowding the hill behind. Their house is two-storeyed, painted white, and flanked by stairs. At the wide upstairs window someone is watching: his grandmother. He doesn't pause to wave. He wants to pretend he's alone.

A few hundred yards from the beach, Libby turns the dinghy parallel to the shore, and strokes to get it moving on its new course. He's far enough out to skirt the small reef of rocky mounds visible at low tide.

Only two houses come after theirs. The tall, dark brown

twin of their own and the half hidden blue house, often empty, which sits on a miniature promontory. Grandad has warned him off landing there: the owner doesn't like visitors. Libby sees his first landmark, a slumped cliff of sandstone Grandad calls Indian Rock. If he squints he can make out a face, and perhaps a fringe of overhanging grass like a headdress of feathers. But the name still doesn't feel like it belongs. Out from it are The Twins, two small islands of cats-eye encrusted rock only fully submerged at the highest tides. Between them is a narrow channel that Libby's swum, but never rowed through. Grandad won't be happy if he grounds there.

The challenge is too much to resist. He lines the dinghy up as best he can and strokes to get it moving right. The tide's so high there's no danger of grounding in the channel, but he's forgotten the oars. Small waves ripple over the islands, inches of water, not enough for rowing. He's losing momentum, the tide pushing him sideways. He could swim and push the boat through, or jump to the rocks and tow it. Instead he ships both oars and lifts one up, its rowlock still attached. It fits a hole in the stern, meant to mount an outboard. It's a makeshift scull. People do this in books, in Italy, but it's the first time he's tried it. At first the boat waggles from side to side, but he remembers to twist the oar as he strokes, and slowly gets some forward movement.

Libby steadies himself, moves his feet further apart, and sculls the dinghy clear of the channel. Standing, he can see what's in front and either side. Left is the grassy bump in the coastline where the blue house sits, hidden behind a pohutukawa. The sea's come high enough to eat at the bank and fresh orange clay marks a new slip. Without Grandad's stone walls, more of the shoreline would be in the sea.

He's delighted by his new skill, but sculling is slow work

and he's eager to get further around the coast. He ships the oar again, returns it amidships and pulls the dinghy around, circling the islands in deeper water. A steady stroke makes the sweat trickle down his back. The sun is well up and hot on his skin, pinching it gently as it dries the salt water.

The blue house appears—a low, slumped building built too close to the water. The windows are masked by yellowing curtains and grass grows from the guttering and high around the walls. The front door's open a little way. He pulls in closer. He's seen a white dinghy moored there sometimes, but not today. Perhaps he should close the door to keep the possums and rats out? He'd only need to land for a moment.

A curtain twitches. From inside the house there's a scraping noise, like something heavy's being moved. Libby stops the dinghy with a short backwards push, his Grandad's warning ringing in his head. The sound doesn't come again.

He backs off, turning again for the headland. He'll tell his granddad about the door later. The house disappears behind trees and tall flax bushes.

His rowing's ragged and he tries to correct it. The nearer the headland comes, the more the tide's against him. He's peering forward, looking for a lumpish mound of pale grey rock overhung by a twisted pohutukawa. From one angle it looks like a lion resting on its stomach, from another a sphinx. It marks the turn of the coast where the inlet ends and the scoop of the broader bay opens.

Libby sees it. The tide's turned it into an island, the water dark and agitated between it and the beach. Lion Rock will do. The usual landing place might be submerged; perhaps he'll tie the dinghy to a tree rather than pull it up on the sand. The wind's come up a little, ruffling his hair and pushing his shirt against his wet back. The waves slap against the dinghy's flat nose.

His palms tingle with rising blisters. He lets the dinghy bob on the waves. In a patch of slow water astern a fish jumps with a quicksilver flash. It jumps again, a sprat fleeing a kahawai or some other big fish.

All right. It's no good leaving the job half done. That's something his grandad says. He pulls the dinghy back on course and starts to count the strokes, working the angles of each one. He's reached fifty-eight when he sees the landing place. The beach is still there, though the sea is among the banks of sea-shells and dried seaweed normally above high tide. Running with the swells the dinghy comes alive and soon sand grates under the hull.

Libby's thirsty for the lemonade but mooring the dinghy is first. He pulls off his shoes and clambers out into the water. It's cool and wonderful on his legs, and he wonders if he should swim before eating. He stands holding the dinghy for a little while, happy to be able to make his own decision.

The dinghy bobs and dips on the water without his weight, and Libby uses the waves to tug it high up the beach. He carries the anchor further up, buries it in dry sand and weighs it with rocks for surety. The tide's probably turned, but a rogue wave could still pull the boat back.

The best place to eat is on the back of Lion Rock. The sea sucks and plays with his toes as he walks and leaves wet marks on the rock as he climbs. He settles in a small hollow near the top. Far out in the bay a few boats are anchored where Grandad fishes at night, going out into the gulf when the tide's right and coming back in the very early morning. He'll gut and clean where the boat's moored, fillet on the back porch and hand the fillets through the kitchen window to Libby's grandmother, who has a frying pan hot. Libby will wake to the smell of frying fish.

Libby tries to sketch the headlands and the distant shape of Kawau Island. He can't capture it, and the shifting sea eludes him. It doesn't matter, it's not why he's come. Once, climbing Lion Rock, he'd gone high into the branches of the pohutukawa. He'd caught a glimpse of something, a valley, a place of deep greenness. Today he'll see how far back it runs.

The sun's at a different angle. From the tree, the colours are muted and there are more shadows, but it's easy to spot a route inland. He scrambles along a branch and down the trunk where it roots into the headland.

None of the sheep that graze the fields come down this far to push tracks through the bush. He pushes through ferns, tangled manuka roots and clumps of green-brown flax. The sky's quickly obscured by overhanging branches of macrocarpa. As he stumbles around another flax he finds a scrap of empty ground, a ribbon of mossy grass that hugs the banks of a tiny stream and angles up the hill. He rests and lets his breathing settle, squats so the ferns arc above him and green is all he can see.

The stream vanishes into a crack. The sun's directly above now and the air is hot and close. He finds a box. No, it's a cage. Crudely made of wood and chicken wire, a makeshift hatch held open at one end. It's a trap, but for what Libby can't guess.

He pushes on, the way forward blocked by a bush with thick, spiky limbs. But he scrambles through, arms up to shield his face. The ground drops from under a foot and trips him into a slide. The branches fall away.

He's found a pine forest. The trees stand in neat, quiet rows. Nothing grows under their dark green boughs, mournful after the bright greens of the bush. His movements are hushed by the carpet of pine needles. The air is heavy with resin.

It's then he sees the hut. A rough pyramid of sticks and

woven fern fronds with a triangular opening at the near end. He walks around it. It's been camouflaged to match the colours of the pine forest—from a small distance it would be invisible. It's bigger than he first thought too, the size of Grandad's basement room. But part of it's collapsed—peering inside he can just make out part of a slumped and distorted wall. He hesitates, then ducks inside.

As his eyes adjust, he makes out a low table at the far end. At its centre is a cage, like the one he saw on the way in. But pushed into a back corner of this one is a tight bundle of black and brown fur. Libby sees the pink bump of its nose and the flick of its matching ears. A possum watches him with large round eyes. It's scared. Stacked around the legs of the table are other traps, all empty. He reaches for the cage on the table.

'What do you think you're doing?'

Libby starts and bumps the table, the possum darts around the cage. The voice is behind him, but he can't see anybody until he puts his head out of the opening. It's a boy. Libby steps outside quickly.

The boy is taller than him and older, lean and bony.

'Well?' The boy's voice is quiet, not friendly.

'I was just . . . looking. At the possum.'

The boy shows his teeth in a way that isn't a smile. 'Just looking,' he says.

He walks over to the hut and ducks inside, out again. 'You touch anything in there?'

'No.'

'You're Enzo's grandkid, aren't you?'

For a second Libby doesn't know who he means. Then he remembers Grandad's name, rarely used.

'Yes,' he says.

'Thought so. What's your name?'

'Libby.'

'That's a girl's name.'

'It's not, it's short for Liberato.'

The boy makes a face. 'That your dingy down on the beach?'

'My Grandad's.'

'Well I know that, but you brought it here. You know you're on private property?'

'No. I just followed the stream up here. Is this your farm?'

'Not likely! It's my hut though, my place.'

The boy looks toward the hut, back at Libby, shows his teeth again. 'Look,' he says. 'Maybe you could do me a favour.'

Libby backs away a step. 'What sort of favour?'

'I need to take that animal around to the inlet, to my house, but it's a long walk. You could give me lift in your boat.'

'I don't know you,' says Libby.

'Sure you do. I'm Rodney. We have a house on the inlet. My dad's even done a job for Enzo once.'

Libby has no memory of him. He's never seen him among the cabins that dot the shoreline near the jetty.

'I don't know.'

'Enzo would want you to help me out.'

Libby doesn't like the way he uses his grandad's name.

'We can keep this little trespass of yours to ourselves, can't we?'

There's a leer in the boy's eyes. Libby doesn't really think Grandad would care if was on a farm, but maybe he'd want him to help.

'All right?' says Rodney.

'I suppose,' says Libby. 'I should be getting back anyway. It's a bit steep though, down to the beach.'

'You didn't come up the track?'

'No.'

‘Well it’s good I found you! Awful scramble down the hill if you don’t know the track.’

I’d manage, thinks Libby, but says nothing.

‘Carry the cage, will you?’ says Rodney. ‘I hurt my arm chopping wood this morning. It’s no good for carrying.’

Rodney’s arm looks fine, but Libby ducks back into the hut and picks up the cage. The possum panics again, dashing from one side of the cage to the other in a blur. He puts it back down, and notices a black rope tied to the top. He lifts the cage again by the rope, trying not to let it spin too much, and spooling the extra rope as best he can.

‘I think I’m upsetting it,’ says Libby, as he emerges.

Rodney glances at him, then at the cage. ‘Upsetting it? Ha!’ He makes a sound that might be a laugh, though it’s more like a bark. ‘You wait till my dad gets his hands on it. Follow me.’

As Libby does, he feels his joy in the day disappear, as if someone has jabbed a hole in him and drained it out.

Rodney moves with an awkward quickness, a curious stumbling flick of his legs. But his paces are long, and Libby has to break into a jog every few steps to keep up. Rodney looks back at him once or twice but doesn’t speak, and makes no attempt to slow down. The possum’s gone still again. There’s a smell drifting up from it, sharp and needling.

The track’s narrow and rutted with tree roots and heads in the wrong direction, away from Lion Rock. Then Libby hears the sea again, and sees the beach. They’ve come down further along the bay, the track petering out into tussocky grass. In the bay the same boats are fishing, and the ferry is making its way to Kawau. Rodney seems more ordinary on the beach—a boy like him, in clothes that don’t fit well.

Libby walks ahead. The dinghy’s still tight to its anchor and he wants to get to it before Rodney can, stop him taking

charge. He's well ahead by the time they reach the anchor and starts digging it up straight away, nodding at the well-made knot in the rope.

He needn't have feared Rodney's interference. He makes no move to help Libby load the cage on board, pull in the anchor, or push the dinghy towards the water.

Libby nudges the dinghy into the waves. The sea's livelier now and the wind fresher, but once they're around Lion Rock it'll be an easy row home. Rodney comes down the beach and climbs over the back of the dinghy without speaking a word, positioning himself next to the cage on the back seat. Libby gets behind the stern and gives it a shove as a wave comes in, soaking his shoes and his shorts. He scrambles over the side and takes the middle seat.

'Watch it!' says Rodney. 'Don't get me wet.'

Libby half swallows an apology and makes sure not to meet Rodney's eyes. He can tell he's being watched and it makes his first few pulls awkward, the dinghy spinning in the water. Rodney makes a noise, half snort, half laugh.

Libby pictures his Grandad rowing, tries to match his strokes to the image in his head. Slowly the dinghy steadies and heads out of the bay, angling towards the calmer water beyond Lion Rock. He looks up at Rodney, who's bending over the cage, intent on what's inside. Libby concentrates on his rowing.

'This boat of yours leaks,' says Rodney, moving his foot through the puddle of water in the bilges.

'It's never sunk.'

'Bloody hope not. I hate swimming.'

How can you live here, Libby thinks, and hate swimming? Some days he's barely out of the water, only emerging to eat.

They've pulled around Lion Rock now and immediately the water's flat again and the wind's dropped to a breeze. It's

enough to cool Libby and he's moving the dinghy along well. Rodney's looking into the cage again, then he meets Libby's eyes.

'Hey,' he says. 'Want to have some fun?'

'What do you mean?'

Rodney screws up his face. 'You don't know what fun is? Are you stupid?'

'What sort of fun, I meant,' says Libby, trying to keep his voice even. He'd like to slap the grin off Rodney's face.

'Take us out a bit further,' says Rodney, looking in the direction of the blue house. 'Where the water's a bit deeper.'

'Why?' says Libby.

'Show you when we get there,' says Rodney, and when Libby makes no move to alter course. 'Oh come on! It'll be good.'

Libby swings the dinghy reluctantly. He'd like nothing more than to drop Rodney on the shore and go home. He can see it won't be that easy. He could take the dinghy in now, leave it there, and walk home. But Rodney would mock him and he'd be abandoning the charge of the boat.

They're in deep water. The blue house is visible on the shore.

'This'll do,' says Rodney. 'Come and get this cage.'

Libby ships the oars, and reaches for the cage. The dinghy wobbles as his weight shifts.

Rodney stands, lifting a foot onto the back seat, bracing himself. The dinghy wobbles a little more. 'Pass it to me,' he says.

'What are you going to do?'

'Just pass it over.'

But Libby doesn't.

'C'mon!' says Rodney.

'You're going to put it over the side,' says Libby.

'So what? Better this way than what my father does to them.'

He wrings their necks. With his hands. He likes doing it.'

'No.'

Rodney sneers. Libby moves backwards with the cage, expecting a lunge. But his feet tangle in the rope and he falls with a crash. The cage bangs against the gunwale and out of his hands. There's a large splash.

When he regains his seat, the cage is gone and so is Rodney.

He scrambles for the rope. A lump of it's already gone, and the section he grabs is wet and slippery.

Rodney surfaces a few feet away, but Libby barely gives him a glance. The cage is slowly coming up. He doesn't know how long the possum will last, and pulls harder, the rope hissing as it comes back over the side.

There's a strangled cry. Rodney is going back under again, his hands grasping at the air. Can't he swim at all? Libby stops pulling the rope, and for a long moment watches the spot where Rodney's disappeared.

'Rodney!' he calls, not expecting an answer.

He kicks the side of the dinghy and lets the rope go, leaps back to the centre seat. He grabs both oars and swings the dinghy around to the spot where he last saw Rodney. He stows the oars and moves forward, looking down into the water, pulling his shirt off, trying to judge the best spot. He yanks off his shoes and throws himself over the side.

Underwater it's silent. The sandy bottom seems close and the water is clear—he sees Rodney almost immediately.

He's face up, drifting slowly down and away. Libby starts to move toward him then stops. Rodney's blurring, the colour in him bleeding out into the water like he's a watercolour dissolving in the rain. His pale face is melting, the skin peeling away in ribbons, exposing tooth and bone. He turns slowly towards Libby.

Libby kicks hard for the surface and emerges gasping, scrambles to pull himself on board. He lies there, dragging in breath after breath. It's long minutes before he lifts himself and peers over the side. The sea's empty all around.

There's a loud thump from the shore. A man's standing in front of the blue house.

'Hey!' yells Libby.

The man does nothing.

Libby grabs the oars and pulls closer. He yells again. 'There's a boy in the water!'

Still the man doesn't move, and Libby pulls within a dozen feet of him. As he does, he feels a lurching in his chest. A tug that grabs hold of his heart and lungs. He knows somehow the possum's no longer in the cage, only the tight circle of a furred body it no longer needs. Rodney's gone too.

'What are you yelling about?' says the man, irritable.

'A boy,' says Libby. 'He fell overboard.'

'What boy?'

'He fell off. My fault, I rocked the boat, and he went in.'

The man's watching him, impatient.

'We dropped the cage too, but we can get it, when the tide goes out.'

'What cage?'

'It had a possum in it, Rodney was bringing it back.'

The man's face goes white, his voice is very quiet. 'What did you say?'

Libby takes a breath. 'There was a cage, in a hut up on the headland. Rodney said it was his, he'd trapped it, I guess, and he asked if I could give him a ride in my boat.'

'You're Enzo's grandson, are you?' The man's voice is dangerous.

'Yes.'

‘He put you up to this, did he?’

‘Put me up to what?’

‘Get out of it!’

‘What—’

‘Go on, you get out of it! Go home!’ The man’s stepping toward him, a fist clenched.

Libby digs the oars into the sand, pushes the dinghy clear, and backs it out into the water as quickly as he can.

‘And you tell Enzo to keep his ideas to himself!’

He watches Libby row the dinghy out into the inlet until a flax bush blocks him from view. Libby strokes hard, making space between himself and the shore. Indian Rock is clear now, and he can see his own house, and The Twins. Twisting, he can even make out Lion Rock. It’s all shrunk, all small. Only the Tawharanui Peninsula, behind him, looms large where it rises above the deep water channel.

He comes into the beach quickly, scrambling onto the sand and dragging the anchor up to dump on the lawn. Then he slumps to the grass, staring back to where the blue house lies, his head full of Rodney’s dissolving face.

‘What’ve you done to my lawn?’

It’s Grandad, coming out of the basement. Libby sees he’s gouged a scar into the perfect green of the grass.

‘Sorry!’ says Libby, and he is. He knows how much work it’s taken to get the lawn so even. He dodges around, freeing the anchor, trying to replace the divot with a foot, looking for a better mooring spot.

‘Libby,’ says Grandad. ‘What’s up with you?’

Libby stops. Meets his grandad’s eyes, blushes. He doesn’t know where to start.

‘Libby?’

‘I met someone,’ he says finally, ‘from the blue house.’

‘I told you not to go there,’ says Grandad. His voice annoyed, maybe worried. ‘Did he hurt you?’

‘No . . . you mean the man? No he didn’t touch me. He was just angry.’

‘What about?’

Libby hesitates. ‘I don’t know,’ he says. ‘Something I said, I think.’

Grandad looks him up and down. ‘You sure he didn’t hurt you?’

Libby nods his head.

‘Well, good then. He’s not a nice man, you need to keep well clear of him, all right?’

‘Yes,’ says Libby.

‘Good. Now give me that anchor, and we’ll get this boat sorted.’

Libby wants to say more, but Grandad’s already moving. They make the dingy fast to a ring on the rock wall and carry the oars up to the basement to stow them.

‘Grandma’s making scones, they’ll be ready soon,’ says Grandad, and holds up his hands, stained with rust from the wet oarlocks, the missing finger obvious. ‘We’d better wash up.’

‘Why’s he like that?’ says Libby.

Grandad catches his eye and turns to his workbench, the Evinrude still laid out on it. ‘It’s a sad story,’ he says.

Libby waits.

Grandad picks up a wrench, tinkers with the engine. ‘He was always angry, at least as long as I’ve known him. Ready to pick a fight. Took it out mostly on those animals he traps. And on his son, Rodney.’

‘What happened?’

‘Rodney went missing, about five years ago. We all looked for him, everyone around here, all up and down the coast.

Went on for days. But we didn't find him. Well, not until a week later when it was too late. He drowned, Libby, someone found his body out in the deep water on their way back from Kawau.'

'Five years ago?'

'Yes. And his father . . . he cut himself off. As if we were all to blame. He won't have anyone go there now.'

There's a question there, if Libby is brave enough to ask it.

'Was someone to blame?' he says.

'I don't know. Their dinghy was still at home when he disappeared. Never understood how his body got all the way out there.'

Grandad puts the wrench down, turns for the door. 'C'mon' he says. 'Scones.'

Hours later, Libby is sitting on the stone wall looking out to where the yachts are anchored in the channel. The tide is right out. The dinghy is beached, and all about it are ridged rocks exposed by the retreating sea.

Out by the channel there's a small group of people, bent over, intent on something at their feet. Digging for pipi, Libby thinks. As he watches they straighten, gesture at each other with buckets and begin to walk back in. On the wet sand the people are preceded by their reflections, stretched and changing with the light.

Someone else is out there walking alone along the edge of the deep green channel. Sometimes they almost disappear against the dark water behind, reappearing when they cross the stark white hull of a yacht. They're lanky, or else emaciated by the distance, Libby can't tell.

He jumps down from the wall, his bare feet slapping into the wet sand. He can hear his grandparents talking upstairs, a clang of a pot on the stove. He walks out to where the dinghy lies and rests a hand on its rough side, feeling the furry wood

roughened with salt and sun. He walks on, his distorted reflection leading, the shallow pools merging across the wide bowl of the inlet until it seems he's walking on water. The channel lurches closer and then recedes, as if it's lost its grip on the world, or he's lost his grip on it. The lanky figure against the green water is still now, patient.

David Coventry

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They punched the fat kid first. Then his skinny buddy and these two wannabe stage-divers fell off the boards before we even began. The clattered sound of bodies, knuckles and skin as the security got ugly and began tussling with each of the boys climbing the stage. Heavy men under the glower of two hundred all staring up from the blackened room. This was Nail's Mexicali down on Neves Ave., the one venue left in the middle of our damp old river town smack on the edge of reality and the west. It was a sweat-stinking dive with a makeshift bar and a rostrum lifted at one end, faces filling the floor to the back as I watched the two body-crossed divers merge with the crowd. Hair, heads and necks in that hypnotic sway and give, the stray energy of loosed teenagers all hepped up on that hell-evoking thing that kept them awake at night.

Yells, the band's name echoed into the room.

'Bauen, Bauen . . .'

Half a dozen in a pathetic mantra quickly lapsing into jeers. Then other chants, rising then falling back, dissipated into single shouts, witless, primed by recall because song is memory: assaulting, lying and always on the move and there at the front were the four of us—drums, bass, two guitars. The usual rig of pent-up souls and instrument, tuned and strung tight. Each waiting on the look, the one that'd say: *Go*. The one

that would throw us, heave us into the lights and land us in a howl of distortion and distressed chord. All in a kind of joy, a sung jewel we wished for every sucker out in the pit and beyond; friends, kin and the loves you're always trying to amaze with something you don't know the name of.

I prowled the boards, ignorant and strange for it. Spencer hunched at his drums, messing with his hi-hat, the chain assembly and how it got stuck some days. I stalked, this way then back to where my amps sat waiting and Tone stood over the kit, his face glistening, dripping with the water he'd thrown at himself backstage. 'Yo. The fuck, Spence?'

Spence Finchman shaking his round head.

'The fuck?' Tone yelled.

A kind of massing out in front as they argued, the security trying to keep the peace, but this *was* a kind of peace and they'd no idea. The sense of event and the odd talent of a crowd of punks to make a gig an issue beyond noise and physical urge. Body heat and a hunger for a kind of forced wrath, for the inducement of physical memory. I trod my distortion on, then off. The room lit by a spasm of electric noise, a kind of warped warning written in feedback.

'Hey, fuckstick,' Tone said, and Spence mumbled urgent and inaudible under the shouts from out front, the *Fuck offs* and the house music scraping through the PA like a bucket of iron. Watch me: I didn't look out, just glanced at the set list and tracked the stage, an adrenal surge and back and forth between the two idiots with their matching T-shirts boldly proclaiming their allegiance to some dead-end security firm hired for the event. I pushed my way through, my mouth dried out on nerves. Though I was never nervous; this was a state unnamed that nervousness seemed to mimic.

Tone shouting. His voice failing like it was seven hours

later and he was in hospital, finally. All the world stinking like disinfectant and the impossibly clean.

‘Wait man,’ Spence yelled through the noise. I went to my amp, took the glass of water and threw it on my face so I looked like Tone for an instant.

‘Play!’ Tone yelled at Angel.

Spence’s head disappeared and all I could see of him for the moment was his faint bald spot.

‘Angel,’ Tone said.

I saw our bass player nodding out the corner of my eye, then heard it: *Clank, clank*. The hard-trebled heft of bass as Angel started low and quick. His pick clacking away and Spence still fiddling. I couldn’t wait, I screamed *Fuck it* as Spence gave in to something and sat up. He started slaying at his half-open hi-hat while shaking his head. He pumped his kick so I could hear it off the back wall. He waited on me. He waited on the stutter I gave before I jumped up sideways, twisting my torso with the neck of the guitar up by the lights—then cranked, right to the bottom of the strap’s arc, my ring finger on the volume knob and I poured it all on in one flick so feedback filled the room in the instant before the beat. I unwound and put my fist into the strings; all power and chord as I landed. My face demented. Everything a crude shudder. Spence: hair and fists. Angel leaning back, his arms extended to the neck of his machine, his mouth fully open in a howl beside the deep fuck of his bass in with Spence’s kick and snare.

A brute dance then as we threw ourselves at the air and every kid out front, they turned a brownish, thuggish fury. One, two. One two, and watch as our wrists, watch as they flicked open chords and our bodies lurched. Sticks through cymbals, snare and tom. The way light suddenly bounced off every corner of the room, off every shaved head and ripped shirt, every glass

surface and every hidden nerd punk. The four of us. The way our wall hit, the sudden terror look on their faces as they leapt and elbowed their way into the sound, swinging and shouting and the security had no chance in the brawl of teenagers and their blunt-cut hair. Fourteen, fifteen, eighteen, because this was an all-agers and most were kids and the way they fell into a form of crippling madness as our amps turned string sound into voltage so the air out of the speakers seemed to rip. And stacks of them. Marshall, Fender, Ampeg. Each of them tearing the air so the hit on the audience was immediate, physical, turning them into butting heads and thrown fists.

Then five of them up on the stage, shoving, jutting legs in a Hermosa strut, that crazed dance imported here from SoCal. Spasmed limbs, all clenched teeth and jerking. Bodies flung back into the audience. Back flip, caught and passed through by reaching arms; no one was left to fall there, always caught, held. And immediately the whole of us, the four of us and the room, soaked. I stood legs apart and leant back before I had to sing, to shout at the mic.

One song, two. The rush and pile of kids and the way they went at each other, the way they held each other and swung through the scrum, hitting and hugging in that punk love thing that nobody was supposed to get.

Song four and this is the room, alive and raw.

I ran in circles as Angel bounced with his bass and Tone flung his head around. The way bass shifted the harmony and you could see it on their faces, a knowing-ness, an uncoupling of something taut and near as the kids danced their spastic dance. At song five Tone stood among the divers, staring through them as they approached and fell back. We chopped into verses and out again, faces snarled and wet. He made sudden jerks in the divers' direction, stared them into stepping

off the stage.

Song seven and these kids don't let up, they don't let go of this thing. Two hundred of them all ready to fight the great unnamed. The fat kid again and he didn't care about his bleeding face and flopped into the crowd on his back, shouting.

One, two. Wood on wood. Teck, teck, teck, teck.

Song slipping into song, and in each song were the fissures, atomic-level breaches in the noise and inside them I watched for Sonya like I always looked for Sonya. For something plain and clearly sighted: a hint of eyes, a lick of mouth, a clue that she was there, keyed in, attuned to the impossible communiqués from these strange assemblies. I swung around, violently colliding with empty space and caught a glimpse. Her hair, her brown bob bouncing beside Leo Brodkey, our pal out of Rhinosauro: legendary Louisville punkers, slow-core with drug-thirsty twin singers. They stood near Tone's amps laughing at something beyond the boards. I watched them as I stalked, one end of the stage and back till noise hit once more and I heard her scream, a snatch of delight at this.

'Hey shitballs,' she screamed out. 'Hey fucktards.' Sonya had a way of appearing wistful when all around her was tearing itself apart. She was there on the tour out of procrastination; at war with her MA, a deserter, hiding in towns far from her desk, typewriter and supervisor. She instead spent her invaluable time screaming at bands, at her brother because Tone hated any kind of heckling. That's the thing with siblings, they're always doing the opposite to stay the same. 'Con,' she yelled at me, laughing. She was laughing because by now Tone was climbing, lifting himself up his speakers like a madman.

Up his two quad boxes and the shitty Peavey he put up against the warmth of the Marshall. He stood there in the hard, invisible air. He let his guitar feedback as the audience started

throwing those clear thin plastic cups. Water and whatever bursting in the lights. Tone stood utterly still as we stormed through the two-chord stab and hit of 'Pig Rental'. Spence the engine of it, clanging the rhythm while Angel and I hacked at the strings in some kinda time that wasn't four-four but fit in with it just fine. It was a build. Deliberate and manipulative, fraught and waiting on the change to come and hit, to scream the anonymous thing everyone will later claim they knew all along. That narrow point of knowing reached by the sight of us switching key and making some new crude harmony and the way it would twist the inside of your guts and Tone. Tone, he stood there on his amp, balancing beneath the beams. He made exploratory hits on an inverted chord up by the ninth that invited us all to listen closely, exaggerating the build and threatening a change from the noise of this, the distortion, fracture and beat that put our faces into ridiculous snarls.

Then—Bang. Bang, bang.

The double snare hits that meant in eight bars we'd stop, pause in the centre of the song and switch keys, dive into the beaten wave that came rolling in after the silence. The movement to half-time. And there, at its head, Tone jumped.

He turned, leapt while hitting the chord back over Spence's kit. Tone grabbed the drapes that covered an arched alcove full of restaurant junk and swung, his guitar banging about as we swam through the outro. Then he fell, inelegant, into the kit. Right on top of Spence—and somehow we didn't stop, just kept ploughing till the last chord was reached and Tone was back on his side of the stage by Angel, our lead guitarist waiting for the next song. Kids yelling, unclaimed insults and cheers.

And all along Sonya was laughing with Leo. She tucked her hair behind her ears and laughed. She said she loved all-agers because the kids didn't know when to stop. There was no edge

of the pit, just a rallying to an ever-sharpening end she couldn't get out of.

Half an hour, three quarters of an hour and then the end.

And at the end, once the seconds passed, the minutes passed, we sat out back in a blurred sway of post-exertion sweat and commotion. Friends sat with us, Vicki Mills, Leo and Leroy. We drank beer amid the insults and jokes. One of the support bands, Spurn-Cock up from Phoenix, brought in whisky and what a mess. The grind and grunt of this voice over that voice and we let the heat rise out of our bodies. Burnt off as if the noise and shriek and lightning-crack volume breached that section of the mind trained to purify all this into the flow of believable memory. We drank and laughed, people came by and said: *What a brute fucken show, man*, and we just sat, drank all sweated-up, making jokes and letting them pass as the security shifted the kids out into the evening.

Two hours later we headed to the van, that '79 Econoline, and the five of us drove through Burstyn, through the rough streets that nerved our little town, that old college municipality 150 miles west of Chicago on Rock River jugged full of broken jetties and riverboats captured in the mud. We headed back to Tone's warehouse at dusk, inched through the wide brick entrance of the Eighty-Eight, the name we'd given the old abandoned hulk in the days after he'd taken it over. Imagine us unloading the gear in front of the building, lowering it to the forecourt floor and standing in the vague paralysis such a matinee can put on a band; the aftershock and slow emptying out. Tone stood arguing with Spence about his hi-hats—*Fuck you*—then it seemed to be over until Spence took a swing at Tone and the both of them tangled for a moment and that was it. They stood panting and then laughing and then all of us found it kind of amusing and we all stood quite exhausted.

There'd been 200 at the Mexicali. Bodies and hair, each thrown against the other, the mash of teens, of denim, callow skin and lit nerve. The remainder of this sat in our bodies, Polaroidic snatches, light, sweat and eyes flinted with a kind of terror. All a-glimmer in the adrenal lag.

Watch us, all quite unaware of what was to come next and you have the scene of a clear, practised memory, a cloudless event of time and movement.

Sonya said, 'Con, I'm seeing you later?'

I said, 'Sure. You're not hanging around?'

'I gotta get a letter to my supervisor. I gotta send some words. Like every good, pretty student sends some words.' She screwed up her face making a temporary monster out of mouth and eyes.

And again I said *sure* and watched her smile out past me. She hugged each of us and left a kiss on my cheek. Then she vanished with the evening.

Once we'd shifted the gear the four of us stood smoking cigarettes as the last of the rush burnt off and the conversation dimmed. Spence announced he was off to feed the two little pups Sonya and I had bought for his birthday and could be seen heading out to Vicki's because that was where he was keeping them while he stayed with his father. Angel and Tone also slowly dispersing. And once they'd disappeared I dragged the equipment to the basement and set things up for the following day's rehearsal before we left on the second leg of the tour. Then I vacuumed, emptied the bag, sat for an hour thinking about Sonya, and not thinking about her, then thinking about her again. Such was the intelligence of my girl: to be there when not there. I figured she'd headed to the pub over from the university library, the open-decked bar where

the word-haunted sat and drank pitchers of beer looking out to the river, reading Camus, Stein and Kafka. The place we all ate dollar-fifty ribs caught in arguments about genre and harmonic sequence, trading the names of bands and people, listed albums, notes that shaped into songs, all the epic titles we gave to scales and space. She bought bags of pot from the bartender there and liked to get blunted in the bathroom out back.

It was 7.20pm by the time I heard noises. Voices chiming in and out of the building.

I abandoned the rehearsal room, went to look. I went out into the forecourt, the once roofed space in front of the warehouse all covered in yellow leaves, red and fading brown. I hunted for the voices, the creeping source of nerves heading up my neck. I stood beside the van and gazed into the various sightlines that looked towards the entrance and alley down the side to the back of the building. People were always trying to break into the Econoline, eyeballing it for equipment and junk. I found no evidence of tampering, just felt the wind, the well-bitten howl off the river. I went back into the building, the so-called Eighty-Eight, and waited at the threshold. I moved slow, wary of who might've entered the building while I was outside. The slow creep of this foot and that foot, a kind of ambulant whisper. I looked into the ends of the halls as I went about corners. Their long shallow darkness and all the doors. I could hear footsteps, slow and uncertain, a nervous echo of my own. I decided to run, to burst into the main area off the hall and startle the lurker. I imagined some drug hunter, thin and desperate. A fuck threatening with a blunt butter knife. I ran, lurched into a gliding run, took no more than five steps before I crashed, chest and elbows into the full front of Vicki. Bones and breast and fright, our bodies colliding, rolling off into the wall. Her forehead into my shoulder and I grabbed her arm to

stop her from falling.

‘Fucken—’

‘Oomph. Jesus, Con.’

The two of us stared at each other there in the hall, hearts thumping like this was some sudden endpoint, flexed and eyes opened in the burst of adrenal thwack. Vicki Mills, five-foot-shooting-fucking-star-nothing out of Athens, Georgia. Her face graced by green make-up-model eyes and a tilted smile. She stood there shaking in a Killing Buddha T-shirt, one that used to belong to Sonya before she’d moved back to Tempe.

‘I thought you were someone else,’ I said.

‘Who?’

‘Where’s Tone?’

‘Don’t know. I was looking for Spence,’ she said.

‘Spence is—I don’t know where Spence is. I thought he was feeding the dogs at yours.’

She shook her head. ‘He was, then he was on the phone to Joan then—’

‘You seen Sonya?’ I asked.

‘You scared the shit out of me, Con.’

We stood waiting in the burnt static air left over from our collision, me panting and Vicki looking at her elbows for potential bruising. Eventually she moved me into the lounge, the enormous room of old couches packed full of horsehair, the one large table, the TV and stereo Angel had pilfered from a house up on Corking Road near the hospital and lent to Spence. And Spence had left the speakers and amp here since everything with the hospice, since he’d shifted from his house on Maple and was constantly on the move between my place and his father’s. I offered Vicki the bottle of whisky I’d bought before the gig and watched her swig and wince. She put a record on the player and sat with the bag of grapes. It was

the Minutemen's *Double Nickels on the Dime*. Punk and jazz and funk and she held the cover over her face so the eyes of the figure on the front covered hers. She lowered it and we watched each other until we matched the looks with laughter.

'What do you know?' I asked.

'What do I know?'

'Yeah.'

'What do I really know?' Her accent and how she liked to play it up all Georgia-southern. All giddy-flirty when nothing of the sort was on the cards. Vicki'd found her way into our lives via alt-rock and shared courses, then friends and houses. She lectured and tutored, killing kids with a wayward glance here and there, a lasered thing of unintended attention. She played in another of my bands—the Ruths—and we were near enough to understand our friendship was beyond the tight corporeality of music.

I nodded. 'Sure.'

'What do I know?' She grinned at me—a challenge of sorts. 'I'll tell you, this is what I've figured out about *knowing*.'

'Give it to me.'

She frowned. 'Each time we've decided shit's being got—'

'What?'

'This is the death of many things. Many, many things.'

I laughed and watched her drink.

'Death. Finito,' she said as her face went screwy, eyebrows unevenly arched.

'Listen to you.'

'Listen to me. It's been a long week,' she said, exhausted eyes like she had an intimate sadness she suddenly wanted to share. 'Either that or everything I know is something I misremembered along the way.'

'Weeks are longest near the start of winter,' I said. 'It's a

physical truth.'

'I'm sitting here watching you, wondering if that's true.'

'Most things I say are only true once you've had tea with me at three am. Before that—I'm all nonsense.'

She laughed, eyed me again. 'You guys were decently savage this afternoon, for an afternoon at least.'

'I had a nap for lunch, so.'

She drank, wiped at her mouth, talked on. Stories and homespun lies. Vicki could always say what she liked and I'd listen. Especially in the Ruths; that band was always hers more than mine. Voluminous, tricky. Our first album she called *Devotional: Songs of Ignorance and Intolerance*. Had four chords in total.

'Spence all right?' I asked. I was imagining him on the phone to Joan George-Warren, talking about the gig, moaning about Tone and his hi-hats. George-Warren replying in that Texas drawl, describing the sky down Arizona way, a blue full of unspeakable silences and size.

'Yeah, fuck. I don't know, Con.'

'What don't you know?'

'What was that about? Tone being such an asshole?'

'We don't do fucking around.'

'Spence was just sorting his shit.'

'We go on. Slam. Then off. We're talking fireworks, bang. Off.'

She poked her tongue out at me. Stared as the old Burstyn creeper entered the room, the draught that frequently broke into the warehouse and told us this was the place we were going to die just by sitting around. It ran up my trouser leg and I remembered that one time Spence'd put me on the line and I was drunk and Joan'd sounded like someone's mother.

'Why was he calling Joan?'

Vicki shrugged. 'He purports to be your closest friend, dude.'

'Nobody's friends onstage; everyone's at war.'

Vicki laughed then shut her eyes, purposely sucking the joke out of my words. She was a year older than me and I often felt it. Felt her capacity to know things. I'd watch her in the cafe where we'd sit and notice how she talked, un-abrasive, adorned with the task of listening and addressing misread things, literary and social. I often thought I was in love with her.

'Doesn't sound like a reason for being a fuck,' she said.

'Yeah, well. Fuck's a fuck. We're nerds practising like retards, so we can be as loose as the shits. On, then off.'

'So? He's your— he hasn't got anyone else. Except me. He's got me and you, Con. He was just fixing his hats.' She sounded resigned now. 'He loves you, dude. These are the things he mumbles.'

'When?'

'I don't know. When he's bitching and aching.'

Aching. I hated that word. I wanted her to use another, something more practical and precisely tuned to Spence. He was permanently miserable. Always at odds with the necessary basics for being. I wanted words that marred the clinical, words that made you clasp your hands together. 'Of course he loves me,' I said lazily. 'I'm prime love material.'

She smiled at me, looking up, gazing from eye to eye. 'Well, you know. Fuck Tone anyway. Put it in your article.'

'Sure. Fuck him.'

She laughed. I was writing a tour journal piece for *Maximumrocknroll*. It'd become a joke because I never worked on it except in splurges. Recalling things I'd no memory of, except for what was still vibrating through my body. Those hungry aftershocks of sound and dance we called music, called hard-

core, then not hardcore.

Vicki and I talked on. University, our months and the empty months. The band and her tutoring, lecturing. The tour. Spence, Angel, Tone and I'd just done three weeks in the Econoline: Newport, Philadelphia, Richmond, Washington, Trenton, New York, Bridgeport, Boston, Akron, Chicago (where Sonya'd met us), Milwaukee, then Madison two days earlier. Then there in Burstyn before we were to head out the next day into the killer cold. We talked about the route we were taking; Vicki liked hearing the dates and towns as if they were artefacts of a dusty old idea she had of the country. We talked about Spence and the author Joan George-Warren, the odd rustling of their relationship. He was essaying about her and she was so often lurking in conversations, hiding behind intent and idea like a TV show, videotaped and just waiting to be watched when that specific paper had been written, when the last vestiges of idea had been reached. A woman famed and made in the south, cooked up in the north-east. Vicki'd started with Spence after they'd met at the writer's art colony in Arizona back eighteen months, an illustrious place of cactus and umber hills. Became a duo. Clothes swapping. Kissing in laundromats.

'You going to Yuma?' I asked.

'I'll meet you guys,' Vicki said. 'I'll see you in Cheyenne, then George-Warren's other place.'

I said nothing.

'The Warrenites place outside of Boulder,' she said.

'Cheyenne?'

'It's on the way—I've friends. My old psych tutor got married and moved there with her husband. Works with young women recently released from prison. How's your Plains Sign Talk?'

'What do you know about the woman?' I asked.

'Joan?'

‘Yeah.’

‘Most things. Spence’s overtaken me in the what-we-know stakes. By a fair chunk.’

‘I spoke to her on the phone for like twenty seconds.’

‘So there you go, you know everything. You’ll dislike her immensely.’

‘I don’t dislike anyone.’

‘You despise anyone who’s not listening to whatever record, then you hate them for uncooling it if they do. Dick in hand.’

‘And, I still don’t know nothing,’ I said.

‘Well, nothing’s something, if you want to know.’ We went quiet for a moment. Faces, lips, eyes and the cold air moving between the legs of the rotted sofa she’d lain on as we talked. George-Warren had three colonies; places dotted between cities and towns where bands showed up and played, were fed. Camaraderie was expressed there in drunkenness and accompanying grief. I knew of them only in theory, but Vicki had visited each of them during the spring of the previous year and had friends in each. She named names and watched as I instantly forgot them.

Eventually we quit gabbing and she rose, stood waving from the door and moved into the long hall and I was alone with the bottle and the shell of the warehouse, the cold and shifting, daring draughts. I put on that Modern Lovers LP and went to the cooker in the kitchen area, lit each of the gas burners. I warmed myself there, clapping my hands together until I began wondering again when Sonya was about to appear. I found myself singing random lyrics. I danced trying to keep myself warm. But instead of Sonya arriving, joining me in the kitchen, boogieing to that perfect rock ‘n’ roll, I started recalling something less perfect. The week Spence and Vicki

revealed they'd got together, how it was just a short month after Spence's mother Ruth had died. Vicki had inherited a wreck and I couldn't stop feeling miserable for her, sad in the way you feel for loved ones affected by cot death or worse. The whole episode had put a hole in Spence, hurt his capacity to think so bad he had a limp for a week and a half. There was always something smartly temperate in Ruth's way, something so near to the gentle eagerness that ran in her son that it hurt in strange ways that Vicki never got to meet her. Ruth Finchman was the one to look after us when we were idiots. She was the one who gave us money for strings and fried chicken when we'd none. She made carrot cake and liked us in her kitchen, exasperating her. Putting in the dumbest questions. We love those who let us annoy and frustrate because they know there's some question in it all—and they know the only way to answer it for us is to be amidst its phrasing. She liked having us there so she could occupy time and keep her from her husband, Frasier. There was always a sense of abrasion there, of hidden events under the long shirtsleeves she used to wear. She found amusement in the things she liked to hide, revelled in her son's intellectual diversions. Then cancer and how she disappeared, how she vanished into her bones, how we were all caught, haggard on the idea of her slipping so silently out of reach.

I waited on Sonya but instead heard the familiar footsteps from earlier: Vicki reappearing in the dark space out in the hall and asking, 'You want to go down the rehearsal room?'

'Why?'

'I feel like playing drums.'

'Sure. You wanna hit things?'

'Wanna exact great revenge,' she said. A kind of vacant smile spread up her face and into her eyes.

I stood, followed her along the hall to the door that led to

the stairs to the room. The whole echoic space following us as we walked to the basement. Vicki had another band with Spence on guitar and her on drums. A kind of pretty pop and jangle they played wearing matching black balaclavas. She sat behind the kit and I turned on my amps. She played in that open-hand style and I struck several chords. The room was covered in sound-limiting foam and flyers rescued from the damp walls of Burstyn's downtown. We watched each other, the incremental gathering of speed and volume. The loosening of wrists and arms, noise and chord and—as such—so began the events that ghost this story, make white its bones, make me recoil from remembering, then recall just the same.

Miro Bilbrough

from *In the Time of the Manaroans*

Uncorrected proof, forthcoming August 2020

John of Saratoga

Returning from school one drear dusk I find John of Saratoga cleaving to the ancient rolled sofa arm, ankles elegantly crossed, the soles of his long feet black with road filth. The stranger's gaunt draws what light makes it through the clouds of smoke that billow from the wood range as my father rattles its chimerical damper and curses. He is preparing a combination of the usual soya bean omelette and garlicky salad, and fresh peppermint tea in a heavy-spouted teapot. Potatoes, sliced into rounds in the cast iron frying pan, are doused with cream and dusted with paprika before being shoved in the oven in honour of the visitor. My sister has taken the opposing arm and is reading *The Blue Fairy Book*. Coming through the door I am magnetised by the dark-hued human buoy bobbing up the other end of our unstable sofa.

I quickly establish that John of Saratoga doesn't speak much but comes to warm himself in my father's sooty kitchen where the most recent flood-line stains the timber interior a metre up the wall, his utterance upstaged in equal parts by extreme diffidence, an ever-ready irony that operates at his own expense, and a hacking cough. From what I can tell, he is a wanderer seeking the next crash pad, the next hospitably expiring couch whose subsidence draws polite New Zealand bodies towards the vertiginous ditch in its centre. He favours broken-down Salvation Army coats, which enhance his concavity; is dark-haired, nicotine-fingered and carries a dog-eared physics text

in his coat pocket. Everything about him tea- and tar-coloured, right down to his teeth, he is like a deteriorated relation of my first love, Cold Tea & Coat.

Mundane biographical details are disdained in the hippy world, direct questions frowned on. When, in *Easy Rider*, Dennis Hopper insistently asks a fellow traveller where he is from, and is just as insistently deflected, self-conscious credo is elevated to taboo. From my father, who thinks *Easy Rider* macho and silly, I learn that John's medieval-sounding nickname is derived from a tiny fishing settlement deep in the Pelorus Sound, where he is based, and that in a former life he was an engineer who migrated from Darwin.

I learn from Dee, from whom my father subleases the Floodhouse, that John of Saratoga periodically goes missing from the hippy circuit. Then, more often than not, his breathing situation will have reached crisis and he is, eventually, to be found in intensive care. Despite being acutely asthmatic, he is known to sleep in a damp swag by the side of the road. That is the sum of available facts. Whoever wrote that romance thrives on an economy of scarcity might have been thinking of Saratoga John.

Despite my school uniform, white socks at half-mast and puppy fat, I have a taste for suffering and a disdain for lifestyle. A chronic asthmatic smoking himself to death, *how stylish*. My eschewal of the lifestyle category is fortunate because my father's dump is off the dilapidation chart. The kitchen doesn't even sport a tea towel, just a stub of bath towel ingrained with stove grime.

Although she is in the process of setting up house with her lover, Dee maintains the best room in the Floodhouse as

hers, visiting it but rarely. This is the light-flooded front room in which I camp on first arrival before reluctantly moving across the hall to its darker sister. Originally, my father and this statuesque potter with serious drapes of gold hair thought they might build a kiln together and share firings. They soon revealed themselves ill suited: Dee accustomed to homage; my father disinclined to render. When their collaboration failed to take my father ended up sub-leasing the house instead.

In Dee's room I can lie in bed and see chinks of cornflower-blue sky or occasionally a star between the wide unlined boards of the walls. Here and there tufts of rose-trellised wallpaper cling like relics of a more couth former life. Blue perforations and chilling draughts acclimatised to, the room is a space in which to brood on the unexpounded facts of my new life, of which there are many.

Sometimes John of Saratoga honours us with a solo visit. Sometimes he turns up in a small party of the Manaroans, commune-dwellers from the remote Pelorus Sound. Once, John of Saratoga arrives accompanied by Eddie Fox, a flashily handsome Welshman, both mounted on Lenny the Horse. My father dreads—and embraces—every option. *Fuck. Visitors!* And he's off in a spin about the catering. *More mouths to feed! What will the horse eat, fuckit?* On the subject of John my father pronounces, with depressive savour, *He's just waiting for death to come along and knock him on the head.*

Personally, I think John of Saratoga looks like a woodcut, or one of those linocuts that are a feature of school curriculum art in the sixties and seventies—only made with graver intent. Hacked out by trowel, ink in deep-cut grooves, graven. It is clear to me that none of it would come together without the cheekbones.

His visits, in reality few and far from forthcoming, are enlarged by my inner saucer-eye, my teen-sorcerer eye. I attribute the magic to John of Saratoga, of course. And I am half right. He is a beautiful riddle modestly stalking the highways of our island. It helps that in my father's house I am inoculated against boys my own age, barely exposed—unless you count the shy, bombastic clods on the school bus, which I don't.

Weather event

The locals call our house *The Hippy House*, which strikes me as inept and inaccurate code for goings-on. For orgies and bong haze and other phenomena that some in the Wakamarina Valley clearly perceive their lives to be deficient in. They have no idea how lacking our household is in the most basic stimulants—television, Coca-Cola, instant coffee, white sugar—let alone opportunistic sex parties. Don't they realise my father is a puritan? Pooling our isolation in the wooden house propped unsteadily on five-o'clock-shadow lawn, abstaining from mainstream entertainments, it is just the three of us, alone together again.

Then, an explosion of hooves around the bend in the valley road: *The Manaroans!* Come to break their journey north or south at my father's, they arrive by collective noun: by horse-drawn hoop and canvas wagon as if directly out of a Western or Eastern European saga; by power of thumb, in ones or twos; or solitary by steed. But, however the Manaroans arrive, the air is charged as it is right before an extreme weather event. A weather event inside and outside my head.

Eddie Fox

There are no photographs of Eddie Fox that I know of. I point my borrowed school camera at him once, but he shows his teeth in warning smile and says that tribal people are correct, *a photograph steals your soul*. I shoot him with my camera-eye instead. A few of those likenesses survive here.

Eddie Fox walks on the balls of bare high-arched feet, wearing band trousers caught with rope at the waist, a thick red stripe down the profile of each leg.

The whites of his eyes flash like an animal's on high alert. A whinnying laugh does nothing to dispel the impression. Eddie prides himself on his vigilance, approaching his surrounds with the mystic outlook and deliberate movements of a well-disciplined paranoid.

A gallant who doesn't like other people all that much. Welsh but black Irish in looks. Central casting for gypsy. Did I mention the limp?

Not long after Saratoga John has ghosted through, I encounter Eddie Fox in the shadowlands of the hallway. He has come to break the journey from Tahuna, a commune on the outskirts of Nelson, to Manaroa; to rest and graze the chestnut horse he rode in on this afternoon. At my father's suggestion, Eddie Fox follows me back down the hall to build a fire in the front-room hearth.

Eddie preaches the pyramid technique, screwing each sheet of newspaper into a twist, then stacking the kindling into a meticulous tepee so that oxygen can circulate and fan the flames. I look on, interjecting with the occasional question. Eddie reciprocates. In this way, as the fire is ritually constructed so are my arrival at my father's house and the raw acts leading

up to this event. If no one has taken such an interest in my history—or my vocabulary—up until now, that’s probably because he’s earnest as an adolescent, Eddie Fox. A bit Socratic. Perhaps my account of leaving 46A touches some childhood leave-taking or other out-casting of his own. He’s just the kind who might have run away to the circus or the sea or to join the military.

As for my father, Eddie Fox gets his goat. *Ah bullshit*, I hear him think as the limping alpha splits a pile of kindling in competitive seconds but fails to help with the dishes or clear his drained mug from the sofa arm. The Welshman is so reliably doctrinaire that my father—physically approximate always, not given to rhetoric or showmanship—is reliably provoked. Perhaps autodidact Eddie reminds him of his didactic dad. He keeps his distaste to himself as best he can. Hippy hospitality is sacred.

For his part, Eddie Fox is not as obtuse as my father believes. Soon enough he finds an excuse to drift out into the overrun garden to check on the horse and the aromal night; mine is the apple for Lenny the Horse with which I follow.

The visual drama of the visitor goes conspicuously unheeded by father and youngest daughter. Young and un-pheromone-clouded, my sister is too haughty to be interested in such a male display bird. She glides by, eyelashes lowered, definitive chin tilted. Distant royalty on the move.

No matter. Eddie Fox and I develop a friendship of sorts: unlikely, provisional, no-strings, Q-and-A-sustained, underwritten by the amusing prospect of what the other will do or say next. By Eddie’s deliberation and my impulse. By our mutual verbal pomp and swagger.

Thanks to Eddie, to this day I can nurse a fire through the

rickety stages where infant mortality is high, through blustery, smoky adolescence and into full fragrance.

The great beauty

Dressed in a dirty, earth-coloured calico dress that emphasises her fertility-goddess figure, Claire has fox-sharp features and a prominent beauty spot on her cheek. At twenty-one she is younger by six or seven years than the average Manaroan. Regardless, the commune's survival turns on this formidable character.

On her occasional visits to my father's house Claire doesn't say much. Rather, she pulls on a rollie, drinks strong tea out of a blue-lipped enamel mug, chops firewood as well as any man, neglects her beauty in a way that is commanding, and watches whatever there is to go down, go down. Sometimes she chews the end of her thumb, a rare reminder of her youth. *Nail biter*, she confesses, blushing to the root when she catches me watching.

Claire quit school as a teenager. Not long after, she became the gardener-founder of the Manaroa commune. Now she works like a pioneer and smokes like a narrow-eyed cowboy; the New Zealand light is strong. Everyone is a little afraid of her.

Manaroa's bountiful kitchen garden is legendary. I hear of it long before I clap eyes. Its great horticultural beauty is mostly down to Claire and those who tread her green-sprung footsteps: Kate, Sylvie and Bernadette. The garden is given over to herbs, giant rows of salad food and companion plants: frilly kale decades before it has entered urban-hipster consciousness, purple-skinned garlic, the dark-veined beet leaves that make

the contents of our salad bowls pithy, marigold and borage flowers for bug-repelling and for eating, and, here and there, a lemon or tamarillo tree. This does not come close to describing the garden's unmarshalled abundance nor its flowers.

It is in the Manaroa garden that I discover those idiosyncratic flowers that resemble two-tone jester hats, aquilegias or—as Kate, herself as leggy and astringent as a spring onion, informs me—*Columbine* after Harlequin's sweetheart. *Aquilegia*. The word is at least half the attraction. *Love-in-a-mist*, with whiskery fronds that screen and frame a single star-shaped blue flower, is another literary siren with an ingenious face. From this time on, I cultivate these mercurial flowers and they me.

Affinities

Kate arrives at the Floodhouse in the company of Claire: one loquacious, the other steadfastly reluctant to be drawn. Everything about them—from their muddy work boots beneath ragged hems to their labour-dented limbs—spells can-do. Kate is directly acquainted with the second wave of American feminism. It might have been she who inspired my father to mail *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, with its black-and-white shots of self-empowering pocket mirror held to labia, for my fourteenth birthday. Secret images right out there in the open that burn a hole in my mind.

In fact, my father has an affinity for the women's movement that predates his acquaintance with Kate. This alliance is not disinterested. Ever since he was born, and thus subjected to the iron law of his headmaster father, my father has found men, and their delusion of entitlement and expertise, an intolerable bore. Decades before *mansplaining* is coined, in another century,

in one or other of the departure lounges that criss-cross my childhood, my father fills the time before take-off by pointing out a male stranger gratuitously explaining something to a long-suffering woman over airport coffee.

But Kate. Newcomer Kate's commentaries are so commenting, her puncturing eye so visibly at work, that I retreat into failure to communicate. As for my sister, she emerges from her moody composure, steadies her Wedgwood gaze and indulges in a chattiness I have not seen before. She seems to instantly apprehend Kate's brainy flow of reference and reflexivity. In turn, my sister's drawings of other, less empirical empires; her collection of hand-stitched, over-stuffed, long-nosed velvet *woozles*; and her purloined recipes for bitter medieval lollies, are given due regard by the visitor. Disinclined to join the fun and, frankly, unqualified, I watch the way the tallest and the tiniest make my father's kitchen their scornful salon.

Kate Camp

How to Be Happy though Human

from *How to Be Happy though Human: New and Selected Poems*

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From the Circle there was a man we couldn't see
just his fingers held out for emphasis
like the hands of a preacher
or a primary school teacher.

Before that we had been at the film
where three people taxidermied a baby zebra
caught in the moment of standing
for the first time.

I go back to the wings
of the stage of my school's assembly hall.
Smell of dust and afternoons.
We are hiding from folk dancing, which we love.

And I go back to Saturday
we dance with other people
other people's children,
create *community* with physics.

Memory is a kind of mourning.
We take each other's hands
as if they were made for that
and we form a circle.

Chloe Lane

from *The Swimmers*

Manuscript, forthcoming August 2020

‘It’s a painting show,’ I said. ‘Geometric abstraction.’

‘Geometric abstraction,’ Aunty Wynn said.

‘Shapes,’ I said. ‘Squares and triangles, etcetera.’

I had no desire to discuss art with Aunty Wynn. I was twenty-six years old and this was the first time she had shown any interest in my interests. I had my mother to blame for these questions about my recent curatorial debut, and while trapped inside a car.

‘I can remember the difference between an isosceles triangle and the other one.’ It was typical of Aunty Wynn to veer the conversation into a zone where she could be in control, in the know. ‘The isosceles and the triangle with three sides the same.’

‘You mean the equilateral,’ I said. ‘And there’s the scalene—you’ve forgotten that one.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ she said. ‘That doesn’t ring a bell.’

Then, before I could respond, as if it were the only play she could think of to again shift the subject of attention in her favour, Aunty Wynn tugged hard on the steering wheel, and I was thrown sideways in my seat.

‘Shivers,’ she said. She brought the car to an uneasy but deliberate stop on the grassy verge on the wrong side of the road. She hadn’t lost control of the vehicle—she had seen something. ‘Look at that.’

I was holding a brown paper package of raw meat that Aunty Wynn had collected from the butcher shop after collecting me from the bus stop. It was our red meat for the long weekend. She had insisted I nurse the parcel, which was the size of my head,

all the way to the Moore family house. I was no vegetarian, but the car was filled with the stench of uncooked beef and lamb. I'd already spent two hours on the bus. Now I just wanted to reach our destination and see my mother, whom I hadn't seen in nearly a month. I wasn't interested in any kind of delay.

I squinted through the dirty windscreen. 'Look at what?'

Aunty Wynn flung open her door and skidded down the small gravelly ditch, and was climbing over the wire fence that separated the verge from the paddock before I saw, strung up by its horns and swinging from a low branch of a bare pōhutukawa tree about twenty metres away, the stricken goat. The animal's back hooves were a foot off the ground. I could hear it bleating. It was a wretched sound. The desperation in its cries, now waning, now increasing.

I had no intention of getting involved. I hadn't even planned on coming north for Queen's Birthday weekend. Only a last-minute change of circumstance had dragged me out of my previous obligation at Mean Space, the gallery where I'd been interning the last six months or so, and where I'd just curated my first show. Knowing how much it meant to me to have my foot in the door with Auckland's art scene, my mother would have been the first to be baffled by my affair with Karl, the gallery's director. The affair had ended abruptly on Friday, after Karl's wife found us in the storage room, backed hard against a rack of paintings covered in bubble wrap and corrugated cardboard, our hands down each other's pants. I hadn't told my mother that was why I'd changed my mind about attending the annual Moore family lunch. I hoped she thought it was because I missed her.

I watched Aunty Wynn from the safety of the passenger seat. Her figure was that of a woman who had once been an athlete but who hadn't managed to keep a full grip on her

fitness through middle age. She was in her late fifties, older than my mother by a couple of years, and, as of two weeks prior, my mother's primary caregiver. She was standing with her hands on her hips with her back to me. Her three-quarter-length turquoise pants were made from a synthetic material that clung to her legs and was bunched up around her backside and waist from the time she had been sitting in the car. On her feet were brand new Nikes, road-cone orange. She was a confusion of wealth and small-town fashion sense. The goat was bleating and softly swinging beside her. I guessed she was figuring out how to extract it from the branch without getting kicked or head-butted. As I was reassuring myself that she wouldn't trust me to be of use anyway, she turned and flapped her arm in a way that suggested she expected me to join her. I pretended I couldn't see.

Like I said, I had no intention of getting involved. I was a born and raised city girl—starting in Wellington and recently settling in Auckland. I looked out my side window: roughly sealed road, ditch, wonky wire and wood fence, empty hump of paddock, three dusty nikau palms. It was a mirror image of the scene out the other window. Except for those exotic-looking nikau palms, which appeared alien against that gorse-ravaged backdrop.

'Hello, Erin,' Aunty Wynn called.

I turned to witness her putting her fingers in her mouth and whistle at me like she was summoning a sheepdog.

'Erin! This fellow and I are going to need some assistance.'

In what was admittedly a pretty petulant move, I heaved the package in my lap onto the driver's seat, but with too much force so it bounced and rolled out the open door. Though Aunty Wynn and the goat were twenty metres away, I could clearly see Aunty Wynn's face as she watched her bundle of

sausages and chops reach the centre of the ditch. Next she looked at me with the kind of expression my mother had used all those times when as a teenager I'd come home at three in the morning stinking of rum and Cokes, with mince-and-cheese pie spillage down the front of my outfit.

I collected the meat package on my way to join Auntie Wynn in the paddock.

The goat was bigger up close. Its coat was off-white with a clean brown splotch on its back, and it had a beard that looked as though it had recently been trimmed and conditioned. Its horns were both hooked around and wedged into a fork of the lowest branch of the pōhutukawa tree. It wasn't clear how it had got stuck that way. Its yellow eyes were round with panic, but beyond that they were just cold animal eyes. I didn't feel comfortable being that close to it.

'We're going to have to lift him up off the branch and this way a bit,' Auntie Wynn said, as if none of this was new to her. 'He'll kick and it might not be pretty, but it's the only way.'

For decades Auntie Wynn had worn large unflattering glasses, similar to those of the Queen, but in the last year she had updated to more modern frames coated in a cheap turquoise that brilliantly matched her pants. They were exactly the kind of glasses you would expect a small-town nurse to wear. From beneath a helmet of curly auburn hair, she blinked at me through her thick lenses, waiting for me to respond.

'How'd it get like this in the first place?' I asked.

The goat was wearing a collar, and attached to the collar was a long metal chain, which trailed back down the paddock towards a triangular hut constructed out of pinewood and rusted-up corrugated iron. I'd seen several of those goat huts already on our drive from the bus stop.

'Goats like to jump about.' Auntie Wynn said this in her

most condescending tone. ‘Though I’ve always thought they must have had depth perception—you wouldn’t believe some of the places I’ve found various goats.’

‘Like where?’ I asked.

Aunty Wynn shook her head and smiled. I could see her mind turning, remembering those various goats. She had no intention of sharing them with me.

My mother and I had always approached the annual Moore family gathering—which for reasons that had never been revealed were always held on the most innocuous of public holidays, Queen’s Birthday Monday—as if it were something to win. Me and Mum against the rest of them. Every exchange was up for grabs. In that moment I hated Aunty Wynn for keeping me out of the loop about her various goat rescues, for the small power she wielded.

‘What do you want me to do then?’ I said, determined to win something back. I placed the meat package on the grass beside me and clapped my hands.

‘I’m going to give this fellow a hug,’ Aunty Wynn said. She was wearing a baggy grey-marle sweatshirt with two pink dolphins embroidered over her heart. She rolled up her sleeves to reveal two soft freckled forearms. ‘Then I’m going to lift him up and sideways so you can unhook his horns.’

‘Yup,’ I said, pretending I was bored.

I moved so I was standing directly opposite the goat. Despite the pitched angle of its head, and the branch between us, I could see into both its eyes. I wondered whether it knew we were trying to help. It hadn’t made any move to kick. In fact, if it weren’t for its fraught bleats, I would have said it seemed weirdly resigned to its hanging position in that tree.

Now Aunty Wynn leaned in, and with a ‘Here I go’ she grabbed the goat around its middle. That started it kicking—

Aunty Wynn was only just out of reach of its hooves. Its four legs went wild. It was running for its life.

‘I’m going to lift him on the count of three,’ she said.

She counted down and then she raised the goat up with a groan, lifting it clear of the branch, after which I managed to unhook the horns so she was free to set it down and jump out of its way. Once the goat’s hooves hit the earth it bolted away from us with such force and speed that it nearly decapitated itself when the chain connecting its collar to its hut snapped taut. It fell to the ground in a heap and let out a high bleat.

‘He’ll be fine,’ Aunty Wynn said matter-of-factly.

The whole scene happened very quickly. I was bowled over by the thrill of it. My heart was racing. I watched the goat for a moment, lying on its side, panting, silent, and then I turned to Aunty Wynn. I was beaming.

I swam three kilometres most days. In the last year and a bit, since my mother had been diagnosed with motor neurone disease, I hadn’t missed more than one day a week. In my peak racing years, I’d swum more, much more. I’d won national-level medals. But the strength I felt in the pool had never really flowed over into other parts of my life. Aunty Wynn’s physical strength wasn’t surprising—she’d had a more successful swimming career than I. It was her self-assuredness that impressed me. I couldn’t think of anything I’d done recently with equal conviction. For the first time in twenty-six years of annual Moore family lunches and one funeral—those were the only times we ever saw each other—I caught myself, if not admiring, then envying her.

‘That was pretty cool,’ I said. It was the most positive thing I’d ever said to Aunty Wynn.

She pushed at the sleeves of her sweater again so they were up over her elbows. She wasn’t smiling—she was staring into

the distance, her mouth moving ever so slightly, as if she were doing sums in her head.

‘Should we check the goat’s okay?’ I asked.

Behind her: a monotone grey sky, more gorse-riddled paddocks, a few mānuka trees huddled together in a lonely group. I thought I could smell the sea, though I couldn’t see or hear it. Some might consider that landscape beautiful. Rita Angus, the primary artist I was writing about for my Master’s, sure did. Though she hadn’t studied these exact hills, she had painted others like them, and relentlessly—paintings that had already been written about relentlessly too. For that reason alone, she wasn’t an original topic choice—something which pained me to admit.

‘I wanted to tell you about a man I saw on TV,’ Aunty Wynn said, ignoring my question about the goat’s state of health. ‘His wife had MND and he was talking about how his wife didn’t die when they thought she would. She kept on. But only after she could do nothing but move her eyes.’ She said this quickly, rushing to get it out.

When my mother was diagnosed with motor neurone disease in February the previous year, I’d binged on all the information I could find about it. I was surprised and annoyed to learn that Aunty Wynn—the nurse!—hadn’t done the same.

‘It’s called locked-in syndrome,’ I said.

Aunty Wynn nodded as if this wasn’t actually new information. ‘The wife would watch him as he walked around the room,’ she said. ‘He said he’d be vacuuming her bedroom, and her eyes would follow him back and forth across the end of the bed.’ She sucked her top teeth against her bottom lip, then inhaled sharply and looked directly at me. ‘Are you worried this will happen to your mum?’

I knew there was a small chance my mother’s decline might

plateau right before death. It had been some time since she had been able to speak. She could no longer eat or drink—all nutrients arriving through a plastic tube on a direct route through her stomach wall. And she could only move about on her own with the aid of a four-wheeled walker. With her doctor's shaky prognosis, and a law of averages guiding us, we were prepared for her to continue this downhill slide for another two or three months. Yet the idea that her decline, however painful and hideous, might slow, that she might remain in this current state, or worse, for an unknowable amount of time—that seemed like the sort of next-level tragedy that would befall someone else. But I didn't know how to admit that. Or if I even should.

'No, you don't need to answer that question,' Aunty Wynn said, as if reading my mind.

The goat was standing up now, a few metres away. It looked calmly in our direction and then slowly lowered its head and enjoyed a large mouthful of thistle. It appeared to have gotten over its recent trauma. I, too, had already forgotten the excitement.

'She's been feeling funny lately,' Aunty Wynn said, though this comment felt like the tail end of a much longer statement. She had been having an internal dialogue with herself, and now she needed to share part of it with me. 'She's been good, really good, but also.'

'Good?' I said. I was picking at the bark of the low-hanging branch of the pōhutukawa tree—it was soft after recent rain. I'd already picked away a scab the size of my fist. 'But she can't do any of the things she loves to do. She can't go anywhere on her own. She can't eat, she can't drink her gin and tonics. She barely has enough energy to read. Her life has gotten shittier and shittier.'

‘Yes,’ Aunty Wynn said. ‘She’s good though. You’ll see.’

‘Good?’ I said, my voice a register higher this time. I didn’t believe it. I threw another chunk of bark back at the tree.

Now Aunty Wynn was rolling her shoulders so her arms danced loose at her side. I recognised the action—she was a swimmer loosening up before a race. It was something I used to do. Then she briefly closed her eyes, and for a second her face appeared almost regal. ‘She’s good,’ she said again, taking a deep breath and exhaling audibly through her nose. ‘Though you should know, your mum has asked me to help her exit.’

‘Exit?’ I said.

‘Die,’ Aunty Wynn said.

She was incredible to watch, my mother had once said about Aunty Wynn. She was talking about when they were both young and still swimming competitively. *Despite how she holds herself on land these days, back then she moved through the water as effortlessly as a goddamn dolphin.* It was, to my knowledge, the only nice thing my mother had ever said about her sister. I remembered this as proof that my mother wouldn’t enlist Aunty Wynn in this way. The idea of my mother checking out made no sense. And even if it could be true, she would have asked me first.

‘The law doesn’t agree with us, Erin.’ Aunty Wynn reached for the package of meat, which was still lying on the grass near my feet. She scooped it up with one hand and lodged it in her armpit. ‘We both thought you had a right to know.’ Her cheeks and neck had flushed a blotchy crimson. She looked deeply unhappy.

‘I don’t believe you,’ I said.

Just then the goat let out a horrific cry. It startled us both. In the time we’d been talking, the goat had planted itself on the top of its corrugated-iron hut. I hadn’t even noticed it walking

back down the paddock, let alone scaling the side of its house. Its cry was victorious. I had a vision of firing a bullet clean through the side of its skull.

‘Mum hasn’t said anything about this to me,’ I said. I’d never fired a gun, but in that moment I felt certain I could. In the same way I felt certain that Aunty Wynn had no idea what she was talking about.

Aunty Wynn moved towards me, and I realised she was coming in for a hug. I stepped away. I could think of nothing more repulsive.

‘I don’t believe you,’ I said again. I was beginning to feel the cold, and shivered. It was June, and the air felt chilled with the recent rain.

I could tell Aunty Wynn wanted to say something else. She looked at me with fear and embarrassment, and whatever small admiration I’d had for her earlier vanished. She had never appeared so large and imposing, but those pants, that sweater, the way she squinted at me through her terrible turquoise frames—I knew there was no way my mother would give herself up to that woman. It was like a strange Mexican standoff, the two of us unmoving beside the single pōhutukawa tree, the goat refereeing from the roof of its hut, but no other witnesses coming or going along the winding road. I’d never felt so alone.

‘Let’s get this meat home and into the fridge,’ Aunty Wynn said finally. And that was all she said before she sadly marched her way back down the paddock.

I had no choice but to follow.

Airini Beautrais

Sin City

from an untitled short story collection

Manuscript, forthcoming September 2020

Predictably, halfway through the second round of drinks, Margot excused herself and went to the toilet. Shortly afterwards, Gregor went to stretch his legs. The bathroom door was locked for a long time. Bill, a small man with a proportionately small bladder, went and pissed off the porch. Next to me, the new woman squirmed uncomfortably. I'd been watching her sideways for half an hour and could see she was terrified.

I pictured Margot and Gregor. I don't know why, they weren't worth picturing. Her over the basin, loose tits swinging. It was all Gregor's idea to begin with, the parties, and for no better reason than that he was already fucking Margot, and wanted it to happen easier. It was often at Arthur's place because Arthur had put in a deck and a Jacuzzi. Arthur was a lawyer and he could afford that shit. He could afford that shit the way Bill, who was a groundsman, could afford tinned beans. Arthur had been divorced twice, two kids with each, and was now married to Jean. One brat.

I was pretending to listen to Roger, who'd been a regular for a while (president of the tennis club), and to the husband of the terrified woman. I'd forgotten his name, and hers, immediately. What were these men talking about? Golf? The stock exchange? Drunk Muldoon and the snap election? Not sex. No one ever talked about sex. Your best friend could be loudly fucking your wife in the adjacent toilet, and it'd be How about this weather. That was the odd thing. It was all about

sex, and at the same time, it wasn't. We did all this to prove to ourselves, to each other, that sex was nothing. In any case, I wasn't listening. There she was, in the centre of things, so cool, so demure, the most beautiful woman in the world. She looked like Princess Diana, right down to the haircut and the dreamy blue eyes, only she was more lovely. Everything she did was an artwork: placing a bowl of chips on the table, adjusting the volume knob on the record player. She was wearing a long blue dress her ankles barely escaped, but when she bent down the polyester fabric clung to her lovely arse.

She was polite. 'How are you this evening, Adam?' she asked me. I was on my feet, pretending to sway to the music, wineglass in hand, but really, I wanted to be near her. She spoke with perfect composure, with a soft smile, like this was just a regular *soirée*. Husband's at-home for everyone from the office. It was as if it didn't pain her. I knew that it did: to be thrown amongst pigs every second Friday, to be put into the collective pool and be fished out. Jean was a jewel and didn't belong in with that dross. Oh, it was all right for titsy Margot, who'd been a slut since fourteen and must have fucked every man in town by now. It was all right for dried-up Carol who'd hardly say Good morning to me anymore, she deserved to go and suck dicks. But Jean, although a mother, looked like a virgin. She was twenty-three and the rest of us were in our forties. It was impossible not to want to rescue her.

Gregor appeared in the kitchen, Margot flopped down beside her husband on the leather couch. I could have sworn I heard her squelch. I nodded to Gregor as he cracked open a stubby, and made for the toilet myself. About this time of the evening, every time, I began to lose composure. I began to feel the blood rushing to my cheeks, an unpleasant twist in my groin, part lust and part hate. I wanted, and wanted to kill, at the same

time. I lifted the seat and pissed in the bowl. It felt like sacrilege, pissing in Jean's toilet, my half-cut slash where she'd make her pretty tinkle. I'd piss on anything of Arthur's, but since she'd married him and redecorated the house, the bathroom felt like hers. Her scents lining the mirror, her hand crème on the vanity, lucky sponge by the bathtub that got to caress her skin. I looked at the peach-coloured towels and wondered if Gregor had wiped his end on any of them. Disgusted with myself for thinking of that, I filled my cupped palms and splashed my face. The cold water made me feel firmer. In the mirror, I saw a man who wasn't bad for forty-seven. Arthur had always been the smarter one, but I, admittedly, was the better-looking. It wasn't that Arthur was ugly, but after forty, if a man doesn't have much to start with, he won't have much to go on. I allowed myself to admire my hair, still chestnut, still lining my forehead except for two triangles at the temples; my jaw, still defined; my teeth and the whites of my eyes reasonably white. If there was any one of us Arthur's wife ought to be content to be shared with, I reasoned, logically, it would be me.

But that was the problem. Every time, the last four or five parties, she'd conjured up tricks to make sure she'd go home with Bill. I had never had a chance on her. Gregor had, maybe once, and Roger, and I think Ron. Why Bill? I knew, and I suppose everyone else did, that she was fixing things, that she'd put some identifying mark on his keys, or who knows what. No one had said anything, up until now. But it was going too far. If it happened again tonight, I promised my reflection I would do something about it.

What? I didn't hate Bill. I hated him with a passion, but I didn't hate him. In my mind he was still a boy, slow to read, late to mature, quietly spoken and always on the outer of things. He still combed his hair to one side, wore V-neck cardigans and

corduroy pants like an old man. I think he may even have worn orthotic shoes, but perhaps I am just being deliberately cruel. In the lounge, I seated myself beside him. There was something comforting about his effeminate face, his greying curls. He was a man who reassured you of your own manhood. But what could he do for a twenty-three-year-old bombshell?

I watched him, and I could tell he wasn't watching her. He was talking to me, softly, about his boss or his orchid house or something. There was definitely something going on, I told myself. He was avoiding her deliberately. They were having a real affair. Perhaps he was meeting her outside of all this. Perhaps she'd drop round to the school or sportsground or wherever he worked mowing lawns and picking up rubbish, and they'd have a quickie in the caretaker's cottage. Perhaps she'd bake him a batch of scones. Did she have a thing for short men, curly-haired men, men with diminutive chins? There was no explaining some people's preferences.

Now it was time for the bowl. The new woman, whose name was Maureen, apparently, had to go first. She was shaking like a hundred-year-old. She got my keys and looked at me wide-eyed and afraid. I had to play by the rules. I stood up, quite normally. 'Well, come on love,' I said, and drew my arm around her and guided her into the hall. Once we were out of earshot, I said, 'Look, I know you don't want to do this.'

'Oh, no, really, it's fine,' she said. She had one of those very girly, high voices. She'd trained herself never to speak too deep. Carol, my wife, had a tendency to growl. Jean had a moderately pitched voice, but soft.

'You don't want to do it,' I reiterated. 'And as a matter of fact, I'm not in the mood myself, tonight.'

Her mouth was open slightly, and she was staring intently at my tie-pin. 'It's not that there's anything wrong with you,

hon,' I said, touching her bare arm. Another night, or another lifetime, maybe, I would have. 'I'm just tired and grumpy and I want to sleep.'

Her relief fell on us, massive and warm. Tears blurred her mascara, and the tip of her nose turned red. 'Thank you,' she whispered. 'This was my husband's idea. Don't think I'm a . . . a . . .'

I felt nice for a moment. 'Whatever it is,' I reassured her, 'you're not one.' Then the nasty feeling I'd had all evening resurfaced. Viciousness rumbled in my stomach, and I couldn't keep a lid on it. 'If you don't like it, why did you come?' I asked.

'I don't know.'

'Get a divorce,' I shrugged, and opened the door for her.

I walked around Arthur's garden, smelled something sweet, heard the night wind slapping leaves. I sat on the back porch for a while, and watched the sky get darker. Arthur's house looked out over the town. I could have fooled myself it was a nice place, with all those lights twinkling, and the darkness swallowing up all those squat state houses and ugly Victorian buildings. It wasn't nice. We all lived here by pure bad luck. I was feeling too sober to keep looking at it, so I got up and slunk back inside. Let anyone ask questions, if they even noticed me. There was no one in the hall, no one in the lounge. There were various bottles of spirits sitting on top of the cocktail cabinet, at various stages of emptiness, but I couldn't find a clean glass. My heart was pounding. I found myself padding up the thickly carpeted stairs. I would go and find Bill and Jean and ask what the hell they thought they were doing, but first I would go and tell Arthur, my childhood best friend, that he was a complete and utter fuckwit. It wouldn't be the first time. He wouldn't give a hoot.

Some kind of shitty hit-parade was blaring from a radio, but I could still hear other sounds above it. I pushed open the bedroom door, and peered in. The bedside lamps were on. There was something of an orgy happening in the king-size waterbed. By the looks of things, Roger and Arthur were spit-roasting Ron's wife Sandra. I thought I could make out the dark shape of Ron masturbating in the corner, but perhaps it was the curtain moving in the breeze. Jean's sweet curtains, and her bed, and her sheets. 'This is bad, this is wrong!' I yelled, but they were too preoccupied to notice me. I went back downstairs, glared into the kitchen where two women were making out against the wall-oven, blouses off, flesh squeezing around their bra-straps. Once upon a time such sights would have got me going, but now I didn't care. I found my keys in my jacket pocket, slammed the front door, went to my car. Perhaps I would have a heart attack before I got there. Or on the way to Bill's place.

But I didn't head straight to Bill's. I drove to the Commercial and parked around the back. This town was like sticking your head under a guillotine blade, every second. This town was like drinking shitshakes. It was mind-numbing, soul-numbing, heart-killing. It was like an old black-and-white TV in an old folks' home, screen filled with static, with all the old folks passed out in their chairs, dreaming of their regrets. They'd dreamed of everything and done nothing. People called this place 'Sin City' and added 'Vegas' as a suffix to its name, well that was a fucking joke. It wasn't wild or debaucherous or sinful. There was no casino here. It was just a tired, sad backwater. It deserved to be wiped off the planet. I walked across the dampish carpet to the bar, and imagined dropping a nuclear warhead on the whole place. From far away, the mushroom cloud would be so beautiful. The new Prime Minister was making noises

about the country becoming nuclear free. I would need to act promptly.

‘One dirty martini please,’ I said to the barman. He looked affronted. He wasn’t used to anyone saying please, or ordering anything other than Lion Brown. He looked up at the rows of dusty bottles on the shelves behind him. I didn’t watch – I knew he’d be mixing something rotten with something awful.

He handed me something in a smeary glass. It was yellowy, like urine. I smelled the pineapple before I tasted it.

‘Excuse me,’ I said, looking him in the eye, ‘but what is this?’

‘Dirty martini,’ he replied.

‘A dirty martini doesn’t have pineapple in it,’ I informed him.

‘Doesn’t it?’ He looked unconcerned. I knew he wouldn’t make me another one. I knocked it back in one vomitous swill, and ordered a Lion Brown. Fuck everything.

I looked around the room. There was a guy with a long grey beard and a Swannndri swaying alone in the middle of the floor. He looked like something out of Barry Crump. There were a collection of sad fucks losing their hair, throwing darts at the beat-up board in the corner. The wall around it was peppered with drunken misses. Someone’s greasy head lay on the pool table, cue clenched in slumped fist. There were two women in the place: one sitting alone looking fed-up, one in leather and lace leaning on the bar. I was pretty sure she was a hooker, but it was hard to tell with fashions nowadays. That whore, Madonna. The leather-clad woman saw me watching her, and shuffled towards me. I looked down – impossible not to, when you are six foot six – and saw a wrinkled abyss between her breasts. On either side of it, skin shifted and sweated. When she opened her mouth to talk to me, I saw she had no teeth. I couldn’t understand a word she was saying, drunk and gummy

as she was.

She leaned in closer. Oh God, I thought, sorry love, I'd rather hang myself in the dunny than pay you for sex. She made a sibilant sound. I drank deep from the piss-warm liquid in my bottle. She made the sound again.

'Cigarette,' she was saying. 'Cigarette.' With a relief almost equal to Maureen's earlier that evening, I pulled a box of tailormades from my pocket, stuck one between her gums, and lit it. Her face smoothed over, and she breathed serenely, like a baby. She sat on her stool with her back to the barman, smoking and not saying a word. This was as close to bliss as she'd ever get, I thought. Maybe she'd have her way with the bearded swayer later on, maybe she wouldn't. A toothless woman would be good for giving head, I thought. I downed the rest of my beer and left.

A neat box hedge went down either side of Bill's path. There were leadlight windows either side of his door, and a terracotta dog by the mat. I pounded with my fist, felt sweat rise in it. I wasn't expecting an answer, thinking I'd have to go round and pound on the bedroom window for a while, but in moments there was a shuffle in the hallway and Bill appeared, fully clothed, in his sheepskin slippers. His reading glasses sat halfway down his nose. Peering over them, he looked perplexed. 'Adam,' he said, in a friendly voice. 'Come in.'

Would joining in whatever they were doing be a consolation? I thought of Roger and Arthur like animals in the bed. They had no qualms about anything, those men. Arthur would go into court and defend the most violent rapist like he was simply a man going about his daily business, doing no harm to anyone. I believe he had reasoned away any moral sensibilities by the age of seventeen. 'We are all machines,' he told me once, when

we were smoking on the roof of his parents' shed. Computers would one day take over the world. I didn't want to live in that world. No, I would not join Bill and Jean. I would simply say my piece and then leave. Perhaps then she would realise how I loved her.

I followed Bill meekly to the lounge. The lights were on, the old black-and-white TV was blaring. A cup of tea, half drunk, sat on the sad tiled coffee table. 'Can I get you a drink of something?' Bill asked me. It struck me that Bill had been born an old man. I sat in the armchair opposite him, not knowing what to say, how to begin. Perhaps she was about to appear, a vision in a negligee or transparent dressing-gown. Perhaps she'd be horrified to see me sitting here.

The TV went on and on, the kettle boiled in the kitchen. Bill knew how I liked my tea. He brought it to me on a saucer, with a ginger nut beside it. Bill was a decent man and Margot had never deserved him.

We sat and drank our tea in silence, but it was a companionable silence. Minutes ticked by and no woman appeared. 'You're home alone,' I observed, after a while. Bill nodded, draining his cup and placing it on the table. 'Same as every time,' he said.

I studied his face, waiting. He was smiling. 'God, you didn't really think she'd be interested in me, did you?' he said. 'I'm just a way out.'

'Where does she go, then?

'To her mother's.'

That made sense. Did her mother, the same age as, if not younger than, Arthur and Bill and Gregor and me, know what her daughter's marriage had become? Was Jean's wedding picture on that mantelpiece, her slim and stunning, him the Cheshire cat? Was his money enough to make up for his

behaviour?

‘It’s the little boy, Adam.’

I had forgotten about him. Arthur had five children, the oldest two already grown and gone. He never spoke about any of them. They were products of his personal machine. How old was the little one now?

‘He’s only just two, can’t say Margot ever would have left ours overnight at that age. She might act the tart, Adam, but Jean’s a lovely mother. She dotes on that boy.’

I felt incensed at his calling Jean a tart, but settled for turning red and saying nothing. I looked at him, prompting him to continue.

‘The first night she came here . . .’ He gave a long sigh, one of those audible, forced sighs. Haaaaaaaa. ‘I wanted to of course, but I just couldn’t, you know.’ He paused. ‘My pecker played up.’

This was remarkably candid.

‘She cried, and I thought it was because of me. What man wouldn’t be able to make love to a woman like that? And so I asked her to talk, and I just listened. She wasn’t even remotely fussed about my shortcomings, Adam! She told me her baby was sleeping at her mother’s, and she missed him. So I got dressed and drove her around there. After that, we made a deal. She’d pick my keys, I’d drop her off, and I’d have a quiet one at home. Can’t say I mind too much.’

He didn’t mention Margot, but I read her in his face. I slurped the last of my tea. ‘Do you have a nip of anything stronger?’ I asked.

Bill pulled a bottle of sherry from the cupboard beside the TV, and two glasses that looked like something my mother would own, deep in her caches of never-used homewares. He poured us each a generous tipple, and we drank. We drank

again. The late show finished, and the test patterns came on. We sat looking at the test patterns and drinking that foul sweet sherry.

‘Adam,’ Bill said, ‘I love you.’

I remembered how we’d been boys together, taking the long way home, poking in streams with sticks. I remembered how his hair had been curly and golden. He’d been the Hobbit and I’d been Gandalf. He’d always been small and girlish, I’d always been stupidly tall.

I looked at him disapprovingly.

He sighed, setting his glass down. ‘You’ve been my friend forever, and I love you. I love them all: Arthur, Gregor, Roger even. And the ladies, but you fellers most of all.’

‘Let’s get out of here,’ I said. ‘Let’s pack the car and fuck off and leave our wives and leave this shit-awful town. We’ll die here, Bill.’

‘We’ll die wherever we are,’ Bill shrugged.

‘We’ll die here quicker,’ I said. ‘Come on. You know you hate it all as much as I do.’

Bill sipped. ‘I can’t,’ he said. ‘Jono’s got footy in the morning. And I can’t just not turn up at the firm on Monday.’

‘Firm? What firm?’

‘The insurance firm. Where I work.’

‘You’re a fucking groundsman.’

Bill sighed. ‘I haven’t been a groundsman in five years, Adam. I sell insurance.’

‘You’re always talking about plants.’

‘Gardening is my hobby.’

‘Oh.’ Perhaps he was right. I hoped he wouldn’t suggest we look at his orchids. I would kill myself if I had to look at Bill’s orchids. It was too dark, I reasoned. Bill wouldn’t show me his orchids by torchlight. Or would he? Did he have lighting

installed in the orchid house?

‘The problem with you, Adam,’ said Bill, ‘is that you live in your own head. You don’t care what happens to anyone else.’

‘That’s not true,’ I said. ‘I came here tonight because I care about somebody.’

‘No, you don’t,’ Bill said. ‘You just want the same thing from her any of the rest of them want.’

I was too drunk to be angry. Bill’s eyes were closing. He wasn’t angry, either. I looked at the test patterns, that horrific rainbow. How anyone could watch the test patterns and not want to die, I didn’t know. I would leave. I didn’t care whether anyone else would, or not. I would leave this place, and that bitch Carol, and my rude, pimply daughter who was bound to turn out mean and ugly. Our son had made a break for it years ago.

Pressed into the vinyl armchair, I imagined myself driving. I turned out of Bill’s street and headed up the hill on the highway west. I drove past a church, and another church, and a gas station, closed and dark. I drove past a closed pub. I drove on to the next town, where everything was, of course, closed. Hardly a neon light flashed in a dim window. I drove to the town after that, and it was the same again, although this one had traffic lights. I stopped at the red, and sat and waited for nothing, and nothing came, and after an eternity the light went green. I took the coastal road and drove around the sea. It was dark, and I was drunk, and I couldn’t make out any beaches. I knew they were there, some rocky, some with sheer cliffs, some sand-blasting hollows where people surfed and picnicked and fucked and holidayed out of pure desperation. I knew on my right there were paddocks filled with dormant cows, their udders slowly filling with milk as they slept. It wouldn’t be long before the farmers’d be up and out into the paddocks, driving

them to the sheds. I thought about the sea, slopping on my left. I wondered what the sea was doing at this time of night.

When I was a young man, and Carol was still kind and beautiful, there'd been this dolphin up North. It came into the Hokianga and swam with people, and took kids for rides and bounced balls off its nose. We sat on the pier with crowds of other young people, scantily clad, laughing, ridiculously leggy and sun-tanned. We were nineteen and we'd run away to get married. Her folks didn't like me, or, more specifically, they didn't like my folks. That's where I wanted to drive to, to Hokianga in the nineteen-fifties. I was a young man, Jean wasn't even born. I wouldn't have to worry about her. I could find that dolphin, or, after it was dynamited, another motherfucking dolphin.

I managed to stretch out my leg and turn off the TV with my toe. The rainbow died. The resultant darkness was a kind of quiet. I was somewhere in the middle of the coastal road and I had run out of gas. I hadn't been keeping an eye on the needle, and anyway, the gauge was wonky. I let the car putter to a halt in the grass on the side of the road. I let the armchair tip back, the footrest extend. Soon I would be asleep. I'd be passed out in Bill's lounge. I'd be asleep in my car on the coastal road in the middle of nowhere, and when the farmers finished milking I'd still be asleep. Families would pass on their way to and from sports games, utes would pass with dogs barking on the tray. Bill's youngest son would arrive in the lounge in his football uniform and find us both asleep in our clothes. I'd wake up stinking with a trail of drool from my mouth to the hot vinyl upholstery. I'd open the passenger door and feel the assault of the sea breeze and freeze my dick off taking a leak. I might vomit, and find Carol's handkerchief in the glove box and wipe my mouth. I'd vomit in Bill's toilet, and scrub up the mess. I'd

walk down the path to my car. I'd walk to the nearest house. I'd beg a few litres of fuel, enough to get me to the next town, where I could fuel up properly. That would be what I would do. I'd be asleep soon. I'd be asleep in a chair, next to Bill asleep in a chair. The sky was growing creamy. Everything that had happened in the past twelve hours was a tremendous joke.

Phil Lester

What kills honey bees?

from *Healthy Bee, Sick Bee*

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‘If the bee disappeared off the face of the Earth, man would only have four years left to live.’ That’s a quote widely attributed to Albert Einstein. It’s the sort of substantial and big-picture statement that this impressive man could have made, but there is no actual evidence those words came from his mouth.

Without a doubt, however, bees and other pollinators are extraordinarily important. We depend on pollination for much of our food. A research group from Europe estimated that the total economic value of pollination worldwide amounted to €153 billion. Vegetables and fruits were the leading benefactors of insect pollination, followed by edible oil crops, stimulants, nuts and spices. Beef and dairy production is heavily reliant on forage pollination by insects. Pollinators were estimated contribute to 9.5% of the total value of the production of human food worldwide.¹ A total of 87 of the 115 leading global food crops are dependent upon animal pollination, and those animals are mostly bees.

Of all the bee pollinators, the honey bee *Apis mellifera* is the most economically valuable in cropping systems around the world. The yields of many fruit, nut and seed crops would drop by more than 90% without honey bees.² Perhaps the most extreme example of our reliance on honey bees is with almond production. Nearly 80% of the world’s almonds are produced in the Central Valley of California each year. Almonds are reliant on insect pollination. It has been estimated that over 60% of the commercially managed honey bee hives in the US

are transported from across the country each year to these almond groves. Almond growers need honey bees and their economic livelihood is in serious jeopardy without them. From the *Los Angeles Times* in 2016: ‘Without bees, there can be no almonds. In fact, each of California’s nearly 1 million acres of almond orchards requires two hives. But California beekeepers have only a quarter of the needed hives. As almond acreage has exploded and bees have been in some kind of crazy death spiral, growers have been in a mild state of panic over where to find enough little pollinators.’³

Even the world’s superpowers recognise the economic importance of honey bees. President Obama had a beehive and pollinators’ garden installed on the South Lawn of the White House. ‘I do care about bees—and we’re going to fix them!’ he said in 2015. At that time, the president was launching a plan to reduce honey bee overwintering colony losses to no more than 15% within 10 years.⁴ Given the high rate of overwintering loss at that time in the US, of 27%,⁵ the goal of losing just 15% represents hundreds of thousands of hives surviving when they normally would die. Not to be outdone by the United States, New Zealand’s prime minister also keeps bees on government grounds. In order to mark the beginning of that nation’s Bee Aware Month in 2019, the current minister of agriculture, Damien O’Connor, inspected the prime minister’s hives and told a group of young beekeepers from Te Aro School that bees were the most important animal in the world and needed our protection. ‘Without bees we wouldn’t have pollination, and without pollination we wouldn’t have food. If we look after the bees, then they can look after pollination.’⁶

The entire world does seem to love honey bees. Our love of this insect is a little ironic, given they probably result in more human deaths than any other animal in many countries

including New Zealand (mosquitoes and malaria take that 'prize' in many other countries). We love bees so much that we've sent them into space. A range of different insects have been blasted by rockets into orbit, including honey bees. In 1982 a space shuttle carried common house flies, velvetbean caterpillar moths, and 14 honey bees. The poor bees had their stingers clipped to reduce the danger for the frightened crew. In space, the bees tended to float a lot. Near the end of the trip one observant and astute astronaut noted that 'the bees have all gotten stationary'.⁷ All 14 bees had died. It seems that the bees were given inadequate food; it really sounded like they were starved and/or bored to death before the shuttle landed back on Earth.⁸

In 1984, two complete colonies of bees, each with around 3400 workers and a queen, were blasted into orbit in a 'shuttle student involvement program'. For some strange reason NASA officials deemed dead bees to be the primary concern for human health on this trip, so all 6800 bees were allowed to keep their stingers, and attempts were made to provide nicer in-flight meals and a degree of stimulation. Bees needed a day or two in space to get used to zero gravity. By the end of the seven-day orbit, they had adjusted to their new environment and 'showed complete adaptation to microgravity'. They flew from place to place. They built wax comb and the queens laid eggs. Crew members noted that the bees were able to learn and adjust their flight behaviour to efficiently move around the colony. All but 350 of the 6800 bees survived the trip.⁹ No doubt with great relief to NASA, those 350 deceased bees didn't seem to have influenced astronaut health. This rate of bee (and astronaut) mortality would be about what you'd expect from bee colonies of this size on Earth over a week-long period.

A long history of bee declines and ‘colony collapse’

A key reason for our long-held love of bees is the human sweet tooth. Until only a few decades ago, honey was the only sweetener available. Honey is a favourite on morning toast around the globe. It stores well and has a huge range of uses. Consequently, for this very selfish reason we’ve been loving bees for thousands of years. Along that historic road, we’ve been selecting bees for traits that we prefer, such as highly productive, gentle bees that are less inclined to sting the beekeepers who steal the results of their hard work. The bees we see now behave and probably look different from those observed even a few hundred years ago.

Because of our sweet tooth and our long history with bees, we’ve been writing about bees for thousands of years. There is a very long recorded history of honey bee declines and collapses at a national scale. In what is still one of our best records and summaries, George Fleming reviewed animal plagues in 1871.¹⁰ The first mention of a widespread ‘mortality of bees’ is in Ireland in 950 CE. Fleming describes how bees were a source of wealth to the Irish people. We have no idea what caused the decline of these Irish bees, but at around the same time, plagues of insects with two teeth (probably locusts) were causing a ‘a great destruction’. Cattle were also experiencing ‘a great destruction’ and ‘many diseases generally reigned all over Ireland’. Perhaps the locusts did what locusts do: eat everything, thus leaving food shortages for bees, cattle and people. Or perhaps the locusts introduced an insect disease to Ireland that affected bees already stressed by food limitation. Another ‘great mortality’ or *duine-badh* of Irish bees, cattle and men was recorded in the year 992 after a long, severe winter followed by a dry summer and famine.

The whole of Bavaria experienced a destruction of bees

in 1035. Four hundred years later, in 1443, Ireland suffered another widespread collapse of honey bees. Bee declines were noted in England in the same century. In 1717 there was a great mortality of bees (and carp) in Poland, and the eggs of bees would apparently rot in Saxony bee hives over 1780–1783, and again in 1796.

George Fleming's 1871 book makes for fascinating reading. People have been writing about animal plagues and disease for about as long as people have been writing. And not just about plagues on land; at various times we hear about 'whales and multitudes of other large monstrous fish were cast on the shore dead'. We have been ascribing and viciously arguing the causes of these plagues for about the same time. Comets, eclipses, fireballs, icebergs, lightning storms, demons, bishops accusing their parishioners of being too nice to cattle, and as many other causes as you can imagine have all been 'known' to cause these dramatic declines and the collapse of plant and animal populations.*¹¹

We've continued to see and record large-scale losses of honey bees since George Fleming's book was published in 1871. One of the most famous was the Isle of Wight honey bee epidemic over three events spanning 1905–1919. During three different disease epidemics, 90% of the island's honey bees were lost.

* What did people do about plagues in the 14th–18th centuries? There were no pesticides at that time. Instead, religion was frequently involved in attempts to eliminate pests during the dark ages and later. Prayer was frequently used, though prayer was just the beginning. Churches and communities went on to establish ecclesiastical courts where insect pests were put on trial, had legal representation, and condemned if found guilty. The offending pests were threatened with excommunication. One of the last trials was in 1886 and involved a plague of locusts in Croatia. One of the largest locusts was seized, tried and found guilty [of being a locust?] and put to death. Poor thing. Curses were formally pronounced and the whole species excommunicated from the church. Locusts everywhere must weep, to this day.

The causes of this collapse are still debated. Unusual weather likely played a part, as did some dubious and ‘disastrous’ beekeeping practices intended to remedy bee illness, such as feeding bees formalin or phenol in sugar syrup. A parasitic mite that infected the breathing tubes of bees and a fungal gut parasite were blamed, although the influence of both have been concluded as a ‘myth’ and each called a ‘scapegoat’ by some authors.¹² We’ve since seen unexplained, large-scale colony losses of honey bees in Australia, Canada, Mexico, France, Sweden and Germany.

The most famous recent widespread colony losses of honeybees was Colony Collapse Disorder seen in North America. CCD was first observed on a grand scale in 2006. It has a very distinct set of symptoms that differentiate CCD from other causes of hive mortality: (1) the rapid loss of adult worker bees from affected colonies as evidenced by weak or dead colonies with excess brood populations relative to adult bee populations, with the queen and small number of workers still present; (2) the workers disappear, with a lack of dead worker bees both within and surrounding the affected hives; and (3) the delayed invasion of hive pests (such as wax moths) and robbing or kleptoparasitism from neighbouring honey bee hives.¹³ There is also an absence of field-diagnosable bee pathogens that might include bacterial foulbrood diseases and mite infestations or viruses. Parasites such as *Varroa* (a parasitic mite) were introduced in the 1980s and caused hive mortality too, but hives dying due to *Varroa* display very different symptoms that include the presence of a declining number of bees, dead bees in or around the hive, frequent robbing by neighbouring hives, and pest invasion.

Nearly a quarter of all US beekeepers suffered from CCD in the winter of 2006–2007. Some beekeepers lost 90% of their

hives specifically to these CCD symptoms. Between 750,000 and 1 million of the nation's 2.4 million hives were lost to CCD in the 2007–2008 winter. Hives that were 'boiling over' with bees one month would have, if anything, just a few young workers and the queen a few weeks later.¹⁴

What caused CCD? We don't know. People blamed electromagnetic radiation from cellphone towers. People blamed genetically modified crops, which had a gene inserted for an insecticidal toxin. But we know that this *Bt* toxin is activated and damaging in the gut of some caterpillars, beetles and mosquitoes, and not in honey bees. It's very unlikely that *Bt* crops or electromagnetic radiation was related to CCD.

Others blamed synthetic pesticides, particularly the neonicotinoid pesticides that have been shown to kill bees or have a range of sub-lethal effects including the disruption of the bee's navigation ability. One of the reviews examining pesticide loads in honey bees found reports of 170 different chemicals, including 35 in stored pollen. Although researchers still express concern over the levels of pesticides found in these samples, none were considered by researchers as the smoking gun that caused CCD. No neonicotinoids were found in many bee colonies experiencing CCD. Still others hypothesised that poor nutrition and a lack of food sources was killing these pollinators. Bees need a diverse range of pollen sources to support growth and immunological function. Again, however, nutrition could not be demonstrated as a smoking gun. About the nearest potential or possible cause that was discovered was the *Israeli acute paralysis virus*, or IAPV. Some researchers hypothesised that a new strain of the virus arrived in the US in 2005 after the government lifted a ban on live honey bee imports that had been in place since 1922. Experimental infection of hives with this new strain resulted

in bees displaying symptoms similar to CCD.¹⁴ Other reviews downplayed the role of this virus strain, and acknowledged that several ‘stress factors’ acting alone or in combination weakened hives, allowing opportunistic pathogens to infect and kill colonies. In the end, the broad scientific consensus is that multiple factors contributed to CCD; pathogens, parasites, pesticides, poor quality food and climate likely played roles.

It’s been over a decade since North American beekeepers have seen widespread CCD. Beekeepers in the United States, however, still experience very high rates of overwintering colony loss. Beekeepers in Michigan, Minnesota and Utah report average colony winter losses at 50% or more. I can’t imagine how their businesses survive that they lose half their hives every year. Beekeepers in the United States typically experience higher winter loss than 27 of the 29 countries where overwintering mortality is surveyed.

Just as bees have a history of widespread, large-scale colony losses, we have a long history of people forming strong opinions and conclusions about the cause of these losses. George Fleming discusses his other thoughts on the history of plagues on both animals and man, and his conclusions are just the same as they are today, 150 years later: ‘Men gazed at the phenomena [of epidemics and plagues] with astonishment, and even before they had a just perception of their nature, pronounced their opinions, which, as they were divided into strongly opposed parties, they defended with all the ardour of zealots.’¹⁰

Beekeepers and scientists discussing the Isle of Wight honey bee epidemic formed just such opposing parties, which they zealously defended. Over the last two decades, we have similarly seen just this level of strongly opposed parties and zealots arguing over bee collapses, including on the cause of CCD. As Joachim de Miranda more recently discussed, reviewing cases

of bee declines or collapses, and echoing George Fleming: ‘Each documented decline sparked animated debates across the scientific community discussing the potential causes, generally without a clear-cut resolution.’¹⁵

Bee declines in New Zealand

We now have data from 2015–2018 on the rates and suspected causes of colony losses in New Zealand.¹⁶ Beekeepers in New Zealand have been extremely helpful by sharing their experiences with honey bee colony losses. In the last survey 47% of beekeepers responded to the survey questionnaire. The number of beekeepers participating in this survey is fantastic, with a response rate is more than double that for any European country. The US data described above is based on around 13% of their honey bee colonies. We have data from small backyard hobbyists through to the largest commercial operators.¹⁷ The focus of the survey is on winter, which is a key period for colony losses in honey bees.

What are the results of these surveys of Kiwi bees?

First off, I should note that CCD has not been observed in New Zealand. I’m frequently questioned about how bad Colony Collapse Disorder is here. As described above, CCD has a distinct set of symptoms: (1) the rapid loss of adult worker bees from affected colonies, as evidenced by weak or dead colonies with excess brood populations relative to adult bee populations, with the queen and small number of workers still present; (2) the workers disappear, with a lack of dead worker bees both within and surrounding the affected hives; and (3) the delayed invasion of hive pests, and robbing or kleptoparasitism from neighbouring honey bee hives.¹⁸ There is also an absence of field-diagnosable bee pathogens that might including bacterial

foulbrood diseases and mite infestations or viruses. Yes, we experience the loss of honey bee colonies in New Zealand, but no, we've had no widespread colony losses that display these specific CCD symptoms.

The average estimated rate of colony loss in New Zealand is about 10%. Colony loss in New Zealand has been estimated at between 8.4–10.2% for the last several years. Some beekeepers, even commercial operators, report losing no hives at all in any given winter. Others reported more, with the highest losses exceeding 50% of all hives for commercial or semi-commercial operators. The rates of hive loss are always highest for hobbyist beekeepers.

All New Zealand beekeepers were then asked to indicate why their colonies had died. Honey bee colony losses in New Zealand were most frequently attributed to queen problems. Clearly, queens play a major role in the colony. They are responsible for the production of eggs and new workers. If they fail, the colony has a good chance of failing. Nearly 36% of all colony losses were due to queen failure. The queens were typically reported to either stop laying eggs or produce only drones. Both are frequently observed when queens get old. Beekeepers also reported that the young queens occasionally fail, produce only drone brood; or they disappear, which might be related to mating failure.

The next major problem with suspected *Varroa* infestations and related complications was associated with the mites' mutualistic relationship with the deformed wing virus. Nearly 20% of all colony deaths were attributed to this parasitic mite.

A further 12% of lost colonies showed signs of starvation. New Zealand has more managed hives of honey bees than ever before. As of June 2019, there are 924,973 registered hives. That's around 3.5 hives for each square kilometre of the country and

represents approximately triple the number of hives we had in 2008. There are so many hives now that there is widespread concern for bee food sources. John Berry, a long-term beekeeper in the North Island, recently described his frustration with the explosion of hive numbers: 'I go past one of my sites and there are 180 hives dumped across the fence from them. On a farm, if you are running a thousand cattle and someone comes in and puts 10,000 cows on the same grass, do you get 10,000 times as much milk? I don't think so.' Beekeepers like John believe they are now in a fight to keep their bees alive—solely because of overstocking.¹⁹ These overstocking rates, potentially leading to starvation, are likely to compound problems associated with parasites, pathogens and pesticides. One hundred and eighty hives dumped next to your apiary will compete for food, but they also represent a large disease and pest reservoir.

Wasps contribute to another 12% of colony losses. New Zealand evolved with no social bees or wasps—all of our native bee and wasp species are solitary, and all the social species present in New Zealand today are introduced. Common and German wasps (often called yellowjackets in North America; *Vespula* spp.) raid honey bee hives, killing larvae and stealing honey. In the North Island, many beekeepers reported losing more than 40% of their hives to wasps.

The remaining causes of honey bee colony losses in New Zealand were all reported as relatively minor or infrequent, at <5%. Suspected *Nosema* and other diseases, robbing by other bees, natural disasters, American foulbrood, suspected exposure to toxins such as pesticides, accidents, thefts/vandalism, and Argentine ants were observed at a rate significantly less common than the causes listed above, but also contributed to colony losses. The low rate of loss attributed to pesticides is interesting, given the prominence and promotion of pesticides

as a source of bee mortality in the media. I'd note, however, that pesticide effects can be hard to spot. There may be a range of sub-lethal effects caused by pesticides, that make colony performance weaker or hives more susceptible to disease and parasites. Some pesticides have been demonstrated to reduce the foraging efficiency of bees, diminishing food harvest and perhaps making them more susceptible to starvation. Pesticide effects could be hidden in this colony loss survey.

New Zealand has many of the global problems with the honey bee industry, including *Varroa*, American foulbrood, fungal pathogens such as *Nosema*, and a suite of nasty viruses. But we've got our own challenges too.

Honey bees as canneries of global insect losses

The challenges faced for the management of honey bees and their habitats extends much broadly. Other insects appear to be suffering too. It appears that many insects are experiencing many of the same issues as honey bees.

A recent article reviewing 73 different studies demonstrated that insect biodiversity is threatened worldwide. Francisco Sánchez-Bayo and Kris Wyckhuys²⁰ found that insect populations have been in 'dramatic rates of decline', which they suggest might 'lead to the extinction of 40% of the world's insect species over the next few decades'. 'Unless we change our ways of producing food, insects as a whole will go down the path of extinction in a few decades.' Alarmingly, they conclude that 'the repercussions this will have for the planet's ecosystems are catastrophic to say the least'. They report some very gloomy statistics, such as with a 50-year study in Sweden that repeatedly surveyed large butterflies in a reserve. Of the 269 species initially observed, 59% are no longer found and

many of the remainder were in decline. Another study in the review found a 76% decline in flying insect biomass at several German reserves over a 27-year period. Insects in many countries appear to be in big trouble. Populations of pollinators such as bumble bees, which were once widespread and present throughout countries such as the United Kingdom, appear to be only just hanging on. The range of the great yellow bumble bee, *Bombus distinguendus*, is a classic example. Once present throughout the British Isles, its distribution has contracted substantially since the middle of the 20th century. Now it is only known to be present on some islands of the Inner and Outer Hebrides, Orkney, and the northern tip of the coast of mainland Scotland.²¹ It resides in a tiny fraction of its previous distribution.

Insectageddon has been used to describe these results. Headlines have included ‘Plummeting insect numbers ‘threaten collapse of nature’.²² The Sánchez-Bayo and Wyckhuys study, however, has some issues and critics. It is important to note that they specifically searched for published studies using the search terms [insect*] and [declin*]. Consequently, only studies that found declines in insect species were found. It is an unrepentantly biased perception of the insect population dynamics. It’s also worth noting that the vast majority of these very depressing results and studies were conducted in Europe or North America. There were very few studies from the mega-diverse regions around the equator. Countries including New Zealand and Australia might be different. We have few long-term studies of insect populations here in New Zealand other than for species such as invasive wasps, which we have found to be doing just fine.²³ Many other insect pests such as cockroaches, invasive ants, house flies, bedbugs, and mosquitoes seem to me to be annoyingly abundant.

A different story, however, is told by my car windscreen. When I was much, much younger, I remember driving in summer and having our family car windscreen frequently splattered with a wide diversity of insects. We had special insect windscreen liquid that was more or less a necessity for summer road trips. It was even worse on my motorbike when riding at (too) high speed, because the frequently flying large insects felt like bullets smashing into your helmet. It was a frequent occurrence for a large bumble bee flying in the opposite direction to hit my helmet and snap my head backwards. Nowadays, the frequency with which I need to wash splattered insect guts from my field of vision is much reduced. That qualitative sentiment is shared by other entomologists in New Zealand. Habitat destruction, with a loss of floral or other resources and the use of the pesticides, are cited as candidate mechanisms for our suspected insect losses here too.²⁴

Nearly all of the challenges that honey bees face are shared by the wider insect communities. Habitat destruction, parasites and pathogens, pesticides, and invasive species are all factors that influence honey bees and entire insect communities. But, of all the insects, we probably know honey bees the best. Honey bees can be considered the canary in the coal mine. The colony losses and many of the causes of loss for honey bees can be used as indicators for the health of insects in general. An understanding of honey bee health might just have broad biodiversity benefits.

Notes

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Ingrid Horrocks

Canyon Country: The Elk

from *Where We Swim*

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Two days later, at dawn in a cabin near the rim of the Grand Canyon, another three hours north on from Arcosanti, my daughter whispered in my ear, ‘The sunrise. Wake up.’

Pulling me urgently from sleep, Natasha climbed on top of me in the bed we shared. Her knees hooked around me like a bony monkey. ‘Wake up,’ she said, louder now to wake her sister Lena and her father too, still heavy with sleep. ‘Hurry or we’ll miss it.’

We pulled ourselves from sleep and scuffled around in the cabin finding warm clothes and hats—it was properly chilly up here—then went out into the quiet, not light yet but no longer dark either. We put our torches away, even the girls hushed by the stillness, ponderosa pines silhouetted around us as we picked our way through the dawn toward the canyon. The forest was so spaced out and the ground so bare we hardly needed the path.

Then, up ahead, an elk, a huge shadowy shape just standing there in the morning air.

We stopped, gathering in close.

Slowly he turned his held-up antlers so that he was looking at us, or at least I felt they were held, imagining the weight of them, and the muscles working in his neck. Both heavy and delicate at once. Lines from Elizabeth Bishop’s poem ‘The Moose’ ran through my head. Only there it was a she:

Taking her time,

She looks us over
grand, otherworldly.
Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?

There was a dim smell of elk, like farm animals but with more forest. Then, as though he had all the time in world and was no longer interested in us, the elk turned his head away. He continued to stand there, his warm breath misting in the growing light. We were dismissed.

The girls had been learning the weight of animals from the information guide, only pounds (lbs) had somehow become *ibises* in their lexicon.

‘Elks weigh from 325–1000 ibises,’ Lena whispered.

The elk became a flock of birds, a whole ecology of warm-blooded life lifting off.

We had arrived the day before. Even as we’d driven here, I’d somehow imagined we would arrive at the bottom of the canyon as you do at Yosemite in California. I’ve never been a very well-researched traveller, and Tim had booked this one, tagging the trip onto a conference in Phoenix.

Instead, the ground dropped away.

It proved to be an overnight hike to get to the bottom of the canyon down narrow switch-back paths cut through sedimentary layers of rock, and we weren’t up for that. Instead, on that first afternoon we’d skirted parts of the southern rim, walking the Trail of Time in which each horizontal metre of the walk represents one million years of vertical geological history, starting 2 billion years ago. We had passed stones marking the time when all this was a shallow tropical sea

around 500 million years ago, through to those marking the relative recentness of the period in which the (now dwindling) Colorado River cut the canyon itself, just 6 million years in the past. We'd wandered along eating chips, our kids jumping on 200-million-year-old rocks and reading panels aloud, while teenagers teetered precariously to get risky selfies despite their parents' cautions. The experience had been one of casual clicking pleasure of intellectual understanding, or perhaps even acquisition, while the numbers remained impossible to comprehend.

It wasn't until after our dawn encounter with the elk, and then a few days later when we swam at Slide Rock in Oak Creek Canyon further south, that it felt real. Or perhaps, that it felt properly other and of itself. In the morning air after the elk, so assured of its place in the half light, we walked on to the canyon alive with awe. At first, the layered rock was only visible in shadow form. As the sun rose, slanting light arrived and descended slowly into the canyon, moving down and back a period of geological time every few minutes.

The four of us sat on a narrow bench to watch the opening of the day, the view so vast that tourist shops, hotels and cafes along the rim were nothing. Only the slender shardic layers near the very top of the canyon corresponded to human history. Where did the Anthropocene start, I wondered as we sat there, the geological age in which human activity has become the dominant influence on climate and environment? A centimetre?

The light brought colour with it. The sun touched rocks halfway down that formed the contours of castles, each geometric shape part of a distinct type of rock system. By the time the sun hit the red in rocks forged hundreds of millions of years ago, still eons from reaching the past of the canyon floor,

it was glowing, burnished morning.

The flutter of dawn elk was still with us when we drove south into the smaller Oak Creek Canyon, the road winding steeply down an hour south of Flagstaff. First, it was all ponderosa forests, but soon we were deep between red rock faces and blazes of red and yellow Fall oaks. As Flagstaff writer Nicole Walker writes in *Sustainability: A Love Story*, her funny, beautiful and somewhat mad book about Arizona and family and climate change and ponderosa and lilacs and joy, the drive into Oak Creek Canyon is itself ‘geological, and therefore perspective making’.

We descended into the slit of the canyon, a layered chasm formed by the slow, persistent flow of snow-melt. Snow-melt that is decreasing year by year. The bright foliage we drove through was itself newly thin, although we didn’t know it then, 21,000 acres of it having burnt in 2014 in a particularly damaging wildfire. Walker writes of how every spring and fall she and her husband create a ‘defensible space’ around their house—and talk about moving back to Portland where it rains. She also writes about the problem of metaphor and the difficulty we have in imagining from other points of view, or things as other than they are—or more vitally, as they could be. And, she writes about how Oak Creek Canyon is part of the largest contiguous ponderosa pine forest in the United States, and how from a certain position at the top ‘you can see waves of ponderosa forest stretching as long as the sea’. ‘I wonder how many fires it will take to make the forest no longer contiguous,’ she writes. When I read this I thought, this, here, is her ocean. Then I wondered what it feels like to be a tree—or an elk—in a forest that is like an ocean.

And when that ocean is on fire.

We slept in a shadowed cabin right down there in it.

The next afternoon we drove the few miles on down the road to Slide Rock, a natural 25-metre-long water slide worn into the flat red sandstone at the bottom of Oak Creek Canyon. It was what we'd been waiting for: one of the 'Top 10' swimming spots in the United States according to lists we'd read online. It was a kind of human sized canyon.

The water was truly freezing this time, 40–45 degrees Fahrenheit the park ranger at the entrance to the park told us. That's 4–7 degrees Celsius. That's properly cold, colder than Lake Taupo in winter, cold enough to meet the International Ice Swimming Association definition of cold.

There were other groups around on the slippery flat red rocks, but there were only three others swimming, a man and his two teenage sons. Lena and Natasha paddled for a while in the bitter shallows and then it was time.

I went first, initially simply falling over on the slick rocks. A particular kind of algae makes them slippery. The trick, it seemed, was to sit and let yourself go. When I did this, I was pulled into the steep narrow channel about a metre wide, and quickly the water was moving me fast.

When I managed to turn my head, I saw Lena had followed and had been pulled around. She was coming down behind me fast, headfirst, her face pushed under the water close to the rocky sides. I screamed and tried to stop myself, but I kept slipping, being pulled on in my own current. Things slowed down. Water rushed around me, Lena's head just out of reach.

Finally, finally, I managed to splay my toes against both sides, the rock gravelly and slick against my feet, and I caught her. I had her. But her body was slippery and heavy, and I couldn't get her out and I was slipping again. It was her screaming this time.

Then Tim was there, firm on the dry rock to the side. I got my footing and pushed our daughter's struggling body into her father's arms.

'We've got you, Love, we've got you.'

I hardly knew who was saying it, Tim or me. But we had her. Safe and held.

Then Natasha slammed into me and we were both going down, and quickly we were pitched into a freezing pool, at which point fear was transformed into a flush of exhilaration, as though there was something in the water. Which there was: cold. My whole body tingled with the shock of it, my breath coming fast, adrenaline pumping through me.

I pushed this daughter too safely up to Tim on the flat rocks, and then, although it seems almost outlandish in hindsight given how afraid Lena had been and I for her, I went on.

There was another rapid of sorts that I bumped down. I paused in the next pool then let go again. It was faster this time, a real slide, at one point too narrow for my woman's hips so that I became wedged in place, my head just above water, the stream rushing round me. Then I was through and the water was pushing me, and I plummeted into a deep cold pool that seemed bottomless, my head going under as I dropped. For a moment, the chill of the snow-fed water clamped me in its grip.

When I finally surfaced, I saw that Lena and Natasha had recovered and were now running down beside me shouting, though I couldn't make out the words. It turned out this one was my swim. It was joyous, then, to be this woman, this mother, this partner in this precise passing moment in the world's turns, muddy and bruised and reckless feeling, my heart calling in warm blood to pump my core organs, my skin rising in rough goosebumps in response to the water. I was as immersed in it all as I could ever be. I was alive.

The current slackened as the channel became wider, and I floated on my back, moving on the flow like an insect carried by water, a daughter flying down either side, one blue and silver, the other blue and red, soaring from rock to rock. We could have flown as easily as we swam. We could have spoken ibis.

When I reached a slow-moving open pool, both daughters ventured in again to join me, swimming swiftly across the unknown depths, and Tim dived in too. All around, the water flowed on, running around us and through us, canyon cliffs rising up into an as yet untold future, and the leaves turned and turned in their still annual red and yellow glory. Together for our breath of time, deep in the blazing cold of the canyon, we floated.

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Bernadette Hall

from *Fancy Dancing: New and Selected Poems*
Manuscript, forthcoming 2020

xiv

Soft rain all night and the gravel paths fill up
with water. There are holes in the plume grass,
that's where the sheep are. A child rattles
silver bells in a yellow frame. Waves bunch up
like Christmas. I left four of my rings in the green
tray when I passed through the Guardhouse.
Susan rang Security from the library and I collected
them on my way out. Such is my tiredness.
He's learning things the hard way, the man
in the ugly track-pants. Every day he's faking it
like the dream of big, easy chairs along a sun-washed
verandah. But there's no sunlight here, just a 22 hour
lockdown. 'I wonder if I'll see you round the traps,'
he says, 'that's if you ever manage to dig yourself out.'

I've been out all night, walking, talking to the sea
and what I was trying to say was, 'Hey you,
stay right where you are.' I've been a bit oh là là
lately, a bit circumnavigatory since the earthquake,
since the slaughter of innocents in the Riccarton mosque.
But what I was really trying to say was thank you
for that brilliant critique of my poem. It was the best
thing ever, wave-written on blotchy, weedy
paper *splish splash splosh* and no,
it wasn't excessive, it was exactly what I needed,
a good old dunking. Was it Sorenson who spilled
the beans about the boy limping home at night,
drunk as a skunk and falling off his bike in the alleyway?
How happy you are now, old man. Come here and I'll feed you.

I'm thinking about it, how we'll embrace each other
at the airport, then you'll drive the long way home,
back down the island, sweet dear heart, sweet.
And I'm thinking about the crazy lady,
how she strides down Cuba Mall in full combat gear,
her face streaked with charcoal, how she barges
through the casual crowd, the coffee drinkers,
the eaters of sweet biscuits. 'All clear,' she shouts,
'I've got it sorted, you may all stand down.'
What I should do, what I would do if this was a movie,
I'd go right up to her and I'd say, 'Thank you,
I feel so much safer in this crazy world with you around.'
Geoff would get it, waiting at the corner of Ghuznee Street.
It's his kind of scene. In fact, he'd probably direct it.

So there's Charlotte and Maddie and Leo and Darcy,
hard at it, swimming in the harbour, their arms
like triangular roof-lines, a row of houses
heading up to the point, past the diving platform,
alternating in the chop and flow of the ocean
at its most musical. Past the elegant integument
of the wooden sailing ship all decked out
with Italian marble and garlands and tambourines.
How easy it was to fall in love with them,
the stilled antiquities. How long it took to see
the eating, drinking, gulping, feasting of the water
body, the spasmodic sun, the specific shade.
Beautiful children, you are forever and thereafter
swimming me to shore. I could not love you more.

Tusiata Avia

from *Giving Birth to my Father*

Manuscript, forthcoming 2020

Samoan funeral with Aunty I

I don't really want to write a poem about you, but someone else has died and I know you will come swooping down out of the blue sky like the witch at a fairytale christening ready to wreak your vengeance, but we are Samoans so you don't do it in the halls of the rejoicing, you wait for the nakedness of grief.

Thanks Aunty

I've been trying all day not to write this, but even as I lie face down staring at the floor trying to empty my mind, there you are trampling across the graves of people close to you and the graves of people you hardly know, to make sure you get a good spot.

You nearly pushed me into my father's grave. I bounced off you because you are a big bitch.

And now you are thundering across that malae like the Jonah Lomu of graveyards, mourners bouncing off you left and right so you can get to your rightful place with fists full of cash and lookatme. That's Samoan you know, it's culture, it's culture and what do you know, girl?

Like I said, I didn't really want to write this poem. There are a lot of people making threats from different parts of the country

at this time of mourning because this is how we mourn, isn't it? Why don't you tell me that I don't understand or that I can go back to New Zealand and leave it to you or that I better get out of his house or that you'll beat me up?

Samoan funeral with Aunty II

I know you're not the only one, Aunty, oh, I know that. The other one flies in too, like a vampire to your witch. All the funeral's a stage now and here she goes:

He was like my father.
She was like my mother.
She was like my daughter.
I was the closest one to her.

The shrieking and the rending of garments. The pushing herself to the front of the grievors—right up there with the mother and father.

I was like your mother.
I was like your father.
He was like my son.

My tears are as big as the whole Pacific. If I open my mouth I will swallow you all.
We keep shrinking, Aunty, and you keep swallowing us. You keep drowning us all.

You are big bitches and we bow down before you.

Catherine Chidgey

from *Remote Sympathy*

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From letters written by Doktor Lenard Weber to his daughter

Frankfurt am Main, September 1946

Look at the picture, Lotte: the Palmengarten in midwinter. How pretty the trees are, their branches sugary with snow. I have a pile of pictures just as pretty; my neighbour gave me a stack of old calendars, and so, in the absence of any other paper, I'll write to you on the backs of all the vanished years.

Did your mother ever tell you that we met at a museum in Dresden? It was 1930, and I was studying medicine and working on my machine that would save the world. Recently I've thought about returning there, to the place where I first caught sight of her, but the museum is in ruins now, the exhibit we visited destroyed. A mass of melted wire and plastic and bone, buried in the rubble like some strange fossil.

I remember the ripple of her black hair. Her butter-yellow dress.

During my studies I'd read about the early therapeutic uses of electricity: Mediterranean torpedo fish applied to the temple for a headache; the limbs of hopeless paralytics shocked back to movement. I'd read, too, of more recent experiments in America and France and Italy, where electrotherapy promised relief from epilepsy and anaemia, neuralgia and chorea, and, some suggested, even cancer. But it was the eighteenth-century

writings of John Hunter, the great Scottish surgeon, that sparked the idea for my machine: his theory that the cure as well as the disease could pass through a person by means of remote sympathy; that the energetic power produced in one part of the body could influence another part some distance away. Each evening in the parlour, I sketched out my plans for the Sympathetic Vitaliser, and I listened to recordings of Lotte Lehmann as I worked, partly to keep myself awake, and partly because her crystalline notes allowed me to worry away at my central premise. In fact, one of her arias—‘Come, Hope’, from Beethoven’s *Fidelio*—was playing as it first became clear to me: if a singer could shatter glass when her voice reproduced its resonant frequency, couldn’t we shatter a tumour in the same way? By causing its cells to vibrate in sympathy, couldn’t we turn it to dust? No need for the knife, just the correct dose of destructive energy delivered to growths crouched in the pelvis or breast or brain, or lodged in the lymph nodes like pearls. *Come, hope—let not the final star of the weary fade away . . .* While my mother slept, I remember, I placed a pile of books on the pedal of my father’s grand piano, then lifted the lid and ran a finger across the taut strings; the instrument let out a soft falling sigh. I peered inside the open cavity and smelled the mahogany and lacquer and wax, and the secret chill of the wires. For a moment I feared the lid might fall on me, shut me away in that dark box, and I steadied it with my hand. Then I sang middle C, and the middle C wire vibrated, and I moved down the scale, note by note, and watched each string begin to move in turn, to quiver and blur as it recognised its own frequency in my voice. For all the earth was alive with energy; every atom of every single thing sang with its own resonance, and this was as true of flesh as it was of piano strings.

Electrotherapy was starting to catch on in Germany

by that time too, and I suppose I fancied myself a radical young researcher. An innovator. As nearby as Giessen, Erwin Schliephake was trialling his short-wave apparatus, and I remember I wrote to him to question the safety of its thermal effects: perhaps it did kill the bacteria in the milk, I remarked, but it killed the mice as well. I pored over the dozens of photographs in Carl Franz Nagelschmidt's publications: carcinomas of the ear and tongue healed by his high-frequency treatment, which also offered a miraculous resolution of pain—though Nagelschmidt insisted that inoperable tumours remained inoperable, and that a patient with metastatic cancer had as little chance of survival as ever. Except I knew he was wrong. I *knew* it, Lotte. I saw for myself the veins of light that leapt from Tesla coils—coronas and streamers that seemed to depict the very pathways of the body, the blood vessels and nerves that led far inside a person to where the scalpel could not reach. Sing into the open piano: watch the wire shiver.

In May 1930 I travelled to Dresden specially to see the exhibit at the new German Hygiene Museum. He was in all the newspapers, the Transparent Man: a real skeleton sheathed in a hard, clear skin, with the circulatory and nervous systems wrought from twelve kilometres of wire, and every plastic organ packed into place. I told my mother that I thought seeing the model might help me design the prototype of my machine, and she burst into tears.

'If only you could have found a cure in time for your father,' she said.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

On the train ride from Frankfurt, I watched my reflection slip across fields sprouting with barley and wheat and corn so bright the green might have been painted on. My aunt and uncle met me at the station—my mother's sister and her

husband. They lived not far from Dresden's Großer Garten, and day after day the crowds streamed towards the exhibition hall there—it seemed the whole country wanted to witness the body's secret workings. The Transparent Man hung on every advertising column, face upturned, arms lifted as if to catch hold of the sun.

It was a clear May morning the first time I went to see him; I know that. Soft white fluff from the poplar trees flecked the air and gathered in drifts on the pavements, stirred by the movement of feet before settling once more into downy mounds. I made my way past office workers and factory workers and young mothers with all the time in the world. My final examinations weren't far away, and I whispered the anatomy of the ear to myself as I hurried along: *tympanic membrane, malleus, incus, stapes* . . . There was too much to remember about the human body: how it functioned and how it failed. There is still too much to remember.

I'd brought only heavy clothes with me from Frankfurt, unsuitable for the warm day, so my aunt had given me some of Onkel Alexander's to wear; the jacket, which smelled of tobacco, hung loose across my narrow back, flapped across my chest. I had just turned twenty-five, but I felt eight years old again, standing in my dead father's clothes while my mother pinned them up and drew dusty lines at my wrists and waist with her tailor's chalk. It was a rectal carcinoma in his case—painful and humiliating—though all I knew at the time was that Papa had been very sick, and sometimes very sick people don't get better, and we would have to make do.

Despite my rush, once I reached the exhibition hall I lingered in the tuberculosis room and the cancer room and the primitive races room; I took my time over the mechanical model of the heart. I delayed visiting the very thing I'd come to see, worried

that it might disappoint. I suspect you'd understand that feeling, Lotte. I suspect you inherited my twisting anxieties, though I always hoped you'd be your mother's tranquil daughter. When finally I made my way to the room that held the Transparent Man, I was surprised to feel the tug of tears; I had not expected him to be so beautiful. He stood on his circular plinth, his clear arms raised, his chest laid bare, plastic organs lit each in turn by tiny bulbs, every nerve pathway and every blood vessel on show. I followed the branching networks of wire and imagined the waves from my machine passing along them until they hit the tumour they were calculated to destroy, and I felt a great surge running through my own body: what if it worked? What if the Sympathetic Vitaliser worked? It really might save the world. It was all I could do to keep still, to keep quiet: in the other rooms, in front of the other exhibits, the crowds chattered away in their usual voices, but here before the naked figure they whispered as if in a church—even the sniggering schoolboys, even the blushing fiancées. And indeed, he stood in a kind of apse, a kind of chapel, shining beneath a pointed archway, lit only from overhead in the otherwise darkened space.

'Like an angel,' a young woman next to me murmured.

Her companion said he couldn't see any robes and he couldn't see any wings, but I knew what she meant: the figure shimmered above us, seeming to float in the shadows, a creature of water, a creature of light, like us but not us, like us but perfect.

'Yes,' I murmured, even though the young woman hadn't been addressing me.

I felt rather than heard the couple behind me—they were irritated because they couldn't see past my lanky frame, I knew. Since I was about fifteen years old I'd stood a head taller than my peers, and I was always conscious of the space I took up, the

way my arms and legs encroached on the aisles in buses and trains, the way I blocked the view. I'd developed a stoop to my shoulders, and my mother told me I would be a hunched old man one day. I turned and nodded to the couple, then moved to the side. They rushed at once into my spot, scowling at me.

I stayed at the museum for hours. After some lunch and a glass of beer, I jotted down notes on modifications to the Vitaliser—the size of the contact plates, their best placement. Then I bought two postcards of the Transparent Man: one to send to my mother, and the other for me to keep, so I could remember him exactly. I kept circling back to his room—I couldn't stay away—and found myself watching the crowds as much as I watched the figure itself. They stood and wondered at him, and lightly touched their own clavicles and jaws, and studied their own hands as if they might see right inside themselves. And I started to *understand* what I had already known: that the body wasn't a collection of separate parts, each performing its own solitary task, but a circuit, a machine, an exquisite and collaborative machine. The fold-out illustrations in my anatomy textbooks had never shown me this, and nor had any of the surgeries I'd observed, and nor had the work I'd done in the dissection room. Here I could see every organ at once, every artery and vein, every nerve, as large as life.

I didn't want to leave, didn't want to return to my aunt's apartment with its squat sofa and its fringed lamps and its framed prints of horses. I could hide myself somewhere in the exhibition hall, I thought; emerge again once everyone had left and the building had been locked for the night. I wouldn't have to jostle past the crowds and worry that I was too tall. I could climb onto the plinth and stand right next to him, measure my height against his. I could touch his glassy skin, trace the route from the stomach to the brain, from the hand to the heart.

I did no such thing, of course. When the time came to leave, I exited the building with everyone else, blinking at the sunny late afternoon.

‘There you are,’ said my aunt. ‘We thought we’d lost you. I made Streuselkuchen, you know. Where have you been all this time?’

I showed her the postcard I’d bought to send to my mother.

‘You’ll give her a heart attack,’ she said. ‘Won’t he, Alexander. A heart attack. Now, how much room do you have in your case? I’ve sorted out a few bits and pieces for her. Does she still like plums? Of course she still likes plums, who doesn’t. A few jars of my plums, and some of my pears, and what about some peas? Peas? And carrots? And look, take some chocolates—she always had a sweet tooth, and we’ve only eaten the nut ones. And orange marmalade? Some people find the peel too bitter. Well, she can try it, and then I can send more. She just needs to say. She just needs to sing out.’

Every time I visited it was the same—Tante Miriam loaded me down with food for my mother. This had started some two decades earlier, when my father was diagnosed and my mother began to wither away alongside him. She was a statuesque woman before he fell ill, but the flesh vanished from her bones, and she had to take in all her own clothes as well as cutting his down for me. Tante Miriam had let out a shriek when she saw her for the first time. ‘I’d not have recognised you,’ she said. ‘I’d have walked past you in the street. Would you have recognised her, Alexander?’ And her husband shook his head and said no, he wouldn’t have recognised her. After that, Tante Miriam started sending jars of preserves and slabs of cake, tins of fish and wedges of cheese. My mother packed it all away in the pantry and always wrote a thank-you note on her best paper, but I was the one who ended up eating most of the food,

or throwing it out when it turned bad.

'Electricity?' said my aunt when I tried to explain my machine to them over supper. 'Sounds very dangerous.'

'Very dangerous,' echoed my uncle.

They frowned at me, chewing on their black bread and waxy slices of Gouda.

'And how would you know what you were doing?' said my aunt. 'You can't even see it.'

'Quite right, quite right,' said my uncle, spearing a gherkin. 'Invisible.'

'But that's just it,' I said. 'No surgery. No trauma to the surrounding tissue. If you came to see the Transparent Man I could show you how the human body—'

'No,' said my aunt, shaking her head. 'No no no.' Didn't I remember cousin Norbert—not a real cousin, of course, but that was neither here nor there—who'd lost the use of his arm when he thought he could rewire a table lamp himself? He should have taken it to a professional, to someone with the proper training and qualifications. This was what happened when you tried to cut corners. Now everyone assumed he'd been wounded in the war, which wasn't a bad thing in itself, she supposed, but he still couldn't tie his own shoelaces. She had no wish to accompany me to the exhibition, and certainly no wish to see a Transparent Man—I don't need to know what goes on inside me, she said. She'd heard that it was very graphic, and that people were lining up outside the door and down the street to see it, and that a woman had fainted and had to be fanned in the face with a lottery ticket. She sniffed. Some things were better kept covered up.

The following morning, I went straight back to the museum. It was a Saturday, and the crowds were even worse, and I couldn't get close to the Transparent Man; people bumped into

me as they wrestled their way to the front, and I hunched my head into my neck and my neck into my shoulders. I stood at the back of the throng and waited for a gap to open up while the bulbs inside his body kept on illuminating each organ in turn. The Transparent Man reached his arms up and away from all the people as if praying for rescue. And then I noticed her—the young woman from the previous day, who'd thought he looked like an angel. She was by herself this time, as far as I could tell, and she wove through the crowd, saying excuse me, pardon me, excuse me, until she was standing directly behind the plinth. She was partially hidden by the figure, though I could make out the butter-yellow of her dress through his legs, and her black hair and pale face rippling through his pelvis. I moved so I could see her better. She lifted her head to look up at the Transparent Man, and the light hit her face and her long, fine neck, and she stretched out a hand and touched his calf, first with a fingertip and then with a cupped palm as if to warm him. Another woman saw her and began to shout: 'You can't do that! It's not allowed! Stop it! Stop it!' An attendant came rushing over, and the scolding woman pointed and said, 'She was touching it. *Touching* it.'

'There are signs,' said the attendant. 'Anyone touching the exhibits will be asked to leave, and prohibited from returning. It's quite clear.'

The other members of the crowd began to back away, as if they might be implicated somehow, blamed for a crime they hadn't committed. Before I knew what I was doing, I was striding over to the rule-breaking woman and placing my hand on her shoulder.

'I do apologise, sir,' I said to the attendant. 'She's a student of mine, an anatomy student. You can understand the interest.'

The other woman snorted. 'What difference does that

make? I'm interested in it too. We're all interested in it—that's why we've paid to come and look at the thing. But you don't see us grabbing it. Leaving our grubby fingerprints all over it.'

The attendant peered at the Transparent Man.

'As mentioned, it was motivated by a professional interest,' I said. 'A *scientific* interest. It won't happen again.'

I pressed my fingers into the young woman's shoulder, and she said, 'No! Absolutely not. I do apologise, sir.'

'Well,' said the attendant, 'in future, please remember where you are.'

'Of course,' I said.

'Of course,' said the young woman.

'Now,' he said, turning to the woman who had complained, 'where did she touch it?'

'Just here, on the calf,' she said.

'Now *she's* touching it,' said the young woman.

'That's different,' said the attendant.

'Quite different,' said the woman.

The attendant took a handkerchief from his pocket and scrubbed at the spot.

'We should keep going. There's still so much to see,' I said, and guided the young woman away.

'Why did you do that?' she said when we were out of earshot.

'I . . . I don't know. People like that . . . they can make things very difficult, once they get an idea in their heads.'

'I expect it made their day,' she said. 'Anyway, it was very nice of you to help, but I would have been all right on my own.'

'I can see that.'

'And you need to come up with some better lies. You look far too young to be my anatomy professor.'

We were at the café by now, and she insisted I let her buy me a coffee to thank me.

‘I thought you said you would have been all right on your own.’

‘So I would have. But it was still a nice thing to do.’

‘I saw you here yesterday,’ I said as we waited for a table.

‘It’s my third time.’

‘It’s my second. He’s . . . he’s . . .’

‘Perfect.’

‘Yes. Perfect. And also . . . I don’t know. Defenceless.’

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘So, am I a diligent student?’

‘The best in your year. With the steadiest hands.’ I still have no idea, Lotte, why I mentioned her hands, but I remember that I blushed. Then, before I knew it, I was telling her about the machine, outlining for her the principle of remote sympathy, and as I spoke I could feel—I could almost *see*—the heat of her hand lying close to mine on the café table.

‘So if something is wrong with my knee,’ she said, brushing her fingers over the knee-length hem of her yellow dress, ‘you might apply the contact plates to my lower back? Here? And here?’

‘Exactly,’ I said, trying not to imagine her lower back. And then, before I could stop myself: ‘But there is *nothing* wrong with your knee.’

I noticed the way she looked at me: as if I had already cured the disease. As if I had already invented the miracle.

‘I’ve seen it work on geraniums,’ I said, and she laughed.

‘You can cure a plant of cancer?’

‘I’m sure of it.’

‘Extraordinary.’

‘I still don’t know your name,’ I said.

‘I’m Anna. Anna Ganz.’

Twelve months later she left Dresden for Frankfurt, and we were engaged.

From then on, more than ever, I willed my machine to work. It felt like praying.

Geoff Cochrane

Chosen

from *Chosen*

Manuscript, forthcoming November 2020

I'm sitting outside the Victoria St Café (coffee, cigarette, my usual table) when a passing dog stops at my feet and gazes up at me with bright black eyes.

'He wants to say hello,' his mistress tells me. 'Would you mind terribly?'

'Not at all,' I say, and give the soulful pooch a gentle roughing-up.

'He does this,' says the woman.

'?'

'Each and every day, at some point on our walk, he stops and lets me know that *this* is today's person, the party he wants to be introduced to.'

Bill Manhire

Wow

from *Wow*

Manuscript, forthcoming November 2020

Published in the UK by Carcanet

Big brother

says also but the baby always says wow,
though soon enough she too is saying also
and listening to her father say later,
and to the way her mother sighs and says
now would also be a very good time.

The ghost would love to say also
but cannot actually say anything
aside from that quiet whooshing sound,
and now there are babies everywhere
all saying wow for a time, and the children grow,
and the children grow, and the wife
goes off for a bit of a break
and never comes back. Also the lawn gets away on him.
One thing after another.

Now the old fellow wants his bed sheets changed.
No one the fuck to do it!
Also the nappies they make him wear!
Also he wants an apple, and new teeth to eat it.
But in this place where he has recently landed,
which is where he has always been,
every day is day-after-day
so you cannot have everything,

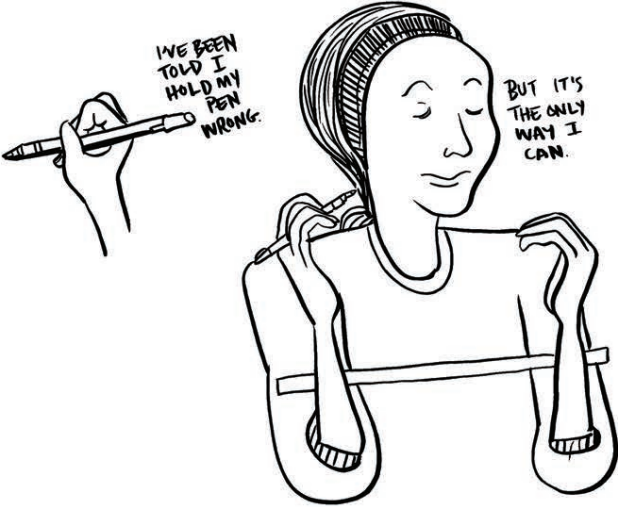
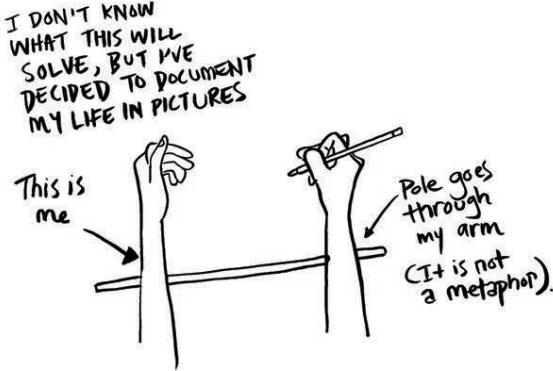
the whole lot has to be later.

Listen hard now to how we all say goodbye
and maybe and wait-just-a-minute,
not hearing the world say back to us wow.
There's not much difference in it.
In this way you will get to hear
his very last sigh—the sound of a plane
powering down when it reaches the gate,
and all of us getting to our feet.

Tara Black

from *This Is Not a Pipe*

Manuscript, forthcoming tbc





SOME NIGHTS I
LIE AWAKE
WORRYING ABOUT
WHAT I WOULD
DO IF HE
LEFT ME.

I DON'T
SUPPOSE YOU
COULD GET
SOMETHING TO
COVER THAT
THING WHILE
WE SLEEP?

IT'S JUST
THAT IT
JABBED
ME LAST
NIGHT.

I KNOW
YOU DON'T
MEAN TO

HE'S RIGHT

I CAN'T
BLAME HIM



It's hard to draw the pole both because of the pole and because drawing metal is hard.



As I draw my skin flexes around the pole.

It cracks and oozes.



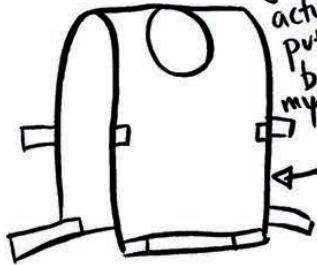
There never seems to be enough blood.



Tops that I wish I could wear

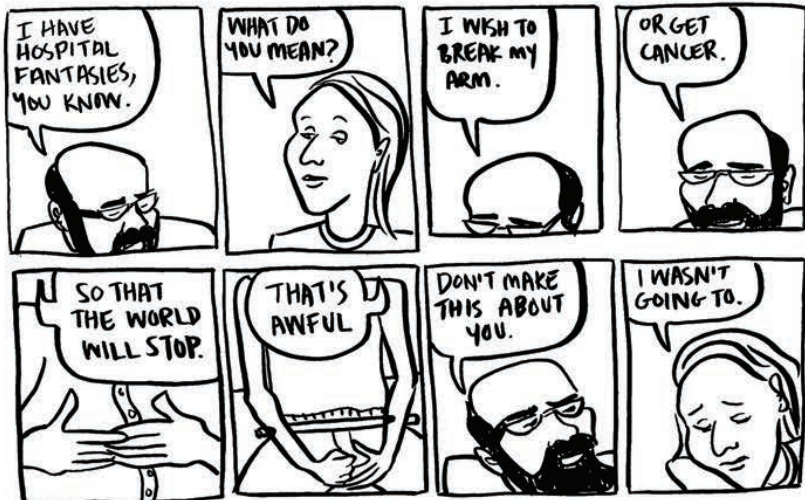


The kind of thing I can actually put on by myself



I SHALL DRAW MYSELF IN MY FANTASY ATTIRE.





YOU'RE NOT SPECIAL JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE IN PAIN.



ONE DAY, KENNETH WILL NO LONGER WANT TO LOOK AFTER ME.

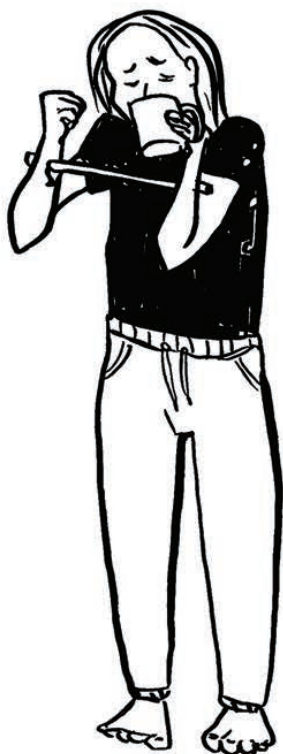
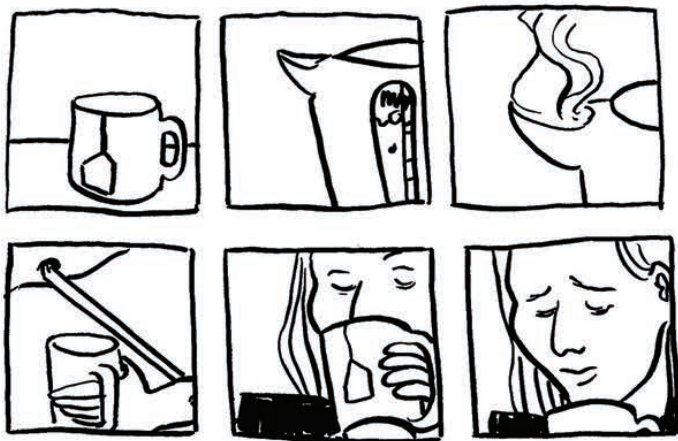
IN THE SUPERMARKET



MOST PEOPLE
TRY NOT TO
MAKE EYE
CONTACT.

SOMETIMES I ASK KENNETH ABOUT
WHEN THE POLE APPEARED.



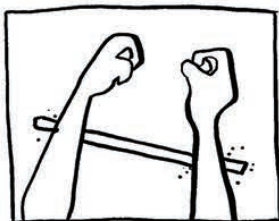


WHEN IT'S
COLD, I
WISH I
COULD HOLD
A CUP OF
TEA WITH
TWO HANDS.

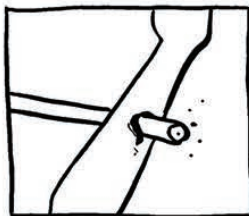




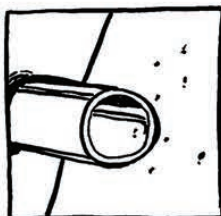




SOMETIMES I THINK
I SEE SPECKS AROUND
THE EDGES OF THE
POLE.



I THINK BUGS
ARE ATTRACTED
TO THE BLOOD.



I THINK THEY
ARE BUGS.



KENNETH
IS FOCUSED
ON HIS ART
PROJECT.

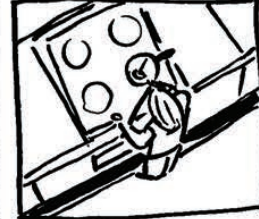
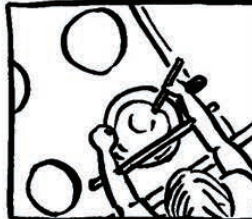
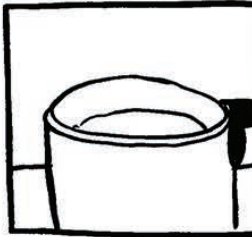


WHAT'S
FOR
DINNER?

HE'S
OBSESSED
WITH PAGE
VIEWS.



I HEAT
SOUP.

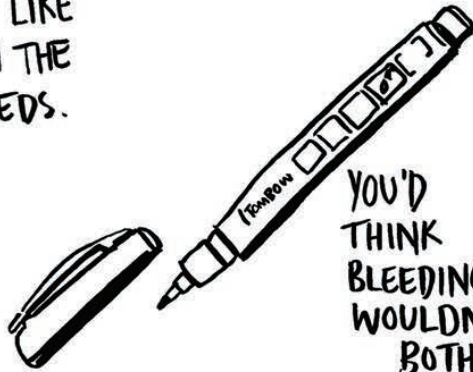


I DON'T
BURN
MYSELF



BETH? DID
YOU SAY
SOMETHING?

I DON'T LIKE
IT WHEN THE
PEN BLEEDS.



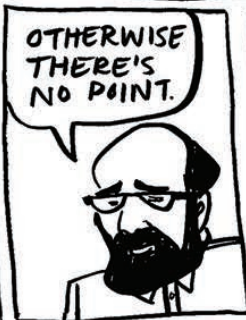
YOU'D
THINK
BLEEDING
WOULDN'T
BOTHER
ME.

(This was meant to demonstrate what that looks
like and now I can't find a single pen to bleed
for me).

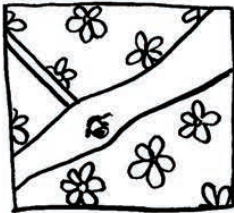


I resisting
drawing my
pen drawing.
It is a
surprisingly
strong
desire.

KENNETH WANTS ME TO DRAW
A COMIC FOR HIS WEBSITE.



IT'S NICE TO BE INCLUDED.



LAST NIGHT THE
BUGS FROM MY
POLE WOKE ME UP.



I THOUGHT
THEY WERE
BITING ME.



THEY'RE
NOT BUGS.





HE SAYS THIS AS IF HE WOULD EVER DO OTHERWISE.

SOMETIMES LIFE IS GOOD.



James K. Baxter

The Fleece

from *The Complete Poems*, edited by John Weir
Manuscript, forthcoming late 2020

For Denis Glover

Denis, the town was flat
As the week-end beer you kept in that
Giant glass flagon! At Sumner one wet day
I smashed the lightshade with your Navy sword;
You didn't grumble much. A difficult peace
Kept us drinking till the grey
Light broke. You gave me bed and board
A hundred times. You seemed
The impossible Jason I had dreamed
About: a man who'd grabbed and baled the Golden Fleece

Simply by being tough. No myth
Is ever fake. One winter Sunday with
You and Mary in the Austen, I,
Squeezed by hangover, found the Fleece itself,
Through the green fabled
Land of drenched willows, riverflats and farms,
Carried and cradled
In strong visible arms.
Did you or I or neither see
Our talented destiny,
To clink in the world's pocket till we die,
Then to be lifted and labelled to blaze in rows on the upper
shelf?

Hocken Collections MS 704/XXIII. 1962. Unpublished.

John Newton

from *Escape Path Lighting*

Manuscript, forthcoming late 2020

How much Manfred Singleton can see is subject to dispute. No one on sleepy Rock Oyster Island has ever observed him without his shades, heavyweight Aristotle Onassis numbers, with lenses like the butt ends of plus-sized Heinekens. Mind you, Manfred keeps to himself, he's not the sort of person you meet at the store. Talk to the locals, you'll learn there's a lot not to know about him. Like where he got four million bucks (give or take) for a concrete monstrosity by Richwhite & Crotch. Like whether the godawful squealing noise that he pipes from a sound system hidden in the spinifex really is some kind of 'difficult' music or just meant to scare the little shits who throw stones on his roof. Cranky old Manfred! Where would the gossips at the Bali Hai Tearooms be without him? Just as well, really, they can't see him now. *What kind of creep* (they might plausibly ask) needs to wear military night-vision goggles to stare at himself in a mirror in a darkened room? A room that resembles an underground bunker, or some dire modernist concert hall: off-form concrete, mean leather couches, electronic keyboards, a mixing desk. And a portable

clothes rack, on which he first tidily
hangs up his jacket and Hugo Boss shirt,
and now wheels aside gaze neutrally
at the insensate void where his breasts
used to be. No one could call him a clubbable
fellow, you can't blame the locals for
having their doubts. But fear not, amiable
reader: Manfred sees everything.

Δ

On the darkened headland, across the bay
at the Blue Pacific Wellness Farm,
scented tealights in thick glass tumblers
burn on the doorsteps of two dozen cedar
chalets. In 500-thread-count Egyptian cotton
the worried well sleep their dreamless sleep:
the well fed, the well stretched, the well
scrubbed and mud-bathed and rubbed and exfoliated,
punctured and pampered, heard and affirmed,
the chakra-balanced, the colonically
irrigated . . . Only the patients of
Juanita Diaz, Analista Lacaniana
(late of Buenos Aires, by way of Melbourne,
Australia), enjoy visitations through
the Gate of Horn. Dr Diaz insists
on this, and her patients know better than to
disappoint her. Likewise Sigrid Tupelo,
her quondam lover and co-director;
and so, for that matter, Sigrid's husband,
cactus fancier, de-frocked scholar
and tacit third partner in the BPWF,

ex-professor Jonah (Joe) Bravo. Not that Juanita is fierce, exactly, but both would agree she's 'particular'. She is also, Joe has just been reflecting, apropos of something she was almost about to say, quite possibly the most opaque woman he has ever nursed a crush on. This, mind you, with no disrespect to Sigrid—Griddle, as he calls her in fun; also Gridiron, Grid-search, Grid-lock, Two Pillow, Tuppence, and pet names more banal still—a severely perplexing woman in her own right. It is midnight in what is informally known as the Farmhouse (a.k.a. Sigrid and Joe's), at the kitchen table of which the three partners have been knocking off a notable Malbec by Enrique Foster. Juanita, now set to call it a night, bestows her *buenas noches* kisses and heads up the slope through the olives to her separate quarters. 'Something's bothering her,' says Joe, as he rounds up the glasses and rinses them off. 'It's always a bad sign when Nita stays late.' Sigrid looks up from her spreadsheet. 'Yes, I thought so too.'



The clinker-built dinghy rows like a bathtub but Marigold Ingle doesn't care. When she digs on the oars she can feel her core body converting the water's inertia

to thrust. It makes her feel powerful like
nothing she knows: as strong as the make-believe
father whose hippie hands crafted it.
In the glare of the headlamp, garfish,
suspended, ride above the seagrass like slender
blue rods. The spotlight undoes them: held
by its gaze, they wait for the dip net
she slides underneath them. She does her work
crisply—a dozen is plenty—turns off
the spotlight, lays back and lets the boat drift.

Her mother—her lovely Aquarian name,
Persia, that's what she always called her—
nights like this they'd play Constellations,
inventing their own: the Sunfish, the Cowboy Hat.
The stars haven't changed. Or the smell of
the seagrass, drying in wave-sculpted ridges
along the high-tide mark. Commuters have come,
of course, overseas money, estates on
the headlands (helipads, groundstaff with tasers).
But the gully: it's much as it was when
they bought it—Persia and Sonny, in that
cheap scruffy decade—except, today,
greener and better loved . . . Or so Marigold
imagines. After all, it's only a story.
The fact is, she can't picture Sonny
at all, and even when Persia got sick
she was still just a teen. She remembers
them only in this life that she lives:
the dinghy, the garden, the alcohol.
The remedies. The kindnesses. And in
the tireless delight that keeps everything

contained, that no one has ever dug
deep enough to find the other side of.
A leaping mullet falls with a slap, then
another: there must be a predator somewhere.
Now a small breeze comes snuffling;
she's no longer warm, as she slips the oars
back in the rowlocks, takes a grip on the water.

Δ

As the evening winds down at
the Sandgroper Lounge, the action reverts
to the pleasure craft moored offshore.
'Come and party with us, babe,' the punters
implore as they trip from the bar—
the pleasantries aimed at a comely young
woman with a glossy black bob, a short
leather skirt and a T-shirt announcing:
Hi, I'm Bridget the midget-brain!
The foxy bar manager waves each away
in a tone that takes stock of their relative
charms: 'Don't tempt me, sweetheart!' 'Ask me
tomorrow.' 'Fuck off, Simon, you gobshite . . .'
and sundry variations. Shortly
from under the waterfront palm trees
a zippy flotilla of tenders discharges,
conveying the revellers to their floating
digs which rock together gently, lit up
like a matchstick city. Ahead lie
the customary late-night bouts of skinny-
dipping and haute cuisine, ruinous card games,
beer and narcotics, and creepy, athletic

rich-person sex. Bridget meanwhile squares off the tills, locks the night's take in the wall-safe and closes up behind her.

If the island's south is the muddy side, the murky side, the shady side, the burned-out hippie white trash hillbilly methadone-maintenance P-lab side, then the landing the locals call Shady Grove is Southside Central. The South Pole. So here is another of the island's mysteries. The slack-timbered houseboats moored in the mangroves are home to a population of nine. The patriarch, Groober, and Cooch (his 'old lady'), come with three interchangeable, rat-tailed kids: Marley, Cassidy and Quinn (reputedly two boys and a girl). There's Leo the Crab Man. There's Bung-Eye Bob, famed for his toxic agave liquor. Homebake, Bung-Eye's singing dog, makes eight. *And then there's Bridget O'Dwyer.*

Now, why would the sharpest young woman on the island—classiest, cutest, most demonstrably hip—choose to be living on a hairy old houseboat with a posse of gap-toothed degenerates? What's *that* about? And yet somehow nobody likes to ask; it isn't like Manfred—his blindness, his money. In Bridget's case there's a curious chivalry, some obscure deference owing to her beauty—or owing (is it this?) to her woundedness. Either way,

the island accepts it. 'It is what it is.'

Now, as she drives home over the causeway, she rolls down the windows to drink in the breeze: the smell of the mudflats, of seagrass and cockles, ti-tree and diesel and garbage and cabbage trees in bloom. Why does it claim her, this skanky old swamp, with its muddy life scuttling and gurgling and farting? And why does she put up with Shady Grove, with the damp, with the rot, with the paddlecrab gumbo? The swamp people, quite rightly, think she's a goddess, they want to protect her, and that's okay. And Bridget? Well, she's sentimental, too—she knows her own limits, is how she'd describe it—and that makes her easy to get alongside of, and almost impossible to reach.



Juanita Diaz at her escritoire has a view of the mainland, the lights of the city. She can make out the hoopla of the Klondike Casino, the tacky little tower thing on top with its lolly-pink knob. Pokerface is what Joe likes to call her: an analytic mask without peer in this poker-faced business. But she isn't a gambler. And she doesn't like to feel as if she's being *forced* to gamble. This character, Frank. Three months and counting,

daily sessions Monday to Thursday, and still
she doesn't know what his game is—
only that there is one. *Charm alert*
is what Luis used to say, but
the charmers are easy: Narcissism 101.
It's the client who wants to give it one
more twist, who knows when to *turn it off*—
that's when you've got a player. Who are you,
Mr New Patient Frank? Tell me you're just
an obsessional moper: Papa with his
hacksaw, minor perversions, self-regard so
deeply occulted you truly believe you don't
like yourself. *That* we can work with.
The job gets so lonely when there's no one to
talk to; she'd just like to off-load to someone,
a second pair of ears. But even Luis
couldn't help with the first one, back in
B.A., at the Escuela Freudiana, that
slime-ball sociopath, the professional
footballer. Broke his wife arm's in the car
door—her humerus (!) he had to point out,
when he came to his session next morning
all pumped up to tell her about it.

In the back of the fridge there's a bottle
of vodka. For a moment her mind creeps
towards it, then tip-toes away again.
We have to keep loving them. That's all we've got.
(Luis, as she lay crumpled up on his couch,
her entire body throbbing with fury that felt
like grief.) And this, she sees now, is where you
learn what that means, adrift at the bottom

of the South Pacific—when you strip out
the language and the coy ceremonials,
the masters, the schools, all the childish
court politics—that’s what you’re left with:
‘a cure through love’. She lets down
the roman blind and takes half an Ambien.

Δ

And Manfred Singleton? No sleep for him—
not yet. His sleep demands premeditation.
Manfred’s dreams are a single dream, with as
many variations as there are nights
to dream it. He dreams of the mountains he
grew up beneath in a storied homeland
far to the south, of saw-toothed granite
and wind-polished ice, of snow like enamel,
of rivers like burnished wire. He dreams
of a universe ravished of people,
and of all the ten-thousand-odd ways to say
lonely in an atavistic, self-devised language
that no one else speaks. These are the dreams
that by day, at the keyboard, he sculpts into
incomprehensible sounds. They are not
to be rushed, or stumbled into; they
are what he has to show for a lifetime
of lascivious perfectionism. And so
his waking hours wind up by careful degrees.
First, the mix-down of the evening’s work;
second, the dusting of all wooden
surfaces; third the rolling of a modest
joint of blue-ribbon skunk laced with

opium paste; fourth, the leisurely
smoking of same; fifth, ablutions and
asanas; sixth, massage of scalp and temples;
seventh, repair to listening station;
eighth, rotation of remote control, eleven
times in each direction; ninth, disinfection
of headphones with antiseptic tissue. And now
our fastidious feral composer, our
oneiric doodler, is ready to push PLAY . . .

The passage of time has become confused.
The playback has ended. Did Manfred
listen? And why is he perched with his chin
on the windowsill, galvanised like a
gundog on point? The inlet below, where some
several hours earlier Marigold's light
caught his vigilant eye, is restored
at this hour to its native gloom, to
the colour that the poet once christened
'bible-black'. A blackout as deep as a starless
sky, across which he finds himself tracking
a smear of light. A comet, it might be,
if this *were* the sky, a reticent smudge
like a match-head just failing to strike.
Phosphorescence, it can only be—but
stirred into life *by what*, exactly? To
interrupt his nightly office—the reader
will gather—is no small thing. But the fallen
heavenly body intrigues him. He must
have his goggles, he must now confirm, in their
washed-out televisual glare, that what he
has been tracking is a human person,

crawling, with a long, steady stroke, in the direction of shore. *But who? And from where, at this unlikely hour?* Is Manfred Singleton paranoid? Let's say, at least, that he's a symbolic thinker, and that it's not every day such an odd fowl swims into his ken. For now the athlete has gained the shallows, his toes have discovered the welcome sand where he hauls himself upright, a turkey-necked Venus, some two metres tall and stark bollocky nude! Lurching ashore, in a great froth of foam, he throws himself down on the gravel, splayed out like a starfish. Manfred turns from the window, shaking his head. Whoever he is, this emissary from the deep, this portent, this singular bird, he is here for a reason, Manfred confides, to himself and to us. We have not seen the last of him.

Tina Makereti

Tea

from *This Compulsion In Us*

Work in progress, forthcoming tbc

In Toronto it's the middle of the night, and I am wide awake. I need a shower, of course, and a cup of tea. I'm also stupidly tired. The room is dated in the way that flash North American hotels sometimes seem dated, as if you're stepping onto the set of *The Love Boat*. Also, from what I can see, my view is of the high rise adjacent, rather than the lake which much of the hotel faces. This does not coincide with the vision I have carried in my head, taken solely from internet images, all the way here.

But I am lucky! I remind myself. In a new city after so many, many hours on so many planes! I will lie flat in a big comfy bed tonight! I attempt to recalibrate my expectations. I am fortunate to be here, after all. I'm just tired, from all the travel. And disorientated. And there's something else in the air here, something reminiscent of other journeys in other lifetimes, something I'm not ready to look at yet. This discontent will disappear in the morning, I decide, when I get the chance to explore the city, and listen to people talk about books. And after I get a good cup of tea.

But there is no good tea to be had. There is no jug. There's a coffee machine and two prepackaged Starbucks coffee filters of the kind that carry the coffee inside them. There are two disposable Starbucks cups with plastic stirrers, not even a teaspoon. There are plastic lids for the cups, and a plastic bag full of various types of sweetener and sugar and UHT pottles of a foul milk-like substance. There are precisely two teabags. There is more sweetener than I can be bothered counting, but

little to sweeten. I quickly transform the coffee maker into a hot water maker by filtering the water through, straight into a Starbucks cup with teabag in. While this is happening I jump in the shower and wash off the 24-hour travel grime. After my shower, the hotel room smells like coffee. The Starbucks cup that is now full of hot water and a steeping teabag smells like coffee. It will have to do. I dump in barely half a pottle of UHT—just enough to take the bitter edge off, but hopefully not enough to taste (it is enough to taste), down it, and leave the room.

The hospitality of the book festival is lush, and on the top floor of the hotel they provide complimentary drinks and food until three in the morning. Normally, I would shy away from something like this, but I am *Wide Awake*, and hungry, and I can't stay in the hotel room because the thing I'm trying to ignore is waiting patiently for me to notice it. And since I am *Wide Awake*, it makes sense to accept the hospitality provided. I see two New Zealand friends immediately, and throw myself into it, grateful and excited at last.

At some point we go to bed. Sleep doesn't come. The TV stations available are very, very bad, but this is expected. I read and watch Netflix and read. The bed is so comfortable it is uncomfortable and hot. I'm a petulant child. Travel, I think, it's just the travel. Somehow I snatch a few hours and wake excited again—Toronto! I head outside at dawn. There is the tiniest sprinkle of snow. There is the lake, though it is somehow hard to get to, so many buildings lined up at its edge. I will find a nice breakfast place, I think. I walk for half an hour or more, see many small dogs in small jackets. Do not find a café. Walk back. On a corner across from the hotel, there's a small Starbucks, and I decide what the hell, for old time's sake, and go in.

On the way back into the hotel, I notice there is also a Starbucks counter on the ground floor. It has a long line. I have no intention of buying my wake-up hot drink every morning, but my supply is soon going to run out. I'm already reusing the non-reusable cups. I will be here five days, so it's clear this situation will necessitate talking to hotel staff, a problem which is, in my opinion, barely conscionable. Whatever I inherited from my English forebears, this might be foremost: the unwillingness to engage with strangers to ask for anything personal. That, and the daily need for a calming cup of tea. Suddenly, tea seems like the most personal thing in the world, and the lack of it some kind of personal insult.

mamae

1. (stative) be painful, sore, hurt.
2. (noun) ache, pain, injury, wound.

I have become a producer of things, a marketer of those things, a traveller, a talker. The things I produce are books, and I still don't know how this happened, really, or how it is that people want to hear me talk about them. Make no mistake, I am very small fry in the great scheme of things; I am no big deal, comparatively speaking. But I've stayed in more hotels, in the last ten years, than seems possible in hindsight. When this first started happening, I couldn't sleep in hotel beds. Now it's second nature. Airports too. Check-ins, security, Ubers, taxis, the tube, the underground, quickest way from A to B, and strangely, quite often, those suited drivers who stand at airport carousels with your name on a little board. When this first started happening, it was so very odd because I never had any money. Sometimes they were very flash hotels and very flash drivers, and still I didn't know how rent and food would

be covered next month. And sometimes those experiences are very fun, very amazing, but more often they are a little bit stressful and alienating, and after I have enough of them in a row being slightly stressful and alienating, they just become exhausting. My inner poor kid looks at these experiences, paid for by other people in exchange for my time and talk, and tells me it should all be wonderful. Such luck! Such bounty! But there is a disconnect between the way I think I should feel and the way I actually do feel. We still struggle with that, the poor kid and me. Be grateful, she says, suck it up. You wouldn't have ever dreamed of this, you know, when you were me. And she's right, it's more than I had imagined for myself, and connecting with people, that is something. And yet.

This is the first time I've been back to Canada in more than twelve years. And it's a big country and I'm at the other end of it. But it only takes a day or so for me to find the thing that has been waiting patiently. It's in my room, out on the street, in the voices that pass by. This is the way trauma sits in us, triggered not by the obvious things but by the minutiae of life.

The pain of my own Canadas past comes to me in the smell of carpet and cleaning products, the colour scheme of the ceilings and walls, the word 'toque', backyards that seem all dirt and no green, condos at the shore of every waterway, the word condo, red fluttering maple leaves everywhere, but only fabric ones. I want to enjoy this visit and those who people it wholeheartedly but my body locates old wounds from a past relationship instead and forces me to carry those through sleepless nights and cold days, running to our kiwi posse near the close of each day for respite. I thought I had left the pain of that time far behind me. I had spent a long time not caring. But sometimes when you leave a thing long enough to gain perspective, you see for the first time how bad it was, and

you mourn the young self you lost in the process. Our bodies are like perpetual photocopiers of memory and even if we no longer have any interest in the narrative they reproduce they continue, the image distorting, paper jamming, ink smudging to a smear.

Collectively, we had been excited about this trip, and now we are relieved to have each other; four writers together representing multiple communities of New Zealand writing: Witi, Brannavan, Kirsten, me. We share our collective dismay at our inability to decipher this place and its pleasures. Kirsten says, I think it's sometimes easier to go to countries where people don't speak your language and you don't expect to be comfortable. It's true—we keep expecting to feel like we fit in here because we speak the same words, but there are worlds between our meanings. I can't read the expressions of the polite young women who run the festival. I can't gauge how they might see me. It is only when I talk to local immigrants—an Australian who says *kia ora* in welcome, or descendants of immigrants—Korean, mostly—that I feel some baseline kinship.

Why did I think I could leave past tensions in the past? They're always there, in the smell or temperature of a new yet familiar city, in the way someone pronounces the word *house*, in the growing twist of pain in my levator scapulae muscle, the one that will leave my neck immobilised by the time I get off the plane in Auckland. I should know by now, as our *tipuna* keep telling us: you walk into your past, not away from it.

I am not the only one carrying wounds through this trip, and as days pass we begin to share them with each other. Some are much more immediate and painful than mine. I don't think any of us would have predicted that this would be the tenor of our journey.

I decide that art is what I need to elevate myself above the closed-in anxiety that is making me too myopic to really be in this place, so I head to the Art Gallery of Ontario where the Anthropocene exhibition is making headlines. It is here that I learn too much perspective can be a bad thing. The exhibition is startling, visually stunning and awful. What humans do to the Earth is a kind of nightmare from which there is no waking.

an•thro•po•cene

(n) Proposed as a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene is defined by the permanent impact of human activities on Earth, such as terraforming through mining, urbanization and agriculture; human-caused extinction and biodiversity loss; and the global presence of materials such as plastics and concrete.

We have reached an unprecedented moment in planetary history. Humans now arguably change the Earth and its processes more than all other natural forces combined. Climate change, extinctions, invasive species, technofossils, anthroturbation, terraforming of land, and redirection of water are all part of the indelible human signature.

The Anthropocene Project

What did I actually think I was going to see? I watch a man walk through his workplace, The Dandora Landfill in Nairobi, Kenya. The looped video runs for 4 mins 42 seconds. On each side of the man, hills of indestructible garbage—plastics, in particular, which are scavenged and sold to recyclers each day. There are 30 acres of this urban landfill, the label says, and even though it was closed in 2001, 2,000 tonnes of waste are dumped

there every day. 'For many of the one million people living in and around Dandora, the site is a primary source of income.' The cumulative effect of watching the man walk through this megadump is both awe-inspiring and horrifying. As is the aerial view of saw mills, coal mines, salt pans, their tidy destruction. The tainted promise of solar panels filling a desertscape, or tetrapods protecting a coastline from the encroaching tide. Or a wall-sized mural of Mushin Market Intersection, Lagos. I feel the terrible human weight I usually feel only when moving through airports. Where do they all come from? Where do they all go? What about all the waste? The waste. Then, in an installation in the middle of the room, thousands of elephant tusks, stacked and burnt to prevent poaching, an act which cannot retrospectively prevent destruction of the animals who once wore them.

At the end of it, I am not uplifted in the way that sometimes a bleak film or artwork can be uplifting. The sharing of a troubled world can be a beautiful act. I'm simply overwhelmed. But I'm not so serious that I can't see the black hilarity of coming to see this exhibition when down at the waterfront, at our hotel in the flash part of town, the impact of human commerce has made the area inhospitable to all natural beauty. When I have been flown here at enormous economic and environmental expense, and will stay less than a week. What am I doing here?

And so I return to the hotel room for a fortifying cup of tea before the next thing on the schedule I've been given. Of course in the hotel room there is no easy access to tea, or a non-disposable cup, so I ring room service and they bring me one teabag in a real cup and also another plastic bag full of the ubiquitous pottles of UHT milk and sugar and sugar-substitutes, but not until after I've gone to Kirsten's room in desperation looking for teabags. She takes one look at me and

tries to give me the whole box, and fancy chocolate besides. I must look as haunted as I feel.

The wound is the place where light enters you
—Rumi

On my final night in town I find relief in the company of creative writing academics—my people, I think. Word nerds are the same the world over. Our hosts are a very small creative writing school, and this is their big event of the year, they tell me, and I am both extremely humbled and a little worried that I am 50% of the bill for this big event. Luckily, Ins Choi, the creator of Netflix's *Kim's Convenience*, is the other 50%. I expect he will attract an enthusiastic crowd. I'm trying to shake off dizzy spells and the soporific effects of five days of alienation and lack of sleep, so instead of beer or wine with dinner, I ask for tea. My hosts seem to think this is a delightfully quaint Kiwi thing to do, alongside my sudden inability to form coherent sentences. We're at a nice restaurant in Scarborough, Ontario, so the insipid packaged tea bag and cup that arrives with water on the side is actually unexpected. It's accompanied by a now-familiar clear plastic bag containing long-life UHT milk pottles and sugar substitute sachets. Sometimes a postcolonial subject of the British Empire just needs a decent cup of tea, dammit! By now I'm concerned about fully losing it by the time we get to our event at the university, so I determinedly brew my tea as strong as I can, not without spilling water everywhere, and drink it as if it is the waters of life.

Ins and I are a strange combination, but the randomness of this billing introduces an element of chaos that can often be very fruitful in a literary conversation. With no obvious connections between our creative output, our host Andrew

simply asks us to talk about our writing lives: how we came to writing, how we sustain it, why we do what we do. I can relax a bit. These are the questions that concern writing teachers and their students everywhere.

And so the event is a good one: the room is full of keen young writers and this in itself is a rare pleasure at any literary event. Ins is an absolute fricken delight: hilarious, irreverent, and somehow completely familiar. Even though I am earnest and serious and academic, the conversation itself roars along: we agree where it matters but diverge just enough to make it interesting. And we talk about our pain: of not being enough, of being alone, of being alienated from our own cultures or by the dominant cultures, of doing work that no one quite knows is going to be successful or worthwhile. And then being some version of successful, and looking around, and still being somewhat alone, and needing them, our young audience, to come through. I'm appreciative of Andrew's final question, which is about hope. We've been talking about diversity and representation and whatever has just happened that week in Trump's America, so we are able to say to the wonderfully diverse group in front of us: you are the hope, because the monolith across the border is a lie, and your lives, your stories, are real.

Afterwards people line up to talk to Ins, and I find my way to the complimentary tea and coffee set-up at the back of the room. As we brew our tea (not bad, comparatively—I'm acclimatising) a nervous young woman comes up to me and tells me about her writing, and how, because I have mentioned Alice Walker, she thinks it's cool how women of colour can inspire each other across time and place, and how she wasn't going to come out tonight but then she forced herself to and she's happy she did because she's motivated to continue her

writing now. She doesn't tell me about her pain, but I recognise it in some of her words, the way it is clear that it would just have been easier to stay in her room. I only recognise this because it is almost a collective pain amongst people of her generation. And because I have children of her generation, it is now a source of my own pain too. I am so grateful she found the courage to speak to me, but I have no words to make it all okay, so I try my best to encourage her, and I hope it will find her, the thing she needs to pull her through all of it, the *mamae*. Perhaps for her it will be writing as it is for me. Sometimes, like today as I write this, leaving behind the discomfort and worry and ineffable sadness of things beyond my control and making time to place words on a page is still the thing that saves me. The beautiful page, and its struggles; beautiful words, and their inconsistencies; the urgent pursuit of story because it is the thing that takes me beyond myself, the thing that connects me to people like her; a room on the other side of the world, a young woman getting outside of her own pain.

Yes, every limb,
every bend
every bone
is a recollection of
who has been before.

A memory
of all the bodies that have been
the making of me.

—Karlo Mila, 'Inside Us the Dead (The NZ-born Version)'

A week later, in London, there is a coffee machine on the ground floor and proper cups with many and varied tea bags,

and an actual kitchen in the room. It's gratitude with every step in London, every sight and experience. Lucky, lucky, lucky. I am having a movie-fucking-montage of a time. The Thames and Trafalgar Square on our actual doorstep. Fleet Street and Piccadilly over there. One evening we have dinner in a huge apartment overlooking the city in a wide panorama, windows instead of walls all along the waterfront. We are dumbfounded by what that kind of real estate must be worth. There is a palace for one event, astonishing night views from New Zealand House over all of London for another. Finally, our group reads to a packed room at the Royal Academy of Arts, our voices rising in the pursuit of decolonisation from inside the very heart of the colonial beast. At the back of the room where I sit and listen to the others read, there is a sign on the wall in gilded lettering: this is the room in which Darwin and Wallace first presented their *On the Origin of the Species* in 1858. The novel I'm promoting is based on the story of a real Māori boy exhibited in London in 1846, across the road from the Royal Academy, at the Egyptian Hall, which exists now only as a plaque. The real Hemi, like the fictional one, attended a royal soirée where Darwin was also in attendance. I carry an image of him with me everywhere on this trip. He re-enters those palaces of privilege with me, and I cannot help but think these surreal moments are his as much as mine.

I get up most mornings to walk 100 metres to the Golden Jubilee bridge, breathing in the city coming to life. At night I go to see the lights from the same spot. One morning I meet a man selling *The Big Issue* on the bridge, and we have an exceedingly pleasant conversation. What a beautiful morning, he says. Yes, it is, I say, and I mean it more than I have ever meant it. I give him my coins for a copy. It's a magazine that homeless people sell—'a hand up, not a handout' it says on the cover. I hope he

has a nice place to sleep now, if he's still homeless, the man selling the magazines. I'm David-fucking-Copperfield. I am my own novel's protagonist: Hemi, seduced by the glory of London town and her panoramas, her exceedingly interesting people, her monuments, the way it's okay to swear and drink a lot of beer.

But I have been in sustained pain since Toronto. American airports and airlines are torturous in their own special way, and my neck is susceptible to misalignment at the best of times, but in recent months I've also learnt I have early onset arthritis, most likely have had it for years. Pain is often easier to brush off, fix up quick, treat like an isolated incident. Until it's so deep and chronic one episode is barely distinguishable from the next. In London I can almost ignore the pain. Almost. I can barely move. My friend Suzi suggests deep tissue massage. I have tried many treatments before, but not massage. So in London, I locate the closest and cheapest masseuse, down a little lane that runs along one side of The National Gallery. The building is poky and run-down, and to get to the massage room we have to descend a steep staircase with closed in walls—a ceiling I can run my fingers along even though I am only average-woman-height. Maybe it was a pub back in the 18th-century day. Buildings like this would be demolished for the likelihood of collapse should Ruaumoko so much as sneeze in Wellington.

The Chinese masseuse is tiny but wiry. I'm so sore I'm a bit scared she'll hurt me, but she manages to find exactly the right balance between intensity and gentleness. Ooohhh you're so stiff! she exclaims as soon as she touches the muscles at the base of my neck. Unusually so, her voice says. Usually it's only men who get this tightly wound, she tells me. She offers me her special massage ointment, the one that usually costs more, for

free, obviously moved by my predicament. Her hands are sure and efficient. She knows the business of people's muscles. By the time she is done, I have more movement and less pain. In fact, for the blissful following hour, I feel no pain. It comes back that evening, but I have been manipulated enough to carry on.

Earlier, I had texted Suzi: I think my body is full of historical tension. And then: what a line. It only strikes me in that moment that the historical tension that my body carries, that any body carries, goes all the way back to childhood, and beyond. I had known this intellectually, but not fully understood before. What Indigenous people have long known, what all oppressed peoples know, is that we carry ancestral memory within us. I think my body is full of historical tension. I marvel at the worlds that sentence contains. I marvel at the worlds of tension the massage reveals. It is not that I have an emotional response to it, other than relief, but that as the massage goes on more and more areas and levels of pain are exposed. It is only when I get a stranger to lay her hands on me in an underground room in Trafalgar Square that I feel the lifetimes of strain and anxiety and stress that have infused my muscles with rigidity. Everything we've survived, me and my parents and their parents and so on. I thought I was fine. But the massage tells me that I have been holding everything up by the strength of my own muscles all these years. My muscles have been doing the work my mind told them to. It's just us against the terrors of the world, my body told itself. Our minds and our bodies are such powerful things. But I can finally see what the health practitioners feel every time they touch me. The pressure has been so intense that my bones are deteriorating. Fusing. Misaligning. The muscles are hard where they should be flexible. The muscles have been holding everything together for so long they don't know how to relax.

I don't want to overstate the ancestral thing. If I was carrying all their pain I would have long ago been obliterated. We are not the victims of unrestrained ancestral pain. By which I mean, our parents stand between us and the violences of the past. It's like a blast at their back, a storm they keep at bay by leaning their whole weight against a door that is threatening to slam open. Sometimes a window smashes, sometimes the door whips open before they can push it back again. Sometimes it takes more than one of them to keep the door closed. Generations holding it at bay. There might be a tohunga who can speak to the storm and calm it. The storm might tire itself out or be appeased by gifts of remorse. Whatever the case, all of us have ancestral storms of differing strengths and violence. All of us must be vigilant. Adding locks and sandbags, scaffolding. Muscles working hard. If you are alone, those muscles can petrify against the storm. But that's better than the alternative. If no one holds it back, the storm gets inside you. How it hurts you and yours changes person to person. There is no inevitability to this—we still get to choose.

But every choice has a price. My vigilance has my neck in a vice grip that reliably gives a little twist now and then.

'We don't know, when we look at images of Frida, whether we're looking at her, or ourselves.'

—Claire Wilcox, co-curator *Frida Kahlo: Making Herself Up*,
V&A Museum, 2018

The body braces give us a sense of the shape of her, her size, the depth of her pain. Polio, a bus crash that spears her diagonally through the centre, damaging spine and collarbone, pelvis and legs, over thirty operations, miscarriages, gangrene.

Pfft, what do I know about pain?

The exhibition makes hers almost tangible, close enough to touch, more than one person should have to bear. But it's what she does with it. She makes all the things of her life beautiful. I don't mean that in some abstract, romantic way. She actively transforms each thing she touches, surrounding herself with vibrant colour and contour. Frida doesn't hold the storm at bay; she becomes the storm, and in doing so she makes it hers.

The plaster corsets are astonishing; there is nothing quite like clothing for giving a visceral sense of the shape of a person, but these are so intimate: moulded exactly to her dimensions, embodiments of pain and imprisonment and hope, painted by the artist while she wore them. Each is a slightly different shape, signalling the different approaches that were taken to holding Frida together. The paintings on them, like all her paintings, her way of transcending her caged body. Beauty tied so intimately, so inextricably to pain. In the end, she watches her body failing, piece by piece removed or adjusted until the operations don't work anymore. Even then, a bright red prosthetic leg with green detail, a dragon dancing along the foot.

We have only gained access as guests of the V&A—tickets have been sold out for months. It's easy to see why. The final room contains an abundance of Fridas, Kahlo-shaped mannequins in recognisable poses, wearing her splendid wardrobe. Cotton huipil / embroidered tops, satins and silks and smooth, cool cotton skirts, ruffled and adorned with stitch and fabric, rebozo shawls festooned with the brightest colours. I find myself fascinated by the voluminous skirts I had thought were simply her impeccable Mexican style. She wore them, at least sometimes, to hide her beleaguered legs. Extravagant, storied jewellery. Nail polish, make-up, seduction. Life lived in full colour. Not many of us can say that.

And here, in this final room, her paintings too, at last. It is extraordinarily moving, after gaining a sense of the pain of her life, to gain a visceral sense of the beauty she made of it. Paintings beside mannequins that mimic them in posture and dress, the artist herself in the room with us. I'm the last here; my group has already moved through. I don't know what it means, any of this or the writing of it. Women of colour can inspire each other across time and place, the young woman in Toronto told me. Maybe that's it. What does Frida say? Perhaps, the pain is inevitable. Be a storm. Make beauty.

Ruby Solly

Arrival

from *Tōku Pāpā*

Manuscript, forthcoming 2021

I have an aunty,
who says she remembers
what it's like to be born.
She describes a feeling of warmth,
and a blinding of light
like staring into the sun.

For many, It's hard to imagine a life before we exist.
But not for us who walk backwards into our futures.
The past getting smaller and smaller,
like being driven away from your first home,
looking behind you out the back window.
The trees waving you on to the cities,
where your family name is nothing but sounds
rolling around the mouth
and through the lips.

We believe the spirit is formed
when the eyes develop in utero.
Our two waters mingling,
in a river encased with sinew and skin.
Ancient knowledge from a waka so sacred,
that those aboard did not eat,
that the women were left behind
to weep on the beaches.
Piercing the sound barrier,

with wails of sacrifice
for the greater good.

I know that Aunty was lying.
Before arrival,
I remember a darkness,
like being under water at night.
Then a sense of deep knowing,
and then fear.
Nothing,
but fear.

Rebecca K. Reilly

from *Vines*

Manuscript, forthcoming 2021

I'm walking through the aisles of the university library, running my hands over the spines of all the books, because I'm so happy. I think maybe I hate the university as an institution and question my involvement with it as both a staff member and a student, but nothing matters when I'm on the fifth floor of the library, touching all the books and looking out at the harbour and the islands in the Hauraki Gulf. I like looking in the backs of the books and seeing how long they've been sitting on these shelves for, sometimes fifty years. Everything that's happened in the world in the last fifty years, and these books were right here. Except maybe a few sojourns to someone's flat somewhere, someone's holiday to the Motueka Top 10 Holiday Park where they didn't even read the book because they were, like, too busy kayaking on Tasman Bay or whatever.

The reason why I'm so happy is because I'm in love. I think about whispering this to a copy of Anton Chekhov, the voice of twilight Russia but I don't want to embarrass myself. I'm in love with a fellow English tutor. I only refer to her as my co-worker, so that my feelings remain a mystery. If I say something like, 'My co-worker and I were having an ice cream at Island Gelato Company last night', and someone replies saying something like, 'Oh right, yeah, Holly said,' I act surprised. Maybe that's her name, how would I know, we're just co-workers, ha ha ha.

I indulge myself in a fantasy about Holly inviting me to her family Christmas in Napier, where the National Aquarium is. I imagine her parents are on a first name basis with all the penguins who live there. Holly will say, 'This is Greta

Vladislavjević', because she knows what my name is and she isn't afraid to say it, and in this fantasy, she knows how to say it properly as well. There won't be any holly, a Christmas plant in other places, which I will point out for some seasonal humour. Everyone will want to pull a cracker with me, even the dog. I assume they have a dog. And a deck. A big deck. We'll all wear paper hats and they won't slide off or slip down over our eyes.

My own family won't hardly notice I've gone to have Christmas somewhere else. My brother V will be busy bossing everyone around, hiding the presents in case we open them wrong somehow, changing into a second outfit like it's his televised wedding reception. My dad will drink too much plum brandy waiting for V to get ready and start speaking Russian exclusively, telling my mum she's as beautiful and knowledgeable as Sofia Kovalevskaya, the first woman to get a PhD in maths.

Holly doesn't drink plum brandy, she drinks whisky. I've never in my life thought you know what, I might just have a whisky. Holly walks around at parties whisky glass in hand, laughing, nodding. She knows a lot of people and they all want to talk to her. Boys like to talk to her about books and politics. Boys never talk to me about those things, even though my thesis is on Cold War Russian and English novels. They just ask me who I know here. I walk around at parties wondering where the recycling is.

I always hope that at the end of these parties Holly might ask me to come back to her house, but she never does. Maybe that's okay, maybe she wants to keep things professional. Maybe I shouldn't be thinking so much about kissing my co-worker. Maybe I shouldn't be looking at my co-worker's bum when she helps my supervisor plug in a computer screen. I try very hard not to look at Holly's Instagram photos of her with

her ex either, from when she did her masters in the UK. I know nothing about this woman, but I assume she's blonde and called Natasha and they sat in little dark cafés talking about Proust. I imagine if I met her, she would think I was very sweet and say that she could never grow long hair like mine.

Sometimes when I ask Holly how she is, she says, 'Better now you're here', and I feel like it's entirely possible that I might open my mouth and all of my organs will come out onto the library floor. No one would look up from their laptops because they all know how it feels to be in love too. One of these moments occurs presently, when I'm looking in the back of a book that was last checked out in 1978, and she messages me: Hey, are you still at uni, can you help me with something?

I feel proud, to be needed to do something. Like at school when a teacher asks for two strong boys, how it must feel to be one of the selected strong boys. I straighten my dress as I walk across Symonds Street to go and meet her. Holly dresses like Hannah Gadsby and I dress like someone whose boyfriend is late to meet them at the French Film Festival. She's leaning on the railing of the ramp to the arts building, looking at her phone and wearing a long-sleeved white shirt and navy suit pants with black Docs. Not really a summer look. It will be months before the leaves come off the big oak trees that line this part of the street.

'Hey, thanks for coming,' she says, as I try and stand as casually as I can. 'It shouldn't take too long.'

'Oh, it's no problem, I wasn't doing anything,' I say, nonchalantly. Touching books is not really what you can refer to as doing something. She runs her fingers through her hair as we walk through the double set of automatic doors, into the building. She has short hair that goes into a point and reminds me of an illustration of a shark in a book I liked as a child. I

wonder if she ever thinks about my hair, and what illustrations it reminds her of. I wonder if she remembers the time we lay on the floor of the PhD common room, after everyone else had gone home, listening to the same song over and over again.

We go in the elevator and I still don't know what we're doing. She presses the button to the fourth floor and stands with her hands in her pockets, looking nervous.

'What are you doing tonight?' she asks.

'Oh, I'm not sure,' I say, trying to present myself as somewhere between being too busy to spend time with her and not having any friends or social life at all. 'I'm going to Wellington tomorrow; I don't know if you remember.'

'Yeah, right, your mum's down there, isn't she?'

'Yes, she's there for a couple of weeks running a summer theatre programme. I'm going down with her friend Geneviève who has a very . . . bold attitude, so I don't know how that's going to go. Flying with Jetstar and everything.'

Holly laughs and shakes her head. There's something about her that makes me feel like every time we're together is the first time we've ever met. Things never become more comfortable. She lets me get out of the elevator first. We walk down the corridor and stop at the English department PhD officer, where she leans down to unlock the door with a key on a navy university lanyard. There are two kinds of people in this world, lanyard and non-lanyard people. Holly is definitely a lanyard person. She has the confidence to pull it off. She holds the door open for me. That's another thing I can't pull off. When I hold a door for someone, ten people end up going through, thinking it's my job. Asking where the toilets are.

Holly stands in front of two stacks of poster board with her hands on her hips.

'How are we going to do this?' she asks.

‘How are we going to do what?’ I ask. It comes out a bit bewildered and a bit suggestive.

‘I have to carry these down to the gallery on Shortland Street. Didn’t I say?’

‘Oh.’ She definitely did not say that. ‘How far away is that, 850 metres?’

‘I’m not sure how many metres, Greta.’

I pick up half the boards straight away. They’re A1 and they’re heavy as fuck. I have long arms, but they’re also quite similar to twigs in terms of breadth.

Holly surveys me, ‘Are they too heavy, should I get someone else?’

‘No! This is fine. Not a problem at all.’

She picks up the other half of the boards with minimal effort. She has a much more suitable physique for doing things like this. I’m quite good at . . . origami. Should I bring that up? Maybe later. I open the door with my knee, and we trundle back to the elevator. I press the button for the ground floor with my knee as well.

Holly laughs, ‘Are you trying to show me your dexterity?’

‘No. I don’t need to prove anything to the likes of you.’

‘That’s true, I have seen you open a bottle of premixed gin and tonic on the side of a bus shelter.’

I pause, and then say, ‘I’m also very good at origami.’

‘Go on, then,’ she says, looking down at the boards. We’re standing close together in the elevator, our elbows are touching.

‘I can’t do it right now, I need Zen.’

‘Are you saying I’m not Zen?’

I shake my head slightly, ‘You are absolutely not Zen. You’re ruckus.’

‘I’m ruckus?’

‘Someone in my Stage 1 tutorial said that,’ I say. ‘He said

Chaucer was ruckus.’

We step back out of the elevator on the first floor, and walk through the foyer, past the furious German receptionist, through the courtyard. When I was at school, I used to meet my dad here. My dad got sushi and coffee, I would get hot chips and a blue Powerade. There weren’t a lot of options. Now there’s tacos and crepes and all sorts, in painted shipping containers. Maybe Holly and I can get crepes after this. We could go to the Kāpiti Store and get ice cream. A few weeks ago, we went to Giapo, Island Gelato, and Duck Island all in one day. I like fruit sorbets; she likes novelty flavours. She got a rum and raisin choc top at the movies and I said I would never talk to her again. I lasted three minutes.

No one’s pressed the button for the crossing, opposite the High Court.

‘Do you want to use your knee for that too?’

‘No.’ I flick my hair over my shoulder, to be coy. She raises her eyebrows, and leans to press the button with her elbow, without breaking eye contact with me. We’re touching slightly again.

When my parents were away, Holly came and fixed my bike. We didn’t end up riding around Mission Bay as planned. We sat on the driveway and talked until it was dark. I got sunburned, I took my clothes off in the upstairs bathroom and looked at the lines on my back. I felt like I was wearing our conversation.

We’re walking past Old Government House, the patch of grass where they put up marquees and serve orange juice and sparkling wine before graduation events. V was in a bad mood at his graduation and kept saying he just didn’t like the hat, but that wasn’t the issue at all. The boards are heavy, but I try not to think about it. I adjust my fingers.

‘Are you okay?’ she asks.

'Yeah, I'm fine.' She smiles at me and I smile back.

'I'm sorry I'm making you do this. I feel like you're a Hire-A-Hubby.'

'I'm glad to be helpful. It's good exercise for my waif-like arms.'

She smiles again and shakes her head at me. 'I would have done two trips but I'm in such a rush, I'm meeting Sonja's friends tonight. I'm so nervous, I haven't had a girlfriend for so long. Not since, you know. The disaster in Portsmouth. I think Sonja's different though. Don't tell anyone I said that. I don't know what will happen, it's been what, six weeks? Do you remember?'

'No.' I've never heard of Sonja before. My hands shake holding the boards. I keep walking determinedly across Princes Street and down the hill of Shortland Street.

'I'm meeting her at work, at the hospital. I hope I'm not late, I can't get my phone out of my pocket carrying these.'

'Is she a specialist x-ray machine technician?'

'No, Gre, you're so funny,' she says. 'She's a mental health nurse. I swear we've talked about this.'

'No, we haven't.'

'I haven't talked about anything else for weeks.'

I want to throw the boards on the ground but I don't, I grip them tighter and tighter, white patches form around my cuticles. My breathing is too shallow, and I suck in as much air as I can without arousing suspicion, wishing I could suck back in every dumb misguided thing I've said and thought back inside my body, pushing them deeper and deeper until they never existed.

'Where did you meet?'

'The usual way.'

'At a cocktail bar?'

She's looking at me like I've lost my mind. 'No, on Tinder.'

My Tinder is just single mums after something different and straight couples looking for a fucking extra pair of hands! A nurse, a wonderful person whose job is helping people feel better! She swears we've talked about it! Ha, ha!

'Do you think I look all right?' she asks. 'Do you think they'll like me?'

'Why wouldn't they? You're fine.'

I'm melting into the footpath. I can see the gallery but it's so far away. I'll be dead by the time we get there. Someone will have to call my mum to get a spade and scrape the puddle that used to be me into a bucket. She'll throw me on her gardenias, and they'll die too. People will ask what became of the pretty white flowers and their glossy green leaves, what's this pit of smoking ash, and my mum will say, do you remember my daughter, Greta? She's dead. I swear we've talked about this.

'Thanks, mate. I knew I could count on you to make me feel better.'

I try and shrug, but it's hard when emotionally I'm dead and physically my arms are about to drop off.

'You'd really like her. She's a good person, you know, she cares about real things. She's not in her head, worrying about the shit we talk about. Not complaining that Das Kapital has been grossly misinterpreted by Anglophone scholars. Just things that actually matter. We never argue about whether John Stuart Mill's dad was gay with his friends.'

They were definitely gay, all of his dad's friends were gay, one of them lived in Montpelier for god's sake, they were going for walks all the time, talking about Herodotus. They were sending each other letters about how they didn't want to be in the war. If that's not gay, I don't know what is.

'And she's hot too,' she says, like we're bros. 'She's Slovakian.'

Another Slav! I want to kick the cover off this manhole and fall into it. I bet Sonja's last name is something is something good that fits on forms, Jovich or Bobkov. I imagine her on the phone, being hot, saying, yes, that's right, B-O-B, K-O-V, never on her kitchen floor calling Studylink, like, V for Victor, L for Lanyards, A for . . . Aneurysm, D for, um, a didactic approach, hang on, only eleven more letters, I for Icarus, S for Susan Sarandon—'

'Cool. Hot. Nice,' I say, like a bad slogan for ice blocks.

'Yeah. I don't know what she's doing with me.'

I don't know what I'm doing with you, I should be on a beach somewhere with people bringing me drinks and telling me that I'm very hot too, and the things I like are scintillating and not at all shit.

We get to the gallery. She unlocks the front door with a swipe card. I don't look at her. When we go inside, I put the boards down heavily and fold my arms.

'What are these for anyway?' I ask.

'They're for a competition where people make posters about their thesis topics.'

'Is glitter provided?'

'Um, no.'

I think about a big, sparkly poster of Mikhail Gorbachev. We go back outside again. She stands in front of me with her hands in her pockets. I don't unfold my arms.

'I'd better set off to the hospital then. Which way are you going?'

'The opposite way,' I say.

'Oh. Well, thanks for helping me. I'll see you soon.'

'Yes. Maybe.'

'Maybe? You're a mysterious woman, Greta.'

We say goodbye and she looks at me right in my eyes like

nothing is wrong. I turn around and start walking down the hill. I don't know where I'm going but I don't turn around. She can't ever know that I'm crying.

Patrick Evans

from *Bluffworld*

Manuscript, forthcoming 2021

1973

The Sorrows of Young Werther.

Have you ever noticed there's a certain kind of fly that doesn't make a sound? I'm watching one now as it moves around the light fitting above my head. They're tiny, these buzzless flies,¹ and if you watch for a while you'll see they move not in a circle but in squares or rectangles and turn right at each corner, abruptly, for no particular reason. I could watch them for hours.

I come here regularly each day with my laptop: sabbatical leave, Bevan calls it—he's my boss, in the bookshop across the foyer from here. Just the two cubicles, and I sit in one or the other of them like this day by day and think about the things that've brought me here. I try to make sense of them, I try to work out whether they were always going to happen or I've just stuffed up, made bad decisions the way counsellors try to get you to see when it's far too late. But then I find I'm watching these flies instead—here's another, come out of nothing and following the first around the light—watching them mindlessly, as if there's not a brain cell left in my head. *Three* of them now, sawing their way silently around the fitting—and always anticlockwise, as if they're onto something about the universe that human beings don't know. *That's* what fascinates me.

1 Three lines in and he's plagiarising already—surely he's stolen this from John Hopkins's novel *Tangier Buzzless Flies* (1972)?

It was always like this, to tell the truth, back in my early days as an academic, that high old time it's high time I told you about. Was that the reason my life became unstuck? Was it something to do with those long hours spent here staring up at these tiny noiseless flies drawing invisible squares around the light fitting on the ceiling of the departmental men's room, while almost none of my academic work got done? The word *gormless* comes to mind.

*

My name is Thomas Flannery and I am forty-two years old.² Here's how a typical working day starts for me, now I've run out of luck and bullshit.

Just before eight each morning I take a bus to the terminus in town, from whichever house I happen to be baby-sitting for STEM³ academics on sabbatical leave.⁴ From there I walk a couple of blocks westward, across the Bridge of Remembrance and along the riverbank. There's the gentlemen's club on the left and the former public library on the right and then the central police station, a minatory presence quickly passed. After that,

- 2 And this surely paraphrases the famous opening of Peter Carey's *Illywhacker* (1985); again, no acknowledgement, no evidence that he's read more than the first page.
- 3 Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, the useful subjects. Proponents of the Arts prefer the acronym STEAM, of course, since they feel that the Arts are not entirely without use or purpose.
- 4 A period, originally up to a year in duration but more recently less, in which academics are released from their usual duties in order to research and publish in their areas of expertise on full salary and with appropriate emoluments. Mosaic in origin, it originally referred to resting land from tilling. In the colonial period here described, study leave gave an opportunity for academics to travel back to their place of origin and harass former colleagues, supervisors, and others who might reasonably have expected never to have to set eyes upon them again or listen to their driveling, self-serving anecdotes and endless complaints.

the dreaming spires⁵ begin to appear ahead of me above a froth of leaves, and then, gradually, as I approach, the neo-Gothic confection of the university buildings beneath. A few minutes more and I'm stepping through the arched entrance beneath the clocktower and into the northern quadrangle and the campus itself, with its grey slate roofs, its gnarled gargoyles and the solemn, looped procession of its cloisters. Ivy, these days carefully trimmed and shaped, is dabbed about here and there. The former campus is a picture.

Here, I spent my student life; here, after a few years, and somehow, I got a temporary job in the Department of English; here, in due course, bit by bit and to my great astonishment, I became a full-time and tenured academic and had what you might call something of a career. And, here, a year ago, it all came to an end: the Dissolution of the Monasteries, I call it, though I got that line from someone else. I get all my lines from someone else. It's that kind of universe, I've found. Bluffworld, I call it, though I think I might have pinched that, too.

You might say that the ontogeny of this daily trip recapitulates the phylogeny of my earlier life. In all truth I know nothing whatever about ontogeny, or phylogeny, either, and picked up the entire phrase from an overheard conversation in a common room.⁶ Excellent and pleasing it is, and the use of it here is an equally pleasing example of bluff. You could as easily say that I retrace my past each morning as I walk through that arched entrance and into the College of Arts.

5 Cf. 'City of **Dreaming Spires**': 'a name for Oxford, deriving originally from "Thyrsis" (1866), a poem by Matthew Arnold (1822-88), which refers to Oxford as 'that sweet City with her dreaming Spires' (Encyclopaedia.com).

6 This phrase in fact refers to the work of the master bluffer Haeckel, whose embryo drawings, faked to prove his theories of species evolution, became influential; a far better footnote to kick off a novel about bluff, surely. Ernst Haeckel (1844-1919). German. Ignore.

Except that it isn't the College of Arts anymore, and it hasn't been the College of Arts since They closed us down last year, and, as effectively as a guillotine or a gun, ended my career and those of several hundred colleagues as well. Oh, yes, they've left it *looking* like a university College of Arts—nearly the way it looks in the postcards: pretty as a picture. And with the work being done now by builders and plumbers and electricians and ivy-trimmers, it looks even more so on its irreversible path to the hyperreal (another word overheard and adopted, another second-hand idea with a meaning that somewhat eludes me).⁷ After all, that was the point of the buildings from the very first, when they were built a century ago and more—wasn't it? To play a part, to pretend, to look much older than they were? To seem *real*. To *seem* real.

To *seem*.

More of that later, though, more of that later. Here I am now, on this very particular morning as it's turning out to be, walking through the outer archway of that discreetly ivied clocktower. I cross the original college coat-of-arms, set out in coloured floor-tiles inside, along with the university's motto—*Faecem in Caenum Mutare*⁸—and pass through the inner archway to the north quadrangle and its tranquil mood. The medium-grey of the stone walls and their buttresses, those touches of

7 Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality* (1973) gives Disneyland as an example of the effort to replace reality with something better. Umberto Eco (1932-2016). Italian. Ignore. Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) also gives an account of this phenomenon, whereby the material world in post-industrial society is increasingly hollowed out with the result that *content* is replaced by *form* in a representation of content by simulacra. Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007). French. Ignore.

8 'Turn dregs into scum' is the best that can be made of this. Can that really be the motto of this institution he's describing? It's increasingly difficult to pin down this writer's tone.

dark ivy, the high, patterned slate roofs with their crocketed ridges, the cloisters running away to my left in pointed loops, atmospherically, evocatively—poetically, almost—to the men’s lavatory at the far end.

Since the Dissolution of the Monasteries⁹ I’ve kept to my old routines, and I always call in at this public loo just before reporting for my morning hours at my new job. I always leak at the same end of the urinal (the farther). As I wash my long thin pale academic hands I always look into the same rust-foxed mirror above the sink (the nearer). I always dry them at the same roller towel (the one in the middle). And, always, the man whose Identikit face looks back in the glass is not Everyman but Anyone, a leftover, a pawn: boring old Me. Some of the changes in my appearance over the last few years have been brought about by misfortune and the passage of time. But some I’ve brought about myself, by abandoning the precious little scarves and retro floral waistcoats I used to affect when a junior academic; the louche little kepi, the cowboy boots, the stonewashed jeans as tight as paint, the—

But—oh, God—here’s Neary,¹⁰ popped up behind me in the rust-flecked mirror and stopping short when he sees me. I turn away to the roller towel, which gives a reassuring rusty old creak as I pull at it.

‘Ah,’ he says. ‘Just the man I want to see.’

As meaningless as the roller towel, this Neary: former head of Classics, a tall, dreary Englishman, Ph.D. Leeds, author

9 1536-41. Henry VIII’s planned destruction of monasteries, priories, etc. in the early stages of the English Reformation; surely a far more significant event in world-historical terms than the mere closure of a university college of arts.

10 I’m sure this name is filched from Samuel Beckett’s *Murphy* (1938), where Beckett is clearly intrigued by the fact that ‘Neary’ is nearly ‘nearly’. But here, again, has the narrator actually read about this in the novel or simply been told about it?

of *The Tongue-Scraper in Classical Verse* (London, Routledge 1979). His inexplicable 'seventies mutton-chop whiskers have survived the closedown of the university.

I know what's up. He's wearing his academic regalia. The St. Andrew's bonnet is a fungoid growth upon his head.¹¹

'No,' I tell him.

In fact, I know I'm going to do what he wants. For the money, little as it is.

'I need one more,' he says, briskly.

'Conray.'

'I've already got Conray.'

'Well, try Bundy, then—'

'Bundy's setting up his food stall, you know that.'

By now we're standing together outside the loo and staring into a patch of early sunlight that's almost reached the middle of the quadrangle. A small group, gathering there: obsolete humanities academics, their academic gowns swirling in a fair old wind from the south.

Now, abruptly, near the Great Hall, from a little doorway in the corner of the quadrangle, tourists begin to stream out, excited in a dozen different languages. Inside, the university's greatest son, its most famous graduate, inventor of the most effective hangover cure of its time, CRAPU-LESS, is impersonated by a stiff, whiskery mannequin in Victorian clothing. It stands, tilting slightly, in a mock-up of the great man's tiny first laboratory.

These tourists gather, cameras up, as a couple of former

11 In fact, the Leeds doctoral regalia involves a cap. The headgear referred to above is the loose beret used by the University of St. Andrews at graduation and copied in a number of colonial universities. Colonial emulation of a non-Oxbridge university is unusual, though the extraordinarily silly appearance the bonnet gives the wearer must surely have influenced the choice in many cases.

sociologists join our group, shouldering their way into academic gowns—they've had the worst of it since the closedown, the sociologists: unemployable, all of them, except for a raucous, insecure woman rumoured to have started a brothel in Brisbane.

'No,' I tell Neary.

'Five dollars—'

'Ten. No, fifteen—'

'Blow you. Seven-fifty.' He holds out a gown. 'You were just the M.A., weren't you?'

Always that question, even after everything that's happened.

'Does it matter what gown I wear?'

'Well, yes, I rather think it does—no, no, come on, put it on properly—'

And so, as always, *the event unfolds*. I join the posing group, pulling my Masters gown around me, yearning for invisibility, for extinction its very self. Together, the eight or ten of us stand squinting into wind that squeezes tears from the corners of our eyes and flutters and flaps at our gowns, while around us the little tourists rush and babble: their phones blink above their heads as they click and change places, click and change places again. I count backwards from fifty, I try to ignore the shouts from workmen on a scaffold high up the side of the Great Hall and the puerile academic jokes of my former colleagues; I count back up to fifty again. I'm doing this for perhaps the tenth time when suddenly it's all over and I can pull off the gown and the hood and the mortarboard, and grab money from Neary's cold, bony fist. It comes entirely in coins.

Back in the men's lavatory I try to pick up my former routine again: half a minute at the urinal, half a minute at the sink washing my hands and gazing up at my reflection, waiting for my sense of self to reassemble. Vanity, they must have thought,

those blokes who used to pass behind me, unzipping or zipping up again, but in fact it was never that: no more, back then, than a form of incredulity, an astonishment at having found the life I'd been given as a junior academic—*lifestyle*, I mean, since style was, generally speaking, the only thing I had. I was all appearance, and it seemed that *that* was all one required to pass oneself off as whatever it was one was pretending to be. Whoever that might have been. And none of it of any use at all now I'm out in the world at last, which is where, for better or for worse, I seem to have been for a year.

In the mirror, I see a face now like a pear or a balloon on a stick. Its slow collapse into the collar has thickened and widened its jawline while the daily evacuation of the scalp lifts the forehead towards a sudden, nude peak—in the middle of which a silly, single tuft of forelock, the last of my widow's peak, sits like an island abandoned to climate change. *Well, then, shave it off*, I can hear you say. *Go with the flow—go all the way.*

Ah, but that lonely forelock is the last thing left to define the face I used to have. As long as it's there I can *just* remember what I once looked like, I can *just* carry a ghostly, faded snapshot of the sharp, hungry, leonine fellow I used to be, a sense of the person I once was or thought I was. A single comma, a single semi-colon—all I've got left of Me.

But, oh, how the girlies¹² liked that sharp hungry fellow back then!—and how I strutted my stuff before them in my lectures, wearing my *Groppi mocker*, as one of my older colleagues used to call it:¹³ Charles II hairdo, sickle moustache, self-involved

12 Oh, dear. I presume he's referring his young female students. This is not a promising start.

13 Dress suit or dress clothes suitable to be worn at Groppi's, an Egyptian tea-house, according to H.W. Orsman, ed., *The Dictionary of New Zealand*

Paisley shirt with high, open collar and throat medallion amidst the wisps of feeble academic chest hair; flared trousers in Karitane Yellow,¹⁴ bright golden shoes built high on cork soles a good three inches thick.

There are photos in the family album which no one must ever see. Me in a jerkin, a sort of buttonless waistcoat atrocity now lost to time, or, downmarket a little, in those tight jeans and that insouciant little Rolling Stones *kepi* I mentioned just a moment ago. Me, under the influence of this woman or that, in an entire jeans-suit with shoulders padded like the back of a sofa. Me, leaning into the flare of a match as I light up, *à la Alber' K'moo*, or *Albert Came-us* as I used to call him before an embarrassing common room correction; I also came to grief over *Laforge*, which I'd been pronouncing *La-for-gew*. Haven't read either of them, of course.

At student parties I found my female students had total recall of my entire wardrobe, kept lists of all young male lecturers' clothing, checked them off from day to day and noted each visit to the hairdresser. Some of them found out where I lived and there was the occasional drunken drive-by on a Saturday night: *parp-parp hullo Tom!* Each morning, at this very mirror, I tried to comprehend the fact of the tiny rock-star life that had fallen upon me so much by chance.

It's a teaser, isn't it, the notion that History has a Beginning a Middle and an End, that and the implicit thought that we—I mean my own generation, late Baby Boomers, the last of the really privileged—were the ones you could see on the right-hand side of those evolutionary charts and diagrams you used to come across: chins tucked in, shoulders pushed back, eyes

English, O.U.P. 1997, p.318. Presumably, the phrase is not used literally here.

14 A distasteful reference to Karitane children's hospitals. See Orsman 1997, p.396.

full of purpose, erect in the public sense and all of us ready for anything, while our lesser evolutionary predecessors trailed off to the left, forlorn, slouched, increasingly chinless, increasingly hirsute, their task as our forerunners over and done.

In the Great Chain of Being, it seemed, we were the inheritors of the earth, the very purpose of history, its end-point and its aim: the vanguard in the March of Progress. That's what we were told, though to tell the truth I can't remember anyone actually saying it. Always there, though: normal, natural, *the way things were always meant to be*.¹⁵ The great conceit of the Baby Boomers: that of all generations, we alone would never grow old. *Never give up the dream!*

Trouble was, I could never believe in myself as part of this evolutionary triumph. I'd never been part of any kind of triumph, never really been first-class and I never thought I could be. I'd come from one of those many butch working-class co-eds the School and College boys cycled past each day in their blazers and their straw boaters, against a languid shoulder sometimes a racquet or a bat. I *crept* into university—this university, this very College of Arts now extinct: *what was I doing here?* I felt like an intruder, I felt I ought to be taking out the garbage. Up the back of lecture-theatres I'd gaze down on the pretty coiffures and occasional pert little hats of the private school girls at the front and listen to their impossible elocution drifting back up to me like a foreign language: each of them (I knew) holding out for a doctor or a lawyer or, for those of a slightly fuller build, a dentist or a vet. I'd look down at them and keep my mouth shut, lest they heard my fallen accent—the voice of the *less-fortunate amongst us*, as I heard one of them say in class. The *pua*—

15 Hm—the influence of Haeckel again.

Some knew my secret anyway. ‘Oh, *you’re* here!’ one of these spoiled brats called out to me after three undergraduate years when the survivors assembled, postgraduates now, for a fourth. ‘How did *you* get into the M.A. Honours class?’¹⁶ This was Sophonisba Curry, ex-St. Margaret’s College, a straight A-plus student like *all the girls* (English being generally acknowledged as a woman’s subject) who crowded out *all the boys*, year (it seemed) after year. ‘I must have a word with *mon oncle* about falling standards,’ she said. A couple of her toadies, I remember, tittered slavishly at this.

Yes, she had an entourage. ‘But have you seen Sviatoslav Richter’s *hands*?’ I remember one of them asking another, a pill who’d told me he’d learned Russian as a hobby during the Christmas break because he’d thought it’d be rather fun. Spanish had disappointed him, he said, since he’d found it so bloody obvious—another predictable Latinate language, all too straightforward and far less interesting than (for example) its neighbour, Catalan, born (originally) in the street language of the Centurions: did I know that? ‘The distaff side of history, so to speak,’ this little prick told me, ‘*though*, strictly speaking, of course, *distaff* meant simply’—‘*Mm, yes, mm,*’ I muttered. ‘*Of course, of course*’. But did I realise (this young god went on) that the Catalans were originally Goths, and that the Goths had played a significant part in¹⁷—

16 The system being referred to involves a three-year course for a Bachelor of Arts, followed by one or two years giving a Master of Arts with Honours to selected students. Top-ranking students of this year qualified to apply for scholarships for postgraduate study at an overseas university; for the rest, travel or school-teaching, and, for the careless, parenthood as a further blow.

17 The theory being expounded here by this try-hard appears on the face of it to be bullshit, but in fact it doesn’t seem to be used as such in this instance; i.e. he believes in what he is saying in the moment of saying it and therefore is not consciously engaging in an act of bluff. Rather than *bullshit*, what he is claiming here should be seen as *horseshit*. This is an important

Well, by this stage I was in full panic, I can tell you, well out of my depth with my snout filling up with water: *what would he ask next, this little tit?*¹⁸ I looked at his thin blue wrists as he talked, I remember, at the hair on them, his animal hair, and something stirred in my mind, a thought that would go no further at that moment, something about minds and bodies and that chart of human progress I've just mentioned. 'Goth?' he asked me. 'Cath? You can hear the connection in the words?' 'Yes yes,' I told him. 'Of course, of course.' He pronounced *Goth* almost as *Gorth* and you really *could* hear it, that connection, I mean. I could feel the brilliance of the idea—the sexiness of it, the quality that appealed to me most about academic life, the sheer *erotic* quality of intellection, all the more so when half-comprehensible as so much of the world seemed to me at that time, and especially when lightly flecked with bullshit as this so clearly was.

So much, so barely understood: caught up in the opening moments of this fourth, this so-called *Honours* year I'd never expected to be accepted for in the first place, I felt mounting, trouser-filling panic. And *Goth* made me think of nothing other than Gotch, of course.

Ah, yes: the *oncle* Sophonisba so frequently referred to—here he is, here he is. Gotcha Gotch, the terrifying Northern Irishman who'd been Professor of English and Head of Department here

distinction.

18 '1540s, a word used for any small animal or object (as in compound forms such as titmouse, *tomtit*, etc.); also used of small horses. Similar words in related senses are found in Scandinavian (Icelandic *tittir*, Norwegian *tita* "a little bird"), but the connection and origin are obscure; perhaps, as OED suggests, the word is merely suggestive of something small. Used figuratively of persons after 1734, but earlier for "a girl or young woman" (1590s), often in deprecatory sense of "a hussy, minx?" (<https://www.etymonline.com>). Used inappropriately here.

for (at that stage) more than twenty years. Charles Edmund Gotch, of Portaloo in Northern Ireland and Queen's University Belfast after that, author of but one publication in his entire life, *Clear Your Passages: A Guide to Writing English* (Portaloo Press, 1950). For him, a nondescript English redbrick or two followed Belfast—and then, directed by the blackest fate, out to the colonies where we awaited his Lamp of Learning. Of course that was long before I myself was old enough to be a part of a *we* or an *us* and could know that, in those lost bleak days, a man could be appointed relatively young to a *chair*¹⁹ in the colonies and what went with it, the endless, all-powerful headship of what was at the time the largest department in the university: or that such tenures became, each of them and always, in whichever department they took place, a reign of terror that seemed never to end. The excreta of the British higher education system, squeezed out above the chamber-pot of colony.²⁰

Sophonisba Curry was this man's niece. On the one hand, she topped the class at the end of that Honours year and received, as a consequence, the scholarship to Oxford that always went to the first of the first: she chose St. Hilda's, of course, for the tradition of it, she told all who would listen. On the other hand, she had heavy, marbled legs, I remember, which chafed when she walked, something she did with a rocking, wading motion that seemed inevitable, like some of the economic tenets I've been told about in Marx, or like the Return of the Repressed, which I read about in an in-flight magazine article about

19 'Chair' from the notion of 'throne' or 'seat of office'. The use of 'sofa', 'lounge suite' etc. for well-qualified occupants is informal.

20 Another unacknowledged influence here, this time from Thomas Pynchon ('Colonies are the outhouses of the human soul', *Gravity's Rainbow*, New York, Viking Press, 1973, p.145). Marx, of course, lurks behind this, as behind so much in today's world, alas.

hothouse gardening.

Here's a symptomatic moment. Sophonisba and me.²¹

After lectures ended at nine each weeknight evening I'd go into the storeroom directly under the raked seating of the vast main lecture theatre and get into overalls. No undergraduate scholarships for me or my flatmate Manatine: we paid our way by working as janitors in the evenings. Till midnight I'd clean the main lecture theatre, sweeping out litter from under seats. I'd clean the blackboards and I'd oil the woodwork and I'd polish the floor with a big old floor-polisher whose torque I'd fight all the time I was using it, like (I used to fancy) a man wrestling a steer.

One evening, soon after I started to polish the linoleum in the foyer outside the lecture theatre, this machine abruptly switched off. I let it go and it turned on again and reared off over the floor. I chased it and grabbed it and pulled it back from itself. It turned off again. I released it, and—

You get the picture. Well, *there* was its power cable snaking over the floor I'd just polished, and *there* at the wall behind me was Sophonisba, her hand on the power switch. I'd no idea what she was doing there, or (come to that) why she was dressed in medieval clothing—gown, sash, cloak and, by far the worst of all, a long, conical wimple that stuck out from the back of her head like the sharpened point of a very large pencil. In the months after this I used to spot her from time to time, cycling off somewhere in this outfit, wimple and all, and looking utterly fucking stupid. I gathered in due course that on these occasions she was on her way to a Medieval Society party, the sort of thing at which similarly dressed Prize Pricks drank mead or mulled wine and spoke only in the language taught in

21 'Sophonisba and I'. For all his pretensions this man sometimes seems barely literate.

ENGL204 Medieval English. Once, I've been led to believe, they even attempted to roast an entire pig on a spit outdoors: 'Why not Sophonisba instead?' Manatine wondered when I told him: but more about Manatine in a minute. His values regarding gender were unspeakable, as you can see—well, this is what Sally told me, anyway. Sally, coming up in Part Two, if I get there. Hard work, typing this on the dunny.

That's all, really—the floor-polisher business, I mean, though for me that incident is quite enough to show you how things were between me and Sophonisba Curry and her wimpled coven. *I* worked as a janitor each night: *she* went to parties dressed up as Hildegard of Bingen.²² *I* toiled to fake up essays: *hers* appeared as if by magic, possibly from somewhere inside her wimple. *She* and her cohort seemed born already *knowing* things: *I* didn't even know how to stop her fucking around with the wall-switch—she turned it *off* and *on* for at least half an hour that night, and came back to do it again and then again, the last time with some silly prick in a suit of armour. Gales of laughter, of course, mutual hysteria as if One thought it *quite* the most amusing thing that—

'Define real,' she commanded me once, I remember, somehow tucking those marbled, self-entitled legs of hers under her well-cushioned arse on one of the postgraduate common room seats. It was a lunchtime bull session and I'd just used some phrase like 'the real world'—something mindless in the usual way, blurted out above an innocent cup of milky tea—and she'd picked up on it like a ferret with a lentil. 'Define real'—what in God's name was I to do? To that point the need to define reality had never occurred to me in my life: wasn't it just *what happened*, surely it was just more of the appalling

22 1098-1179. Tedious medieval mystic writer, composer, etc. Surprised he knows about her. German. Ignore.

disaster that opens up in front of us each morning? I didn't come to the notion of constructed reality till much later on, as I listened in on one of those departmental tearoom conversations that, occasionally, unexpectedly, very rarely, reminded me that there really was a World Elsewhere,²³ some kind of intellectual Amber Room whose whereabouts were known only to a very few who were In On It and had been told how to reassemble the thing and enter it and experience its spell once again. (I think I read about the Amber Room in an in-flight magazine, too.)²⁴

I've no idea how I got out of that problem with Sophonisba, the *define real* thing, I mean, if in fact I did: but whatever I might have said I'd have been obliged to say it politely, since (as she repeatedly reminded us all) *she was the niece of Gotcha Gotch*, meaning (quite apart from anything else) that she belonged by right to the rarefied, privileged world of academic life, was in fact born to it by dint of her parentage privilege education class and sheer good luck. Hence (quite apart from anything else) her ridiculous stuck-up given name, as against all those Raelenes Raewyns Vickis Marshas Sharons and Sandras at Anthrax High, the grim suburban secondary I'd attended. Sophonisba, on the other hand, moved in the propertied north-west, in a world of Margarets, Helens, Elizabeths and even a Daintry (which, she would insistently explain, as if we lacked all learning, was a version of Daventry).

These women I once watched from deep fine leg during a staff-student cricket match—itsself organized in desperate emulation of imagined, yearned-for Oxbridge summers—

23 Does he know that he's quoting here?—and who he's quoting, of all people, if he does?

24 The Amber Room was a construction of panels in amber and gold leaf gifted to Tsar Peter the Great in 1716 by the king of Prussia and stolen by Nazis during Operation Barbarossa early in the Second World War. German. Ignore.

watched them determinedly *gambolling*²⁵ across the distant grass beyond the boundary, daisy chains in their hair, themselves a long, horrid human daisy chain linked arm-in-arm: large, mutton-fed private-school virgins locked together at the elbows and *gambolling* up and down, heavily, as if in slow motion, up, down, up again and down again, many of them (I saw) equipped with much the same bulky undercarriage as Sophonisba herself: who was in the middle of this line, loudly urging the others on in (I think it was) *Latin*, as they receded heavily but joyously into the distance of their privilege. All of them strenuously *having the time of their lives*, even as they watched themselves *having the time of their lives*.

I still don't really know, now, a full year after the end of my unlikely career as an actual academic, what happened to begin it. I was completely lost, as I say, when I first followed Manatine through those clocktower arches and found myself amongst the children of the rich. Why did they speak like that? How did they seem to know already where everything was? Why did they laugh so knowingly at the lecturers' little in-jokes? How was it that they referred to the academic staff by their first names, *Alun* and *Eugene* and *Marigold* and so on, as if they knew them socially? And why was it that they *did* know them socially, and were invited to their homes as equals?

And Manatine? I couldn't even remember a first name. That year he and I were the only two to make it to university from Anthrax High: I slipstreamed him in. He always frightened me slightly, which I found *not unattractive*, as academics would undoubtedly phrase it: he seemed to know things the rest of

25 'Skipping or leaping about in play; frolicking.' In the instance referred to here, the women (and young men of a certain sort) appear to be gambolling in unison, arms linked, away from the game of cricket, in which, unforgivably, they clearly had no particular interest.

us didn't know. Where to get Mary Jane, as people called it then in a winking, knowing manner, and which he smoked in surprising places: how to roll a cigarette with the fingers of one hand, which his father had taught him to do, he said, after watching Gary Cooper do it in a movie.²⁶ How to get good grades, that was another thing he knew, which also surprised me, given his background, his presentation, his lifestyle—all helpful in the pursuit of women, of course, who queued and very nearly fought one another with knives for the authentically countercultural moment of existential confirmation he seemed to promise them in the sack.

You might say he smoked *them*, too, in surprising places: women, I mean. In that storeroom directly beneath the main lecture theatre, for example, where, after late classes, the two of us would start our evening of janitorial work in overalls. Following his first success down there he showed a small group of us the blanket on which the unimaginable, the *sublime* event had occurred during Alun Pismire's lecture on the Retreat from Reason in the late Eighteenth Century. We stared down at it dumbstruck, as at the Shroud of Turin. 'What did she say when you were at it?' I asked him later. 'She wanted to know when I'd be done,' he replied.

But in the longer run it turned out I had something they didn't have, a single asset rare in all those many who were brighter than me and, as a consequence, wedged so hard up themselves they could be rolled downhill with a push. *I was full of shit and knew it*. Oh, yes, there were others who were full of it, stuffed

26 There is some scepticism about this stunt, and Cooper himself denied being able to do it. He claimed that cowboys actually used a thigh to complete the one-handed process. This raises some doubts about the status of what Manatine is described as doing here. Who is doing the bluff-work here: the character, the characters, the author, the 'author,' or the lot?

with it, but who had no idea that they were—nearly all of them, I'm sure now, nearly all. But not quite: there were always those students—one or two a year, or, sometimes just one and quite frequently there was a year or a run of years whose intakes to university life had none at all of these marvels—students who were genuinely what they seemed to be, intelligent, able, brilliant, born not necessarily in a state of perfection, but already in the final stages of perfecting themselves. A demographic, one not even Higher Education could destroy.

But—to be *full of shit and know it*, and to have no pretensions to anything else, and—more—to rejoice in it and see it as a gift in itself; and to be able to see, through it, the bullshit at work behind the general *seeming* of everyday life: that was the real gift as far as I was concerned. Especially, it was the key to the university as I began to understand it, in those early days as a student. And, soon, the key to more than that. To all the world as well, as I came to see it and know it to be. The key to Bluffworld.

Susanna Gendall

from *The Disinvent Movement*

Manuscript, forthcoming 2021

This is about freedom, he said when we got back from the market.

I was drinking black coffee and reading the dictionary, a habit of his and an experiment of mine.

Abeyance it said. *Let's hold that problem in abeyance for a while.*

I nodded vaguely in the style of someone busy with the Internet, even if it was a large, heavy, physical book with 1,229 pages and the cover torn off. It was so huge and physical that it was making me feel sweaty and light-headed, although this may have been less the book and more the coffee. How could so many words exist? Why choose one over another? Faced with this vast ecosystem that lived, apparently, in my own head, words great and small crawling around, dozing, incubating, I had to take another sip of coffee.

He asked me what I thought, and when I didn't reply, he asked me what I was thinking. I told him that I was thinking about my grandfather. This was not altogether a lie. Alzheimer's had killed off a large part of his ecosystem. Every now and then he'd come out with a rare species. Last time I'd seen him in the rest home he'd leant forward in his soft beige armchair of which many replicas has been arranged in social configurations around the room and said, Isn't this the wilderness? He seemed a bit emotional as if he knew it would be the last time he would use that word. I wondered if pathological forgetfulness was what had happened to the earth. He wanted to know what my grandfather had to do

with the problem of our relationship.

I glanced down at the dictionary, letting my eyes fall on whichever word would help me. There was something soothing about *and*. It was a word you could rely on. I liked it immensely.

*

On my birthday, I was taken to a hotel that had once been a prison. It had been renovated in such a way so as to preserve its particularities, with passionfruit flowers and other creepers entwined around the bars over the windows. An absence of television, telephones, fridges and kettles. The double bed that lay stripped in the middle of the room looked more like a single. Instead of a bathroom, there was a velvet curtain, hung somewhere between poverty and decadence. It resembled less a hotel and more an example of how a prison reform might look, with a view of the sea and tinted bottles of shampoo, conditioner and body wash, the notepad on the desk that said, *I woke up feeling inspired*.

It was the doors to the rooms that had absorbed most of history. The numbers stamped on them had the bare font of prisoners about them. Like bodies, they were heavy and took two people to open.

He was eager to get out and explore the landscape. I preferred the hallways which veered in unpredictable directions, leading to rooms and alcoves unwilling to be identified. We spent some time in one, trying to give it a name. There was a wooden ladder that reminded me of our relationship. It was attached to concrete wall and led up to the ceiling. The room would not be defeated by us and in the end we left it unbaptised. We went back to our room for a meal. I thought they would have room service, that it would be part of the hotel's philosophy, but I

was informed that this also belonged to the modern world that they were trying to protect their guests from.

There wasn't much else to do but go out.

*

There were also the black carbon particles that had turned up in the hearts of school children. There was the urban heat island. There were tyres and their tendency to release particles of themselves. There was ubiquitousness and David Attenborough. There were placentas which, it turned out, could be crossed.

There were so many things we'd heard before.

There were also so many other things to do.

There was the pasta to cook (water as salty as the sea) and a salad to make.

Can't you clean up every now and then? he said. It was old trick we played on each other, an emergency exit, a quick fix. An argument was such a good way to prove you cared.

It was a mysterious thing to say to someone who had just spent the morning trying to make the house look like other houses I'd been inadvertently invited into. Maybe he was referring to the spider webs. The one in the kitchen was particularly spectacular, erected in the corner between the oven and the fridge so you had to duck every time you wanted a drink. It had been pulled down several times but its maker was always efficient in reconstructing it. The location was close to its heart.

It was only later that I realised I had failed to participate in the argument.

There was, I thought, still a chance that I had misread his comment, that he was not flirting with me, but merely asking me a rhetorical question. It could even have been a throwaway remark. People threw away so much these days.

Danyl McLauchlan

The Hunger and the Rain

from *Tranquillity and Ruin: Essays*

Work in progress, forthcoming tbc

I have to change buses at the mall. The bus to the monastery doesn't leave for another thirty minutes and although it's a sunny day it's windy and cold at the bus stop, so I wait inside the Westfield Queensgate shopping centre. Which is fine. I actually like malls. It's fashionable to hate them, and denounce them as symbols of civilisational decline, so I defend them on contrarian grounds. But I also just like them simply and unironically. I like the steady, unnatural light; the seasonless warmth. I find it relaxing to walk between the shops and happy shoppers, drifting about while waves of white noise from the air conditioning and background music wash over me. The escalators crowded with kids and teenagers remind me of Larkin's vision of modernity as an uncomplicated utopia, with 'Everyone young going down the long slide / To happiness, endlessly.' And I like the smoothie stands.

But today I am tired. I haven't been sleeping well: it's been a busy and stressful few months. The interior of the mall is bright, the music is too loud. The crowds of happy shoppers manifest as dark and ominous shapes, spectral, shimmering like migraine auras. I need to eat, so I go to the food court on the mezzanine and order a Happy Meal, but while I'm waiting for it I lean on the balcony and sink into a fantasy about the mall of the post-apocalyptic future. The ground floor below me is flooded. The skylights in the roof have caved in. The heat is unbearable, and the air is thick with poisonous insects. The escalator has collapsed. It lies on its side, half-submerged,

covered in vines. The water is discoloured with algal blooms and coated with a shimmering chemical film. The shops are inhabited by monstrous crocodiles: they slumber in the drowned aisles of the supermarket and breed in the warm darkness of the derelict lingerie store.

I feel better once I've eaten, better still when I'm out of the mall and back on the bus, and I'm almost cheerful by the time I arrive at the monastery. Bodhinyanarama ('The Garden of Enlightened Knowing') is situated on the edge of Stokes Valley, a low-to-middle income commuter suburb in the Hutt Valley. It's only a minute's walk from the bus stop, but once you pass through the gate it feels very remote.

I walk up the driveway to the main building. This is a modern, two-storey steel, concrete, wood and glass structure. I knock on the door, which is open, and offer a few 'Hellos?' into the silence, incrementally increasing the volume until I'm as loud as I think I can get, but there's no one around. Eventually I notice a card with my name lying on it on the kitchen counter. It welcomes me to Bodhinyanarama and reads 'Turn this card around for a map of the monastery. Turn your attention around to discover your mind.'

I turn the card. The map shows me the way to my kuti, a Thai word meaning meditation hut. It leads me through the courtyard, past the cloister and meditation hall, then along a narrow trail through the bush, which zigzags up the slopes of a large hill. It takes about ten minutes to reach my hut, which is tiny: wood walls, a corrugated iron roof. It's well made, like everything here. The interior has white plaster walls, a blue rug, a small bookshelf filled with Buddhist literature. The furniture consists of a single bed and a wooden chair. On a wooden shelf sit a variety of Buddha statues in the South East Asian tradition: Buddhas who are young, slender, rather androgynous, and a

framed black-and-white photograph of Ajahn Chah, the Thai monk who established the modern Thai Forest Tradition monastic movement. A glass and aluminium ranch slider leads out onto a wooden deck, and this looks back down the valley I've just walked up. The ridgelines of the lower hills overlap each other in a series of intersecting V-shapes, recursing away into the afternoon sun haze. The roofs of some of the other meditation huts are visible just above the treeline further down the valley. The birdsong is very loud but if I concentrate I can still hear the faint sound of traffic.

I've stayed here before, about six months ago. I stayed in this same hut. But when I told a friend I was coming back here she made fun of me. 'Why do you keep annoying the Buddhists? Why don't you go have your mid-life crisis in a Catholic Monastery?'

'Because I'm not a Catholic.'

'You're not a Buddhist, either Danyl. You've just read a few books about it.'

I thought about taking her advice. I even looked at a few websites of Catholic monasteries, and they looked nice enough. But nothing ever came of it, and as I move the chair out onto the deck and sit down on it to meditate I'm glad I ignored my friend, because this place is just what I need.

I meditate for most of the afternoon. But I get cold and a little lonely at about 5pm, so I walk back down the hill to the kitchen. There's a woman there. She's small, extremely thin, in late middle-age with short, dark hair. I will call her S. She's one of the lay residents: a small group of people who live at the monastery and help run it, but who haven't been ordained as monks or nuns. She sits me down in the glass-fronted hall running along the side of the main building and asks me if I've stayed here before.

‘Yes,’ I reply. ‘Earlier this year. I think you were away travelling.’

‘So you know the rules of the monastery?’

‘Yes.’

‘The precepts.’

‘Yes.’

‘And the schedule?’

‘Yes, yes.’

‘And you know about the festival on Sunday? Kathina?’

‘The what?’

There are five ordained monks living at Bodhinyanarama at the time of my visit, and no nuns. The monks live in huts on the opposite side of the valley from mine. They spend most of their days meditating and studying. They’re bound by a code of discipline which regulates almost every aspect of their lives, and includes not handling money, not driving, not preparing meals, and only eating food that has been offered to them. There are 227 rules for monks (311 for nuns, many of them forbidding the nuns from being depraved, consorting with lustful men, sympathising with women thieves, or walking through long grass while not wearing any underwear). The lay residents perform much of the day-to-day running of the place, the tasks the monks are forbidden to do, in exchange for residence and spiritual guidance.

For the last three lunar months, S explains, the monastery has observed Vassa, a state of retreat corresponding to the rainy season in South and South East Asia. This year it’s run from June to October, and the residents of the monastery have spent that time fasting and meditating. Now Vassa is over and they mark this in four days’ time with Kathina, a celebration with ceremonies and a large feast.

‘Have you come to Bodhinyanarama for solitude and

meditation?’

‘That was my plan.’

She nods. ‘There will be hundreds of people here for Kathina,’ she explains. ‘People from Thailand. Sri Lanka. Cambodia. Laos. Vietnam. It will still be somewhat quiet in your kuti,’ she concedes, before adding, ‘but there is a huge amount of work to do to prepare for the festival. And you will have to help.’

‘I’d also hoped to speak to the Abbot, Ajahn Kusalo.’

‘Ajahn is very busy. [Ajahn is an honorific, a little like calling someone “sensei”; it denotes monks who have passed at least ten vassa in a monk’s robes.] He is arranging the festival. Ceremonies at other temples. Meeting with ambassadors. The best time to speak to Ajahn is—’ She pauses to think about this for a moment, then concludes, ‘The best time to speak to Ajahn is April.’

‘April? As in . . . the month of April? Six months from now?’

‘Other times he is on self-retreat. Or travelling. April is best.’

*

Bodhinyanarama was founded in 1985, but if you stand in the central courtyard in just the right spot you can entertain the illusion that it’s been there for a thousand years.

The courtyard is gravel and stone. Near the centre, mounted on a plinth, is an engraved brass bell which is rung to signal meal times and other gatherings. At the far end stands a tall brass statue of the Buddha depicted in the Thai tradition: slender, young, draped in a robe, standing atop a lotus flower. A wall of trees runs opposite the main building. Some of them are *kōwhai*, and they’re in bloom, and the yellow blossoms lie scattered around the bases of the statue and the bell, unnaturally bright against the gravel and stones.

Behind the statue is the cloister. This is a wooden square designed for walking meditation. Circular pillars hold up a wooden roof, which runs around the sides. The large square space in the centre is normally open to the sky. Today it's covered by a large canvas tent: preparations for the festival. Beyond the cloister lies the meditation hall: a large temple with wood panelled walls and a high white portico with a stylised wheel in the centre.

S returns to her hut, and there's no one else around, so I spend the late afternoon in the library. This is a separate, modestly sized building not far from the courtyard. The books are, unsurprisingly, mostly about Buddhism, although there's a handful of works on literature, philosophy, new age mysticism: Martin Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics* is here, along with books by people like Krishnamurti and Eckhart Tolle. Roughly half of the books are in English; the rest are in Thai, Sinhalese, Pali. There's an old-fashioned card catalogue. Peacock statues on the desk, a reclining Buddha on one shelf. The main window looks out onto a sheer wall of native bush. There's a photo of the Dalai Lama on the back of the door.

There's no one here, which surprises me. The library is the only place in the monastery that is heated—they keep it warm to prevent the books from getting damp—and the first time I stayed here many of the other guests naturally gravitated here in the early evening. This became rather a lively social event, until the Abbott found out about it and called us all before him. By staying in his monastery, he reminded us, we'd agreed to abide by the eight precepts, the fourth of which was to refrain from incorrect speech, and this included gossip and idle chatter, which was what most of those late-afternoon conversations in the library consisted of. After that we still went back there in the evenings because we were cold, but we

read in companionable silence.

Tonight I have the library to myself. But I miss the gossip and companionable silence so I return to my kuti. It's about five thirty. The sun won't set for hours, but in the bush it's already gloomy, twilit. The trail is narrow, running between dead ferns, rotting punga trunks, vines twisting to waist height. A stream runs down the valley fed by innumerable tributaries. The monks use the sound of the water as a meditation object.

*

Here are the precepts you agree to live by when you stay at the monastery:

To refrain from destroying living creatures (harmlessness: not intentionally taking the life of any living creature).

To refrain from taking that which is not given (trustworthiness).

To refrain from any kind of intentional sexual behaviour (celibacy).

To refrain from incorrect speech (avoiding false, abusive or malicious speech and idle chatter).

To refrain from intoxicating drink and drugs which lead to carelessness (sobriety).

To refrain from eating at wrong times (restraint: not eating after midday).

To refrain from beautification, entertainment, and adornment (restraint: not seeking distraction, not playing radios and music, and dressing modestly).

To refrain from lying on a high or luxurious sleeping place (alertness: refraining from overindulgence in sleep).

The first five of these are the day-to-day values you're supposed to observe if you're a lay Buddhist, i.e. not a monk, with

the proviso that lay Buddhists don't have to be celibate: they're just supposed to avoid 'sexual misconduct'. But actual celibacy along with precepts six to eight are the rules at a monastery. So gossiping in the library put me in breach of precept four. Killing a mosquito that bit me when I was meditating might have put me in breach of precept one, although the question of whether killing mosquitos is bad karma is a subject of endless debate among philosophically inclined Buddhists.

But the precept I worried before my first visit was number six: eating at the wrong times, because at Bodhinyanarama the wrong time is almost all the time. You're allowed a light breakfast at 6:30am and a main meal at 10:30am, and nothing after that until breakfast the next day. This is very different from my diet at home which involves breakfast, a mid-morning snack, and then lunch followed by a series of rolling snacks during the mid and late afternoon, culminating in a large dinner supplemented by some post-dinner snacks or dessert.

This is a terrible diet and I'm very overweight, and I've spent years attempting to change what I eat and when I eat it, and all of those attempts have failed. So staying at a place in which I only eat one meal in the mid-morning was likely to be a miserable ordeal in which I constantly felt hungry and thought about nothing but food. But what I found during my first visit was that I was never really hungry here at all.

Sometimes, when I'm upset about my weight—which is most of the time—I print out papers on the psychology and biochemistry of diet and compulsive eating. I read them over lunch (yes, I see the irony) and the science is fairly bleak. Being a person prone to obesity is about 70% genetic. There's no single gene responsible: about 150 genes, transcription factors and other gene products regulate appetite, weight and body-shape, controlling everything from hunger to digestion to stomach

receptors to regulation and activation of the hedonic pathways in the brain: the neural circuits that reward us with feelings of pleasure whenever we do anything pleasurable.

There's a classic study in the obesity and food addiction literature. You take a selection of obese and non-obese people, stick their heads in an MRI scanner, then give them a chocolate milkshake. Obese people show greater activation of the reward circuitry prior to drinking the milkshake, when we're looking forward to it, and much lower activation when we actually drink it. We anticipate and crave food more but enjoy it less. And that incentivises us to eat larger quantities of food, ideally food packed with sugar, fat and salt, because that's what gets us closest to the feelings of pleasure that non-obese people get from eating normally.

Humans aren't supposed to be overweight. We evolved to be hunter-gatherers in the mid-point of the food chain. So our bodies have multiple oversight and feedback systems designed to keep us at healthy body weights. Even if you're genetically inclined to crave food more we still have biochemical and neurological regulators upstream from those cravings, signalling for us to exercise more or eat less if our body-fat goes above a certain window. But modern food products—milkshakes, Happy Meals—have been brilliantly designed to circumvent those controls. The act of chewing sends the brain signals of satiety: If we've chewed and salivated a lot then the brain assumes we've had enough to eat, and it makes us stop eating. So most of the junk food I consume is 'prechewed and pre-salivated' to use the wonderfully disgusting terminology of the nutritional literature, by which they mean it's been processed and has a high water content, designed to be tasted and swallowed without chewing, so I can just go on eating more and more of it.

Why don't I get hungry at the monastery? I'm still not sure, but I know the answer isn't willpower. As far as the cognitive neuroscientists can tell, willpower is not a thing that exists. The reward pathways in our brain tell us what to do because it feels pleasurable and we do it. I don't like drinking alcohol, while some people can't stop drinking it, and this has nothing to do with willpower or choice and everything to do with different receptors in our brains responding to different stimuli and rewards. Something about life at the monastery changes the incentive structure of my reward system.

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The air in the meditation hall is scented and cool. The light is dim. The floor is polished wood. At the back of the room is the shrine: a large statue of a meditating Buddha sits surrounded by fresh flowers, candles, incense. The resident monks sit on a raised platform directly in front of the shrine. Five of them wear dark brown robes; two of them wear white. The monks in white are much younger than the others. Facing the monks and the statue, sitting cross-legged on meditation cushions, are the two lay residents, four resident guests and two casual visitors who've come for the evening puja: the chanting and meditation ceremony. Puja is a very old Hindu word meaning an act of worship. At the monastery this involves two hours of chanting and meditation every night, beginning at 7pm, and another hour and a half every morning at 5:15am. Attendance at both is mandatory.

It's very, very quiet in here. You can hear the birds and the stream, and you can hear my footsteps as I hurry in, a little late because I've walked down the trail by torchlight and it took me longer than I expected. I take a seat on the floor and pick up a

book of chants, and remember that the Abbott hates lateness, instructing his guests, ‘In my monastery five minutes early is right on time.’

The Abbott Ajahn Kusalo sits in the middle of the monks, directly beneath the Buddha statue. He’s in his late sixties but looks about ten years younger. He is bald and clean-shaven. His manner is one of quick, amused intelligence, self-confidence and also a faint air of menace. If you bumped into him in a bar you’d apologise very quickly.

He announces the chants and suttas we’ll sing tonight and then we begin. We chant in Pali, the sacred and liturgical language of Theravada Buddhism, widely spoken in the Indian subcontinent from the 5th to the 1st century BCE. It’s probably close to the language the actual Buddha spoke, and it’s what the first Buddhist scriptures were written in, and I find it very hard to read aloud and sing along to. It has long compound words and non-European inflections on almost every syllable. Here is the opening of the *Dhammapada*, the best known Buddhist scripture:

Manopubbaṅgamā dhammā, manoseṭṭhā manomayā;
Manasā ce paduṭṭhena, bhāsati vā karoti vā,
Tato naṃ dukkhaṃ anveti, cakkaraṃ’va vahato padaṃ

The monks sing loudly, the lay residents less loudly, the other guests are quieter and less confident, the visitors mumble along, and I keep mispronouncing things and losing my place and produce almost no sound at all. At the end of each chant we bow towards the shrine, and at the end of it all we bow towards the monks while the monks bow towards the Abbott.

The first time I stayed here, I had a problem with the chanting and bowing. I’d made peace with the idea of Buddhism as a

philosophical tradition, an empirical study of psychology and meditation, but when you're singing in a dead language and bowing to a shrine, you're no longer in philosophical territory. You're obviously worshipping. When my wife picked me up at the end of my first stay and asked me how it was, I replied, 'It was interesting,' and added in a disapproving tone, 'but a lot of it was very religious.' And she explained, in a slightly pained voice, 'It's a monastery.'

After the chanting we meditate for an hour and a half, then a bell rings and the ceremony ends. You're supposed to maintain Noble Silence between the evening and morning puja, which means that I'm not supposed to talk to anyone until 6:30am tomorrow morning. But the Abbott speaks to us for a few minutes after the session, and when he's finished the other monks whisper to each other, so I feel like I have a brief window to speak with the Abbott.

I try to stand and find that my feet have lost all sensation: I've been sitting on them for almost two hours. I have no muscle control below my knees. I wobble across the room, throwing my arms out for balance, attempting to intercept the Abbott as he heads towards the monk's exit at the back of the hall. He pauses to watch my progress, an expression of polite amusement on his face, until I stand before him.

'I don't know if you remember me?' I say. 'I stayed here about six months ago. We talked about meditation and mood disorders and monastic life?'

'Oh?'

'And I remember being very interested in your ideas.' but I didn't note any of them down and I don't quite remember anything you said.'

'Oh.'

'So I know this is a busy weekend and a bad time, but I'm

here until Sunday, and if you could find just a few minutes to talk to me? And I'll take notes this time?' I wait. The other monks have left the hall. He looks me up and down and says, 'Yeah, I remember you.'

*

I sleep badly. The bed in the kuti is hard (precept 8: 'refrain from sleeping on a high or luxurious place') and I leave the curtain over the ranch slider open because I have a romantic notion of being woken by the sunrise. But the streetlights from the suburb stain the low clouds a luminous chemical orange. The light keeps me awake but I'm too tired to get up and close the curtain, and I finally fall asleep around midnight. At 2am the rain starts. It's very loud on the metal roof and maddeningly random and arrhythmic, as if it's deliberately beating out of time just to keep me awake. So I read by torchlight until 5am then walk very carefully down the trail, which is already turning into a stream.

I like the morning puja. It's the same as the evening one, only with the sequence reversed: first meditation, then chanting. But there's a sense of ritual and community I get from walking through the dawn to the candle-lit hall, then sitting in silence and meditating for a great deal longer than I have the time or patience for in day-to-day life. I even sort of like the chanting.

After the puja we do chores. It's about twenty-two hours since my Happy Meal, and under ordinary circumstances I would now be hungry and angry. But I'm fine. S tells me to sweep the polished concrete floor of the glass-fronted hallway in the main building, and while I do this a group of monks sweep the courtyard. The sun is rising, lighting up the grey stones, and then the wind picks up and sends down a storm of

kōwhai blossoms, spinning them around the monks in their brown and white robes, who stand inside the vortex of yellow petals, regarding them with bemused calm.

We eat a light breakfast—muesli—and while I'm washing the dishes I talk to B, one of the trainee monks. He's Australian, in his late twenties. Shaved head and clean-shaven. I wash and he dries, because the kitchen is large and I don't know where anything goes.

'So what's your official title here? Are you a novice? Can I call you that?'

'My official title is Anagārika. It means like, homeless meditator. That's my status for a year, and then they can ordain me as a monk.'

'What did you do before you came here?'

'I've mostly just lived in Buddhist monasteries,' he replies. 'But right before I came here I spent a month living on the street in Sydney. You know, living without possessions and meditating. So I was literally a homeless meditator. I wanted to have that experience and bring it into my calling as a monk.'

This is less odd than it sounds: Buddhism has a very long tradition of monks living as mendicants, or beggars. It's how the Buddha himself started out.

'The first monk I ever met was mendicant,' B explains. 'He was a lawyer and he renounced all his wealth and walked from Sydney to the Northern tip of Queensland, begging and teaching the dharma.'

'Was it scary being homeless in Sydney?'

'Yeah. I mean, I was lucky, nothing bad happened. But it was scary. And very humbling. I got advice from another Buddhist I knew who was homeless and who meditated on the street. I was going to sleep in the park, because I thought I needed privacy to sleep. But he told me that the park was too

dangerous, and that the safest place to sleep is the footpath of a busy street where there are lots of people around. And he showed me where I could get free showers, and a restaurant that fed the homeless. I ended up volunteering there.'

'Was it hard to sleep on the street like that?'

'It was. I'd meditated for years, and I thought that I'd triumphed over my pride and my sense of self and all that stuff. And sleeping on the street taught me that I still had so much pride in me.'

'Are there lots of people in Sydney who are homeless for spiritual reasons?'

'Not really. If you're homeless it's generally because you're crazy or you have drug and alcohol problems.' He smiled. 'There's no group of enlightened beings living on the streets. It's a romantic idea though.'

'Maybe there are,' I reply. 'Maybe they're the secret rulers of the world.'

B shakes his head. 'It's hard to meditate in the city,' he says. 'I tried, and I ended up walking around talking to myself, reciting poetry. The Buddha tells us that it's better to sleep in the forest than meditate in the city.'

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The monastery is surrounded by a network of trails through the bush. Some of these lead to the kutis or the stupa. This is a large, white burial mound, prominent in the Buddhist architectural tradition; at Bodhinyanarama it is on the promontory of one of the hills. But most of the trails are just walking trails, and they're used by people to jog along or walk their dogs.

The period between the end of breakfast and the main meal at 11am is the work period. On my first visit here, I spent the

chore period on my first day doing trail duty. This was rather pleasant. You take some clippers and machetes and spades and head up into the bush, and you can pair up with someone and chat with them, or just take a section on your own and cut back branches and clear culverts of mud and leaves.

On the second morning, though, one of the lay residents stopped me before I reached the trail, telling me, ‘You work with Ajahn Kusalo this morning.’ I felt rather privileged to be singled out to spend the morning with the head of the monastery and I didn’t register the expressions of sympathy on the faces of the other visitors, who had all been there much longer than I had, and who hurried on up the path away from me.

The lay resident led me to a collection of kutis near the main courtyard. These were two-storey buildings, one separate room atop another. Ajahn Kusalo waited for me in the gutted bottom level of one of them, dressed in his brown robe and a pair of black gumboots, holding a large shovel. He stood between a large steel wheelbarrow and a huge mound of fresh earth.

‘I’ve stripped out these walls,’ he explained, ‘because the building is damp and it needs to be properly insulated, ventilated and clad. Do you know how to do any of that?’

‘Not remotely.’

‘What are you like at mixing concrete?’

‘I’ve never done it before. Maybe I’m really good at it.’

‘Right.’ He handed me the shovel. ‘We’ve had a bit of subsidence overnight.’ He pointed at the waist-high mound of sodden clay, which had slipped down from the bank behind the kuti. ‘This all needs to be shovelled into the barrow and hauled away. And while we work we can talk.’

To my eyes, shifting the clay looked like a good day’s work, maybe two, and I took the shovel and set to work, slowly but

steadily. To the Abbott, however, shifting the clay was merely one of many tasks to be completed that morning and it had to be done as soon as possible so that we could move on to the other tasks, which were even more difficult.

So we shovelled clay, and talked, and then we mixed concrete, and after that we chipped wooden tiles off a concrete base and talked. Because I am a fat, unfit, unskilled man and I found the work so exhausting, I remember little of what was said. We talked about meditation, of course, and Buddhism and the nature of reality and the nature of mind. And at first I thought it was charming to discuss philosophy with a real Buddhist monk while shovelling mounds of dirt. But then I formed blisters on my hands, and by the time they popped and started bleeding we were only about ninety minutes into the two-and-a-half hour chore period, and I wasn't sure I could go on.

I showed my lacerated hands to the Abbott. Compassion was a core tenet of Buddhism and he'd vowed to follow a strict code of monastic discipline, so I figured he was obligated to let me off work for the rest of the morning. But he barely glanced at my wounds. Instead he said, 'Just wipe the blood on the grass. Your hands'll scab up pretty fast.'

But one moment from our conversation that morning stuck in my mind. I made a sharp comment about the chanting during the puja and the merits of reason versus superstition, and the Abbott, damping down a dirt floor where he intended to pour down concrete, replied, 'Singing brings people together. That's not the only reason we do it but it's one of them. You can tell yourself that it's irrational while you're living your life in a way that's very rational and scientific,' he fluttered his hand dismissively, 'if you like. And maybe you are and maybe you aren't. But if you want to build a community, then the values

and practices of that community have to be meaningful to a broader group of people than sceptical intellectuals.’

It’s a comment that came back to me a few months later. I was at work going through my emails and one of my google alerts for neuroscience and depression served me up a paper on the mental health effects of group singing. The study showed that singing along with a large group of people releases endorphins and oxytocin: neurotransmitters which make you more relaxed and less stressed and boost feelings of social inclusion and cohesion. The timing of the music literally synchronises the heartbeats of the singers.

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The New Atheist movement rose to prominence in the early 2000s. This was a sort of all-star team of ultra-sceptical intellectuals—Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens—who regarded religion as the main problem with the world. Mystical beliefs and non-rational thinking were the reasons bad things happened. This was after September 11 and the US and UK-led invasion of Iraq, catastrophes that the New Atheists claimed were religiously motivated. At the same time there was this ferocious cultural debate about evolution. Was the theory of evolution science, or just a theory? Should it be taught in schools? Should intelligent design be taught alongside it? I was in my late twenties, studying undergraduate biology, when this great cultural war broke out, and I strongly identified with the biology-science-atheism-reason side of this conflict, so I read a lot of books by New Atheist authors and spent a lot of time arguing with fundamentalist Christians about evolutionary theory on the internet.

In retrospect most of this was a waste of time, but I learned

a lot from Richard Dawkins' science writing. Dawkins was—and still is—the most evangelical of the New Atheists. He's a rather disreputable figure nowadays. This is mostly his own fault. He's intolerant, strident, given to conspiratorial twitter rants denouncing Muslims and feminists. Shortly after my first visit to the monastery I reread his first book, *The Selfish Gene*, and a few people who saw me reading it on campus asked—with some distaste—why I was reading Dawkins. Isn't he problematic? Hasn't he been cancelled?

Which is a shame, because *The Selfish Gene* is one of the great popular science books. Going back to it nearly twenty years later I was surprised by how well it holds together. It's a book about genetics published in 1976, long before the human genome was sequenced, and it's outdated in parts, of course, but most of it stands up. And it's more than a science book. It's a philosophical book, a book about the problem of evil; the problem that Dawkins thinks is caused by religious belief, but which his own book suggests has little or nothing to do with this at all. It's a book that tells us more about life and rationality than the author thinks it does.

This shouldn't surprise us. Dawkins was a young Zoology lecturer when he wrote *The Selfish Gene*. It was his first book and it's a masterpiece of the genre it helped invent: the popular science bestseller that unites a range of discoveries and ideas, and packages them all into a coherent narrative. The gene-centric view of evolution is now inseparable from Dawkins, but the book is a synthesis of ideas from other mid-20th century biologists: George Williams, Bill Hamilton, John Maynard Smith, Robert Trivers, George Price. Dawkins brings them all together, along with findings from hundreds of papers and studies. The result is a synthesis now known as 'selfish gene theory'.

The title was a mistake. Even Dawkins admits this now. His publisher preferred ‘The Immortal Gene’, because genes aren’t selfish in the sense that humans—or other animals—can be selfish. They have no desires; they’re just sequences of chemical information. More importantly—and this is one of the major themes of Dawkins’ book—genes cooperate, because cooperation is rational. They’ll behave altruistically if it is in their interest to do so, which it often is.

But they are immortal, and that points towards one of the most challenging ideas in the book. Some critics thought that by talking about ‘selfish genes’ Dawkins was making assertions about human nature, that he’d claimed humans are innately selfish and individualistic. And of course that isn’t true. We see evidence of altruism and cooperation everywhere in human life. What the book is *actually* saying is far more disturbing. Instead of speaking to human nature, *The Selfish Gene* argues that humans are peripheral and unimportant. We are fleeting. The primary actors on earth are the genes that build us. We are their temporary hosts. They use us to replicate themselves across space and transport themselves through time. ‘We are survival machines,’ Dawkins wrote, ‘robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes.’

Prior to Dawkins, most biologists thought of DNA as a tool that humans and other organisms use to propagate our species. They’re a means to an end, like our eyes or our lungs. Our eyes see, our lungs breathe, our DNA codes for the proteins that do all of this. But we don’t use the genes, Dawkins argues: they use us. They build us then use our bodies to accumulate energy and resources in order to make new copies of themselves. Eventually we die and they survive. This explains an awful lot about the natural world. Why are some organisms multicellular? Why are some insects social? Why do parents care for their children?

Why do members of flocks and herds and hives and societies help each other? Why do we suffer? Because the genes are not individualistic. They exist in multiple copies across multiple organisms, and they maximise their overall replication, not the happiness or the survival of the organisms they happen to inhabit. We're designed and built by processes that are indifferent to our suffering and consider us disposable.

The genes began as replicators: simple chemical arrangements that could make copies of themselves. They came into existence about four billion years ago. No one knows how they first self-assembled, or where (mineral-rich volcanic vents on the ocean bed are strong contenders). The replicators don't *want* to copy themselves and they're not selfish, or unselfish, or sentient in any conceivable way. It just works out that the laws of chemistry allow for certain sequences of atoms—mostly carbon, hydrogen and nitrogen—to arrange themselves in certain configurations, which copy themselves if they have access to energy and raw materials, both of which were abundant in the warm, chemical-rich environment of the oceans of the early earth.

And everything flows from that. Over time the replicators form different arrangements, not intentionally, just randomly, and eventually one of them assembles into a pattern that also allows it to build additional structures that help it obtain more resources, or protect itself, which allows it to build yet more copies. And over time they build cell walls, flagella to move around, enzymes to make the copying process more efficient. And, again, none of this is intentional. Everything is an accident. Random configurations of atoms come together. Most of them do nothing, drift apart, but when you're dealing with planetary-sized oceans and geological time scales, highly unlikely accidents happen relatively frequently. The

complexity of the replicators aggregates. They band together. Form colonies. Specialise. At some point we can talk about organisms. Bacteria. Plants. Animals. All of these are molecular robots built by the replicators to facilitate the self-copying process. Some of them assemble in ways that allow them to capture energy from sunlight, and they use that energy to copy themselves, and others consume those organisms, and some of them consume the consumers.

The copying process always generates errors in the chemical sequences, and this is how evolution happens. Most of the errors mean that the organism—the host, the robot—fails to survive, but this is of total indifference to the genes. Every now and then a copying error leads to an improvement. This is also a matter of indifference, everything is, but the improvements proliferate, outcompeting inferior configurations.

In one of his later books, Dawkins shows how the evolutionary process explores genetic space. This is a hypothetical universe—what mathematicians call a vector space—in which the errors in the copying allow the replicators to randomly iterate through different sequences of information: different strands of chemical codes that create different structures in the actual universe. I.e. different organisms for them to live in, and compete against each other. Genetic space is like Borges' Infinite Library. Most sequences and gene combinations are meaningless; most of the paths they explore lead nowhere—death for the organism, maybe extinction for the species. But a few lead to clearings that open out into vast new spaces of life. Internal complexity. Multicellularity. Sensory systems that can detect the environment. Nervous systems that can predict the internal and external states of the organism, i.e. brains.

Brains endow the survival vehicles with a certain amount of autonomy. They can make choices, and this opens up the

possibility of hosts doing things the replicators don't want them to. An incentive alignment problem. So the replicators find a new pathway in genetic space and invent pleasure and pain. This allows them to programme their vehicles effectively, ensuring that we're always maximising their utility, not ours. As hosts we work hard to keep the interior of our cells early-Earth-like: aqueous, warm, salty, anaerobic. The conditions in which the replicators evolved.

Every organism on the planet is a survival mechanism for the replicators. We're tools for capturing energy and resources and replicating the chemical sequences encoded in our DNA, passing them on into the future. We're a genes' way to make copies of itself, so those copies can make more copies, and more copies. Forever.

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The chore period begins at 8am. We aren't on trail duty today. Nor are we mixing concrete or shovelling clay. Today is Friday and the Kathina festival is Sunday, and there is a lot of work to be done between then and now.

The first job is to put down carpets in the concrete space in the centre of the cloister, because that's where most of the visitors will sit. There are large canvas bags containing rugs and felt underlays stored away in the attic above the meditation hall. This is accessed via a narrow set of stairs leading to a narrow step-ladder. We form a human chain, guests and monks and homeless meditators, all ferrying dozens of heavy rolled-up rugs down to the ground floor and around the side of the hall. The underlay and carpets are all different shapes and sizes, and they all fit into the space if you arrange them in a very precise geometric pattern, which Ajahn Kusalo knows to

the exact millimetre.

As soon as we've finished arranging the carpets, the rain intensifies. There are leaks in the tent over the cloister. We've put down buckets to catch the drips but this new downpour sends a cascade of water spilling down around the central tent pole. There are lights mounted on the pole, about five metres up, and the streams of water pouring over them glitter in the radiance.

One of the monks says, 'It looks like its raining light.'

'Those are just low voltage LED bulbs,' the Abbott growls. 'But they're still connected to mains power and I want to electrocute as few guests as possible this year.' He thinks for a moment. 'We'll set up a tarp,' he decides. 'Above the lights. We'll tension it to catch the leaks and funnel them, then suspend a bucket beneath it.' He starts pointing at guests and monks. 'Go get the large black tarpaulin from the attic. Someone else get the ladder. The rest of you go get the prayer flags and start hanging them up around the walls. Not you, Danyl. I want you to search the attic for a bag of garlands and hang them around the Buddha statues in the shape of a heart.' Everyone scrambles to obey, and the Abbott rubs his hands together, announcing happily, 'I'm just a frustrated holiday camp decorator at heart.'

The Abbott carries a saffron-coloured handbag around with him most of the time. It is filled with various tools and knives, and he also wears a tourist's fanny-pack around his waist containing even more knives, and smaller tools, and he produces and uses an assortment of them while he ties his rainproof tarp into position.

He does this atop a very tall aluminium ladder. B and I keep the ladder steady while he balances atop it, far overhead. While we wait I ask B, 'Did you try out any other religions before you committed to this one? Did you stay at, say, a Catholic monastery?'

‘Not really. Maybe I should have. I visited a Greek Orthodox monastery once. The Theravada monastery I lived at in Sydney was in the middle of a national park, and there was this Greek Orthodox community about two hours walk away. So I walked over there one day.’

‘How’d it go?’

He makes a face. ‘Some people say that the different faiths approach the truth from different directions. You know—we’re all climbing the same mountain. So I tried to find common ground with the Orthodox monks. I said: “You guys like asceticism, we like asceticism. You’ve renounced the sensual world. We’ve renounced the sensual world.” But they just kept bringing everything back to Jesus.’

‘Do you worry about renouncing the sensual world?’

‘I’ve spent a lot of time this year thinking about that. Its like: Buddhism is supposed to be the solution to suffering, but why reject the nice things in life? Why reject pleasure?’

‘What’ve you come up with?’

He tips his head to one side. ‘What do you think the answer is?’

‘Doesn’t the Buddha teach that the desire for pleasure leads to suffering? That sensual pleasure is like scratching an insect bite? It feels good in the short term but really just aggravates things?’

‘That’s pretty much it,’ he replies. ‘But the metaphor the Buddha uses in the Suttas is more graphic. He compares sensual pleasure to a leper scratching at a sore.’

I nod. This makes sense. If I was the Buddha, trying to convince people to take an oath of celibacy I’d go with the stronger image.

*

In 1975, one year before *The Selfish Gene* was published, the evolutionary biologist George Price committed suicide. Price's work with John Maynard Smith was at the heart of Dawkins' book. He derived the Price equation: the mathematical description of how a trait that increases fitness will increase in any reproducing population. It's one of the central formulae in modern evolutionary theory.

Price also pioneered the application of game theory to evolutionary biology. He was interested in altruism. Why did some organisms help each other while others did not? He used his formula and its derivations to show that most of our behaviour, for good or evil—and the behaviour of plants, fish, insects, bacteria, basically every living thing—is driven by the calculations of the replicators as players of strategic games. Genes, cells, animals; all become more likely to cooperate the more genetically similar they are to each other, because the genes exist in multiple copies. So it's rational for a gene to sacrifice an individual organism to protect further copies of itself. But genes will also defect from positive-sum coalitions if there's an advantage to an individual gene. And this is where things get bleak.

Dawkins asks us to imagine a hypothetical nest filled with baby birds. The mother bird has a worm and she's trying to figure out which baby to feed. The birds signal their hunger by chirping at their mother. In an ideal world, the noise of the chirping will signal the baby's real level of hunger so the mother can simply give the worm to the baby that needs it most.

But resources are scarce: sometimes there won't be enough food for every baby to survive. A gene—or allele, or combination of genes—which causes one bird to lie and chirp loudly no matter how hungry it is will get more food and thus

be more likely to live. And because of that, this gene will be more likely to spread throughout the species until all birds in a nest chirp loudly no matter how hungry they are, with the rewards going to birds with genes that chirp even more loudly, until they reach some maximal point. Maybe they get so loud they attract predators, maybe the energy consumed by chirping is greater than can be obtained by food. Now every baby bird is chirping loudly for no gain, because everyone else is doing it, and there's no way to dial it back. It's an outcome that's bad for the species and even worse for the individuals, but you get there anyway because the genes are blindly following the logic of the non-iterated prisoner's dilemma, defecting whenever there's a short term gain.

Price and Maynard Smith refer to scenarios like the maximally-chirping-baby-birds as an evolutionarily stable strategy, or ESS. It's another somewhat misleading name. An ESS isn't stable for the species, or ultimately, even the gene. It's stable in the sense that it can't be invaded by an alternative strategy. If birds evolve that chirp less than average they get no food and die, and the chirp-less gene dies too. So it's possible for a species to arrive at an evolutionarily stable strategy that drives it to extinction, a process that's referred to variously as 'evolutionary suicide', 'Darwinian extinction', 'runaway selection to self-extinction', and 'evolutionary collapse'.

Price worked on the Manhattan Project. He was hired by the Galton Laboratory at University College, London when he walked in off the street with no references and no appointment, and told them he understood the evolutionary basis of altruism. They hired him that same day. He struggled with depression. He was a scathingly militant atheist—like Dawkins—until 1970, when he found God. He felt that he'd been divinely appointed to discover the Price equation and the rational basis

of altruism, but he was also troubled by the moral implications of the synthesis of evolutionary theory he'd helped develop, and the nihilistic worldview it pointed towards.

Political scientists have this very useful term: 'the tragedy of the commons'. A commons is a large pool of shared utility that many agents have access to. If you're a group of humans it might be a forest you can cut down for firewood, or a lake filled with fish, or the atmosphere and the oceans, which absorb your greenhouse gas emissions. If you're a non-human predator, such as a Canadian lynx, the commons is the number of snow hares available for consumption. If you're a single cell in an animal, the commons are all the energy and nutrients available in the organism.

Competition for the commons is a classic prisoner's dilemma. Rational self-interest means you should try to outcompete all of your rivals to get as much utility from the commons as you can, and it's rational for them to do the same. So you might cut down all the wood, or catch all the fish, or eat all the hares on the snow tundra, or turn into a cancer cell and copy yourself as many times as possible, growing a tumour that diverts utility from the rest of the body and into your own self-replication. The tragedy is that if everyone follows their rational self-interest then the commons is depleted and everyone/everything dies. You can avert the tragedy by forming temporary alliances and coalitions, but the nature of the replicators is that they're always blindly iterating through genetic space, looking for ways to outcompete their rivals and maximise their own utility. And if they don't do this, their rivals will.

Richard Dawkins, writing as an evangelical atheist, believes that the problems of the world are due to a surplus of a religious faith and a deficit of rationalism. But *The Selfish Gene*, written by Dawkins the biologist, shows that most of the hard problems

of the world are due to replicators following rational strategies. If you're a baby bird in a nest and everyone else is chirping, it's rational to chirp louder. If you're a cell in a tumour and every other cell is rapidly proliferating, it's rational for you to do so too. You can 'choose' not to do those things, but then you simply get wiped out and replaced by replicating agents that choose differently. None of these agents are evil, but they're trapped in stable strategies that compel them to act in ways that are indistinguishable from evil.

In 1973 George Price became what effective altruists refer to as an extreme altruist. He gave away his clothes and food and money; he invited many of the homeless people he encountered in central London to live with him in his rented apartment. He lost his job. Eventually his lease ended and he became homeless himself, drifting from one squatter's flat to another. At the same time his collaborative papers with Maynard Smith were being published in the world's most prestigious science journals. Eventually he found work as a cleaner at a bank, but soon killed himself in an abandoned house scheduled for demolition.

*

I return to my kuti to change for lunch and that's when I learn I've forgotten to pack a change of socks. This is really bad news. The main things you do in the monastery are work hard and get sweaty, walk along damp muddy paths and get wet feet, and sit in the meditation hall with no shoes on in close proximity to other people. I'm here for three more days and my only pair of socks already smells bad.

The first time I stayed here I forgot to bring a towel, and when I told one of the lay residents, assuming there was a large cupboard filled with spare towels I could use, they shrugged

and suggested I take a flannel from the laundry and dry myself with that. And I did, and it was a miserable experience. Nobody here is going to lend me socks. The monks go barefoot all the time and they'll probably tell me to do the same.

The monastery exists to provide training and residence for the monks and to function as a religious centre for the wider Buddhist community. Almost every day a group of Buddhists in the region come here to cook the main meal of the day. They're usually South or South East Asian: Thai, Sri Lankan, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and they're usually celebrating the birth of a child, or a birthday or wedding, or the death of a relative. They offer up food to the monks in exchange for a blessing.

And the food is phenomenal. It's served up in a large buffet. The protocol is that the monks always serve themselves first. They ladle the food into their large copper begging bowls, return upstairs and sit on cushions in the meeting hall above the kitchen. Once they're seated, the rest of us can serve ourselves. I pile my plate high with rice and curry and chapattis and sit in the glass hall on the ground floor. The kōwhai tree opposite is filled with tūi: more than I've ever seen in a single tree before, a kaleidoscope of swaying branches and beating black wings. There must be at least twenty or thirty of the birds.

'That's unusual,' one of the older Sri Lankan visitors, a white-haired man in a suit and tie comments to the group. 'Tūi are usually quite solitary.'

'It's spring,' one of the younger women explains. 'It means they're going to have a lot more tūi.'

One of my duties is to help with the dishes, and because this was an enormous feast there are enormous piles of them. I'm strapping on an apron and filling the sinks with water when B comes and taps my shoulder. 'I'll do that,' he says. 'Ajahn is

waiting to talk to you in the meeting room upstairs.’

*

Many people read *The Selfish Gene* and are distressed by its worldview, and some of them write letters to Richard Dawkins. In his memoir, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, Dawkins publishes extracts from correspondents who’ve read his book and find they can’t eat, or sleep; they’re spiralling into depression. They feel *The Selfish Gene* is largely to blame. Many of them wish they could unread it.

Dawkins is baffled by all of this. His book is true, isn’t it? And he’s not saying that humans are selfish, or that we’re utterly controlled by our genes. All his examples are drawn from non-human animals, after all. Other species might be disposable slaves for the replicators, but humans are obviously exceptional.

It’s true that the case studies in *The Selfish Gene* are non-human: fish, birds, insects. There’s a passage describing male butterflies fighting over patches of sunlight which they use to attract mates that has, for me, forever disenchanted the sight of butterflies fluttering in sunbeams. But most of the book talks about abstract behaviour, and it feels like Dawkins is talking about humans. He refers to males and females, mothers and grandmothers and children. Aggression and cooperation and deception. Altruism and territoriality and love. All recognisably human behaviour, and all of it, the book reveals, attributable to the logic of the replicators competing against each other in strategic games.

When I first read *The Selfish Gene* I was troubled by it and enormously relieved by the final chapter. Humans, Dawkins declares in this chapter, make our own choices. We do this

due to our superior access to reason and the imagination. We invented and use contraceptives, don't we? This thwarts the will of the replicators, doesn't it? But, rereading the book, I think that the people who responded to it with insomnia and breakdowns were more perceptive than I was, and that they understood Dawkins' book better than he himself did.

We can invent and use contraception and thus thwart the will of the genes, which removes genes disposed towards this behaviour from the pool. And in making such a choice, are we *really* choosing, or are we just one of the many paths through genetic space that lead nowhere?

We have reason and imagination, but our use of these facilities is downstream from our desires, and our desires are downstream from the replicators. The mall was constructed using reason and imagination, and everything inside it—the food court, the shops, the theatres, the donut stand—were built to interact with the dopaminergic reward pathways in our brains, which were designed by the replicators. All of our wants are bounded by them.

*

'What was I like as a teenager?' Ajahn Kusalo considers the question, then replies, 'I was punk before punk was punk.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means I wore military clothes. Chains. Things like that.'

'So you dressed like a punk.'

'No.' He holds up a correcting finger. 'The punks dressed like me.'

The meeting room is carpeted, with white plaster walls on three sides. The fourth wall is glass, looking out over the courtyard and trees. There's a shrine at the far end with a

Buddha statue surrounded by fresh flowers. The Abbott sits on a meditation cushion just to the side of the shrine, dressed in his brown robes, drinking tea from a china tea set. I sit on the brown circular cushion on the floor before him.

I ask, 'Can you tell me about the commune?'

'What commune?'

'The last time I was here you mentioned founding a commune. On Great Barrier Island.'

He nods. 'I was looking for an alternative. A way out of society.'

'What was it called?'

The Abbott hesitates. He looks at my notebook and narrows his eyes and asks, 'You said you wanted to talk about Buddhism and monasticism. What does any of this have to do with that?'

'Because the monastery is a community that works,' I reply. 'There are lots of people out there looking for alternatives, or a way out of society, and some of them found communes. But most communes fail. If you read the sociology literature on alternate societies, the ones that succeed tend to be religious. So I'm curious to know how your commune failed.'

The Abbott sips his tea. I wonder if our conversation is already over. Then he says, 'That particular commune failed because it succeeded. At the start it was very communal. And that's because it was hard, and we needed each other, and you always get unity through adversity. Someone needed to borrow my chainsaw. I needed to borrow their boat. So there was a mutual interdependence. But there was no spiritual core. As people get wealthier—' he points at me. 'You don't need my chainsaw any more. You can just hire a guy to do your chainsawing. Soon nobody needs each other. There's no shared value system because there's no intrinsic spiritual dimension. No sense of the transcendent. Pretty soon you're

not a commune anymore, you're just a group of people living separately on the same patch of land, with all the tensions that brings if there's nothing to keep you together.'

'What did you do after the commune?'

'I tried other communes. Other alternatives.' He laughs. 'There were a lot of strange spiritual movements around in the 1980s. Lots of derivations of Buddhism. Eventually I wound up in West Australia with my wife and son. We were heading for Asia but we ran out of money. So I looked in the phonebook under B for Buddhism, dialled the number and a monk answered. And that's how I became a Buddhist.'

'Did you get to Asia?'

'Eventually. I stayed in Perth for a while. Set up a factory there. Made cabinetry. I wound up with a qualification as a quantity surveyor. Then I came back here, solo parented for five years. My son's in the tech industry now. Doesn't really care about Buddhism. When he was old enough to look after himself I came here.'

'How long have you been a monk?'

'Twenty-eight years.'

'Have you ever met an enlightened being?'

'People ask me that sometimes.' He shrugs indifferently. 'If I say yes, what does it mean, and if I say no, what does that mean? Is the promise of enlightenment a marketing technique for spiritual movements? Of course. Some people get the idea that enlightenment is a box they can tick, or a form of power they can obtain, that they can use to control and exploit. But real transcendence goes in exactly the opposite direction. Other people want to believe there are heroes in the world who can solve all their problems. Like Superman, or John Wick.' His eyes narrow again. 'What are you smiling at? You think just because I live in a monastery I don't know about John

Wick? And what's the other one they all love?' He thinks for a moment. 'Riddick.'

I'm tempted to ask the Abbott about his popular culture diet, but that might take the conversation down a path I can't get back from, so instead I say, 'This takes us back to the idea of communities and value systems. If you want to keep a community together, it's very useful to be able to say: the person who founded our community achieved enlightenment. They've seen the hidden true nature of existence, and based on their superior knowledge they've decreed that this is how we should live and these are the rules we have to follow, and the leaders of the community have privileged access to the same truths.'

'It does keep people tidy,' the Abbott concedes. 'Keeps them all lined up. To be part of a monastic community is to acquiesce to leadership. I often say: this monastery is a democratic dictatorship. I'm the dictator and everyone else is part of the democracy. And that's where the danger lies, of course. You get the mixing of church and state. Corruption. Abuse. That's the function of the vinaya—the monastic code of ethics. It constrains the rulers. Celibacy, poverty and so on. And the ruler cannot change the rules. If they do they're no longer the ruler.'

'Does the system work?'

'Obviously there are failures. One of the oldest rules is that you can't charge money for teaching the dharma. Well, there's an order of monks in Thailand that sells real estate in one of the heavenly realms. If you pay them enough, you can buy a house with a pool in heaven. The same thing happens in the west. Prosperity gospels. TV evangelists. People think that they've worked hard so they deserve the things they want. They don't understand that the wanting never ends.'

‘It’s like a loop.’

‘Exactly. I used to be very evangelical about Buddhism. I thought, “People need to know that we’re all caught in this trap and there’s a way out. We can be free.” But most people just want to be happy. They don’t want to be free. And that’s okay.’

‘Aren’t freedom and happiness . . . connected?’

‘Are they? Freedom is a complicated thing. Most people are somewhat friendly towards Buddhism. It’s palatable. We’ve never had a holy war. We’ve got the Dalai Lama. Most people will go with most of the five precepts.’ He ticks them off on his fingers. ‘Don’t harm anyone. Don’t steal anything. Don’t tell lies. Don’t be unfaithful. Some people have a problem with the fifth precept: sobriety. What’s wrong with a few beers? Well, nothing. Unless you’re an alcoholic, in which case giving you the freedom to drink takes away your freedom not to drink. If you’re an alcoholic you can’t choose. And most of us are alcoholics in some way. All of us have desires that compel us, and our society is very very good at manufacturing new desires. New drugs. Games people can’t stop playing. Smartphones we can’t stop using. And all of that behaviour is monetised. Why is YouTube free? Because Google owns it, and they want to commodify your compulsions. Why is GitHub free? Because Microsoft owns it.’

‘How do you know about GitHub?’ I’m genuinely intrigued. GitHub is a software development website. I use it at work all the time, but I can’t quite imagine how a Buddhist monk would stumble across it.

‘I’m rebuilding the monastery’s web site,’ he explains. ‘In JavaScript. And I use GitHub as a code repository. Now, code,’ he continues, ‘is a useful way to think about meditation and freedom. I’m still learning to programme and that means I can only use the language the way it’s designed to be used. If

something goes wrong I don't know how to fix it. But once I'm an expert, once I understand how the language works under the hood, then I can do the things I want. Then I'm free. And that's the purpose of meditation. You're learning about how the mind really works and that opens up a very radical form of freedom. I've just been on self-retreat. I only ate every two days. I didn't have to do all that eating and chewing and excreting and I felt very free. When you're out in the world you're free to eat whatever you want whenever you want it.' I glance down at my belly, involuntarily. It pokes out between my T-shirt and sweatpants. He asks, 'Do you feel free?'

*

I have a plan to wash and dry my socks.

Washing them is easy. I can just rinse them with hot water and dishwashing liquid in the bathroom sink, and wring them out a few times. Drying them is hard. It's pouring with rain. There's a small laundry room in the main building, but no dryer. I might be able to dry them in the oven, in the kitchen, but this could go wrong in several obvious ways. And then I remember the library. It's heated to keep the books warm. I'll wash my socks and dry them on the library heater. I hum a triumphant little tune to myself, fetch the detergent, wash my socks and then emerge from the men's bathroom barefoot to find that the key to the library—which was there, like, two minutes ago—has gone.

Carrying my socks, I walk across the sharp gravel stones to the library. The lights are out. The door is locked. There's no one there. I walk back across the stones to the main building. Its early afternoon. There's no one around. It's raining again. My feet are cold. My socks are sodden and cold in my hands. I

can't even walk back to my kuti. I came out of my conversation with the Abbott with a deep sense of clarity and purpose, but this feels like a very low point on my spiritual path.

I decide to sit in the meditation hall and meditate, because that's what the Buddha would do. But I can't concentrate; I'm too distracted by my cold feet and my frustrated plans. After about half an hour I get up and go outside, stand at the top of the steps leading down to the courtyard and stare at the rain, with my hands in the pockets of my sweatpants. I do this for at least two minutes before I realise that the object I'm holding in my left hand is the library key. I must have picked it up earlier and slipped it in my pocket.

The socks are cotton. Medium thickness. Orange. They'll take some time to dry. I lay them out on top of the heater, position my frozen feet in front of it and take Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics* down from the shelf, and spend the afternoon reading it as the rain comes down.

*

Introduction to Metaphysics is seen as a rather unsavoury book in philosophical circles. And the last time I stayed here the Abbott made it clear that the library should be used for studying Theravada Buddhism. So I shouldn't be reading western philosophy at all. But I keep going back to Heidegger in much the same way a teenager who grew up in a Christian home might listen to satanic metal. Heidegger is the great enemy of reason. His critique is, in some ways, rather Buddhist, and some commentators believe he was influenced by Schopenhauer, who was the first philosopher in the western tradition to read Buddhist and Hindu texts in translation.

The logician and mathematician Bertrand Russell once

declared that ‘what science cannot discover, humans cannot know’. Heidegger replies that we cannot accept this state of affairs because there are simply too many vital questions that science cannot answer, and the world that science reveals is too impoverished for us to live in.

If you ask a meteorologist why it’s raining, they’ll give you an answer describing weather patterns and chaotic systems. If you ask a chemist where these things come from, they’ll tell you about water vapour and gas laws, and physicists can explain these phenomena in terms of elementary particles and fundamental forces. But we can’t go back any further than that. We’ve hit the wall in terms of scientific explanations of the rain. And even if some new explanation or discipline explains the existence of particles and laws, that just pushes the problem back. There must be some deeper explanation beyond that explanation, and another beyond that. Looking for ultimate rational explanations in any direction always throws us into an infinite loop.

And it’s the same with other deep philosophical problems. What is the causal explanation for the beginning of time? What—to ask Heidegger’s favourite question—is Being? Why is there something rather than nothing? Why are we aware of the world instead of just part of it, like all the other matter we see around us? How should we live?

So Heidegger asks: is reason really the only tool that we have for knowing things about the world? Advocates for reason believe that science is objective and impartial; that they are seeing the world neutrally. One of Heidegger’s aims in *The Introduction to Metaphysics* is to ‘deconstruct’ rationalism, that is, to show that the scientific viewpoint, which sees itself as natural and impartial, is a very artificial construct, the product of two and a half thousand years of cultural and philosophical

and linguistic development, and that its viewpoint of the world is very constrained. It cannot see many things, but it cannot see that it cannot see them. Rationalism is one path through the forest of existence; one route through the vector states of conceptual space, and it leads to some clearings, some ways of unconcealing the world, but it leaves much of existence dark.

Heidegger believes that there are other paths, and that it is urgent that we explore them because the path we are currently on—the path of rational modernity—has arrived at a dead end. The logical destination of modernity is what Heidegger calls ‘machination’. He’s referring not just to industrial machines, but rather to an understanding of the natural world in which everything is a machine. It’s *The Selfish Gene* view of existence, basically, in which we’re all temporary aggregations of particles competing for utility; ‘a revelation of beings as a whole as exploitable and manipulative objects’, as he puts it. Rationalism locks us into a ‘mathematisation of the world’ which strips everything of meaning or purpose other than as available utility for rational self-interested agents to satisfy our subjective desires. Everything is a resource—natural resources, human resources, virtual resources. All is raw material to be acquired and processed.

Heidegger felt that the path of reason was probably an apocalyptic one: that it would end either in wars that annihilated our species or runaway resource consumption leading to ecological collapse. But he had an alternative nightmare scenario he sometimes offered up, a future in which:

The world shines in the radiance of advances, advantages and material goods, where human rights are respected . . . and where, above all, there is a guaranteed supply that constantly satisfies an undisturbed comfort, so that everything can be

overseen and everything remains calculable and manageable in terms of utility.

Me at the mall, basically. From Heidegger's perspective, Larkin's long slide 'to happiness, endlessly', becomes something monstrous. And he isn't just critiquing consumerism or capitalism here. He sees socialism and communism as indistinguishable from capitalism: they're all incarnations of modernity, materialist ideologies trying to deliver utopias which are actually technological prisons, dopaminergic traps in which we live impoverished, pointless lives but don't know it because we're so comfortable.

How do you escape the trap? Rationalism and materialism give us so much power over the world. They're a stable strategy, resistant to invasion, a loop you can't get out of. Heidegger's ambition was to find philosophical alternatives to modernity. But he knew that philosophy alone wasn't enough. You also needed cultural and political alternatives. That's one of the reasons he joined the Nazi Party when it rose to power in Germany.

*

Heidegger is hard to read when you're tired. And I haven't slept well in a long time. I fall asleep in the library and am almost late for the evening puja. We start with the chanting, and I'm getting the hang of the Pali pronunciation so this goes rather well. But I spend most of the meditation period in a state of dullness. My mind is blurry, unfocussed, drifting. This is not unpleasant: I feel warm. I see hypnagogic colours and patterns on the back of my eyelids. I float through a sequence of abstract, dreamlike thoughts. Eventually I doze off then wake myself

with a ragged, bestial snore to find myself pitching forward on my meditation stool, about to fall face down onto the floor. I jolt upright. One of my meditation guides calls this 'the Zen lurch'.

It takes me a long time to walk back to my kuti. It's raining. I stop to rest at the top of an incline, and on a whim I shine the beam of my torch up towards the sky, transforming the rain into threads of white light. I have a brief Buddha-mixed-with-Heidegger vision of humans as sentient rain, countless billions of us pouring into existence out of nowhere, briefly lit as we fall through time, then falling back into darkness.

I wake early. It's my third day at the monastery, and I sit up in my sleeping bag and look out at the mist and feel a pleasant lack of hunger. I think about the Abbott's comments on freedom. When I'm living in the world I feel relieved that I'm not accountable to a church, or state, or Ajahn Kusalo to tell me what I can and cannot eat. But now that I'm here, spending a few days outside my own life, the freedom to eat uncontrollably until I die of cancer or heart disease does seem like a strange form of freedom.

'Freedom is a complicated thing.' I think about the most famous idea in *The Selfish Gene* which isn't even about genes. Towards the end of the book Dawkins introduces one of his most controversial theories: memes. These are cultural replicators: the non-physical equivalent of genes. Memes are languages, songs, gestures, rituals, the theories of Martin Heidegger; anything that can travel from one mind to another. Like genes, memes can replicate, mutate and respond to selective pressure. They're living things, Dawkins argues, in the very literal sense, and from his perspective, religions are viral memes: obey me in life and make as many copies of me as you can and you'll be rewarded after death. They're parasitic, they infect the mind. They function as tools of oppression,

causing terrible bloodshed when they clash with their religious or ideological memetic rivals.

*

At the beginning of the work period, B and I stand in the courtyard, awaiting orders. There are baskets of flowers everywhere: lilies, succulents, ferns, roses. The monks are hanging up banners of prayer flags.

I've been wondering how long you have to meditate to achieve the insights into the nature of mind that Ajahn Kusalo talked about, so I ask B if he's had any insight experiences. He gives me a wary glance and replies, 'I've learned that it's not a good idea to have deep and meaningful conversations in monasteries.'

'Isn't that the only kind of conversation we're allowed to have here?'

'People have insights and experiences,' he replies. 'But they interpret them in different ways. If you try to discuss them everything gets confused. I think the best thing is to keep the conversations superficial and work the deep stuff out for yourself.'

'Huh.'

He points at the flags. 'Did you know that the Buddhist flag was designed by an admiral in the US Navy?'

'I did not.' I consider the flag. It has bright multi-coloured vertical and horizontal stripes. 'Do the stripes represent, like, wisdom and compassion . . . ?'

'Yeah. I'm pretty sure white is purity.'

'Makes sense. Orange?'

'I think orange is wisdom.'

'Red?'

‘I don’t know about red.’

We keep looking at the flags, trying to figure out what the red stripes mean, then jump in alarm when Ajahn Kusalo materialises out of a shadowy corner of the courtyard.

‘Danyl. B. Follow me.’ He sweeps past. We follow him up a flight of concrete steps. ‘It’s time for you to be initiated into the esoteric secrets of the monastery.’

‘What secrets?’ B sounds wary. ‘What initiation?’

‘Don’t worry. All it’ll require is a small blood sacrifice.’

The Abbot’s voice is light. I think he’s probably joking, but B isn’t so sure. He asks, ‘Blood from who?’

‘From you.’ The Abbott leads us to a stone plinth with a very androgynous Buddha statue mounted atop it. ‘Kneel down,’ he instructs and we obey, moderately terrified. ‘This Buddha can be detached from the plinth.’ He instructs us in the rather elaborate hidden mechanism for doing this, ‘like so. And when it’s free I want you to carry it down to the wooden table in the centre of the courtyard. It is extremely heavy, so be careful. Lift with your knees.’

We stand once we’ve released the statue, and I get ready to lift when B taps my shoulder and asks, ‘Did you see me hit my head?’ I look over at him. There’s a cut above his right eyebrow and he’s bleeding.

‘Did you just do that?’

‘Yeah. I hit my forehead on the base.’ He touches his hand to the wound and it comes away with quite a lot of blood. ‘Whoa.’

‘Head wounds bleed a lot,’ I say. ‘You’ll need a bandage.’

We walk back down the stairs, behind the Abbott. ‘Damn,’ B complains. ‘You said there’d be a blood sacrifice. You called it.’

Ajahn Kusalo does not reply. Nor does he appear displeased by this sequence of events. When we reach the bottom of the

stairs the other monks see the blood running down the side of B's face and hurry over. 'What happened?'

The Abbott replies, 'The Buddha bit him.'

*

There's an apocryphal story about Heidegger delivering an earlier lecture on metaphysics entitled *What is Metaphysics?* At the end of the lecture, so the story goes, there was a deep silence, eventually broken by the question, 'Professor Heidegger? What is metaphysics?' to which Heidegger replied, 'Good question.'

Heidegger is famously opaque. Hannah Arendt called him 'the secret king of thought', and he's often cited as the most influential philosopher of the 20th century, but he doesn't make it easy for us. The challenge in understanding Heidegger is that he doesn't want to be understood, at least not in ways that can be easily explained, because he thinks that the language that we use and the framework that we think with are part of the problem with the world. His project is not to prove or disprove things, or to communicate ideas via language, or any of the usual concerns of philosophers, but rather to change the type of ideas that we can have and the language that we think them with.

What is metaphysics? It is all the problems that physics and the other sciences cannot solve. Causality, consciousness, being, time. Heidegger's assertion is that the modern scientific worldview is built on assumptions that it cannot explain, or can never prove. His goal as a philosopher is to build a radically different worldview: a new way of thinking and speaking and relating to existence.

We see ourselves as individuals that occupy bodies that move around in space. We experience the world subjectively,

and are closed off from each other and the rest of existence. Heidegger wants us to understand ourselves differently. Instead of objects in space he describes us as events in time. Instead of experiencing the world as subjects interacting with external objects, he portrays us as ‘the world opening up to itself’. Instead of impartial rational observers, he describes us as historical constructs, built from language and culture. Instead of individuals, we co-exist with the members of our community in a web of mutual cooperation, understanding and responsibility. If we reject modernity and adopt this alternative way of being in the world we can, he claims, lead more authentic and meaningful lives.

Heidegger’s most famous book is *Being and Time*, and these subjects are the basis for his conceptual system. He’s confident that no physicist or psychologist ever will be able to dismantle his assertions about either of them. Unlike Christianity, say, which made falsifiable assertions about the creation and nature of the world, Heidegger’s system is designed to be immune to rational attacks.

The Introduction to Metaphysics was first delivered as a lecture series in 1935, about two years after Heidegger became a Nazi and about one year after his attempt to establish himself as the lead philosopher of the National Socialist movement failed. This failure was partly due to his political ineptitude, partly because rival intellectuals in the Nazi movement announced that Heidegger’s abstract and difficult ideas had little or nothing to do with their—or anyone else’s—conception of fascism. Even though the lectures were delivered after his failed entry into politics, they still praise ‘the inner truth and greatness’ of National Socialism.

When the *Introduction* was published after the war, Heidegger insisted that it contained a secret critique of Nazism,

if you read it in just the right way. But he never publicly apologised for his Nazism. If anyone should apologise to anyone, he commented to a colleague, Hitler should be brought back to life to apologise to Heidegger. The *Fuhrer's* version of National Socialism was, he felt, just another nightmarish incarnation of modernity. With its failure there were now no alternatives to materialism, machination, the death of Being. There was no hope. Shortly before his death he declared, bitterly that 'Only a God can save us.'

*

Lunch is another gigantic buffet. Vietnamese. Amazing. After we've washed the dishes I try to strike up a friendly conversation with S.

'So, you're from Malaysia?'

'Malaysia. Yes.'

'How long have you lived in New Zealand?'

Pause. 'Are you looking for some work to do?'

'Not really. I mean . . . I'm happy to help, if you want. Although I did work this morning. I was just asking—'

'There's a broom in the car port. You can sweep the paths around the library.'

There are a lot of red and pink camellia blossoms on the paths around the library and it takes me a long time to sweep them all up. Afterwards I wash my socks and spend the remainder of the afternoon drying them on the library heater, dutifully reading through a collection of the sayings of Ajahn Chah, the founder of the Forest Monastery tradition.

The Forest Tradition is a new monastic order. But it's very traditional and very conservative. Like the Christian monastic tradition, Buddhism tends to follow historical cycles:

monasteries are founded by spiritual leaders who renounce the world and seek a more contemplative life. They draw followers to them because every society is filled with lots of people who don't want to live in it. Over time the monasteries transform into powerful, rather secular, rather corrupt institutions, and eventually there's a reformation and another return to austerity and spirituality.

The forest tradition was a reaction to the 'luxurious and unreflective' form of monasticism practised in Thailand in the early 20th century, in which very few of the Buddha's monastic codes were observed and meditation was seen as a bizarre and suspicious practise that might expose the practitioner to possession by evil spirits. Ajahn Chah was born in 1918. He lived as a mendicant monk for a while, rising to become the forest movement's spiritual leader, and founded his first monastery in a grove amidst a dense forest 'known as a place for cobras, tigers and ghosts'. In the 1960s he began training westerners and establishing monasteries in the west, and by the early 21st century there were about three hundred forest tradition monasteries around the world.

Before the evening puja ceremony I speak with one of the Thai monks at Bodhinyanarama. He's slender and small, wears very large, thick eyeglasses that cover about half his face, and radiates an aura of wisdom and humour. He is generally very Dalai-Lama-like. We chat for a while about the monastery, the dharma, the innate emptiness of everything.

The first time I stayed here, one of the long-term guests told me that this monk was one of the wisest they'd met, and that I should ask him for meditation advice. So I explain to the monk that I've been meditating for about two years, mainly concentration meditation, and ask if I should widen my practice to include more insight meditation. And he replies, 'No.'

‘No? Shouldn’t I be trying to perceive the true nature of existence?’

‘No. First you need a stable mind.’

‘I feel like I’m pretty stable.’

He shakes his head firmly. ‘No.’

I open my mouth to argue my case then remember that it’s been about two weeks since I slept properly, that I had a strange apocalyptic vision in the mall three days ago, that last night I spent about ten minutes shining my torch up into the rain and thinking about tranquillity and ruin. I close my mouth again.

He tells me, ‘Practise concentration until the mind is stable.’

‘What should I do when my mind is stable?’

‘If I tell you now I’ll just confuse you. But when the mind is stable you’ll know what to do without me telling you.’

*

In the mid-1960s the western philosophical tradition realised it had split into two distinct streams. There was the analytic school, which tends to be logical and rational and scientific, and the continental tradition which exists outside of, and critiques, the analytics. (Everyone agrees that the names for the traditions are terrible and make no sense, and that both categories are almost impossible to define, but everyone uses them anyway.)

The analytics respond to Heidegger in a number of ways. First: does he even make any sense? When Heidegger claims, for example, that ‘the nothing nothings’, is he advancing a philosophical argument, or is he forming sentences that are literally meaningless and merely pretending that they have depth? If ‘nothing’ is the absence of anything, how can ‘the nothing’ do anything, and what could the ‘nothings’ that

nothing is allegedly doing possibly consist of?

Heidegger's defenders reply that Heidegger is trying to express existential truths outside the narrow bounds of rationalism, so of course you can show that his statements are non-rational. That's the whole point of his project. But, his critics reply, what criteria do we use to judge the validity of such 'non-rational truths'? Can anyone say literally anything and insist that it is a non-rational truth, and if not, why not?

Secondly, Heidegger sees modernity as 'the death of Being', but the vast majority of people born prior to modernity endured lives of incredible drudgery and suffering. They had no vaccines, no antibiotics and no anaesthetics. About a quarter of all infants died before they were a year old. Overall, child mortality rates were about 50%. Average life expectancy was about thirty. Most people worked on farms their whole lives, until they died of famine or disease, or in childbirth, or by violence. How awake to the mystery of Being were the people who lived under these conditions? How terrible is rationalism if it can relieve such unimaginable suffering, and what have any of these 'other ways of being in the world' accomplished that can compare with the invention of antibiotics?

Finally we can ask: where did Heidegger's alternative path through the forest of existence take him? Did it lead to a more spiritually pure and more authentic life? It did not. It led to the Nazi Party, and many of Heidegger's intellectual heirs became apologists for Stalin or other forms of totalitarian Communism.

So it's easy for analytics to dismiss Heidegger. 'A bad man,' the analytic philosopher Gilbert Ryle said of him, 'cannot be a good philosopher.' Karl Popper called Heidegger a swindler and beseeched the world of philosophy 'to unite and never again mention him, or talk to another philosopher who defends

Heidegger'. Rudolf Carnap—one of the most influential thinkers of the analytic school—dismissed him as 'a musician without musical ability'.

But many of Heidegger's most brilliant students were Jewish. They thought he was a great philosopher who had—rather obviously—lost his way, but that his ideas were too important to ignore. Leo Strauss, the most influential conservative intellectual of the 20th century, who studied under Heidegger at Freiberg before fleeing the Nazis, first to London then the United States, was one of them.

Strauss was primarily a political thinker. Like many post-war intellectuals he was concerned with the problem of building a good society. Why did catastrophes like Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia occur? How could you avoid them? And what obligations did intellectuals and philosophers have towards the societies they lived in? Strauss would have been murdered if his academic career hadn't allowed him to flee Germany, and Heidegger—that nation's most brilliant thinker—would have quietly approved. Philosophers and other intellectuals needed to do better.

Strauss believed that every society needs a foundation: a story and accompanying moral code that validates the authority of the state while also protecting the citizens from the depredations of their rulers. And he believed that this foundation needed to be religious in nature: that Plato's Noble Lie was the only basis for a sustainable society. If the rules were sacred then the rulers could not breach or change them without invalidating their right to rule. Meanwhile, the faith allowed the rest of society to live together and believe that their lives were meaningful.

Modernity was able to discredit almost all of those religious systems. It revealed that the Noble Lies were just lies. But it wasn't

able to replace religious morality with anything meaningful. Rationalism can reveal that there is no objective morality and no meaning to existence, Strauss felt, but any society which believes this will fail. The reason rulers like Hitler and Stalin appeared was that under conditions of rational modernity there was no longer any shared value system by which to reject them.

Strauss's proposed solution to this problem is that philosophers, and other sceptical intellectuals, must accept Heidegger's critique of reason. We live in a universe that is ultimately mysterious, and the questions most non-intellectuals want answers to—how we should live, why our lives matter, how we can live together—lie outside the boundaries of rational inquiry. Only revelation—religious visions and sacred laws—can speak to these questions. Or, at least, pretend to do so. Reason can disprove religious claims (unless you're cunning and base your system on metaphysical problems the way Heidegger did, or the subjective experience of an enlightened being, like the Buddhists). But only the moral systems of religious traditions can address the failures of reason.

So the two traditions—reason and revelation—exist in perpetual tension. But Strauss felt they needed each other. Reason reins in the excesses of faith, while faith reminds philosophers and their fellow apostles for reason that they see less than they think they do, and that they are not merely rational self-interested individuals: they're members of a society, which they have obligations towards. And in return they gain the benefits of living in that society, even if they don't share its beliefs. It doesn't matter if the faith is true, Strauss taught. What matters is that it works because it is seen to be true.

*

I wash the breakfast dishes, yet again, only this time I'm joined by R, the other white-robed monk in training. He's in his mid-twenties, did an engineering degree, suffered from acute depression, started meditating, wound up here. We talk about the similarities and differences between universities and monasteries.

'Universities used to be monastic,' R points out. 'In some ways they still are. Some of my maths lecturers were very otherworldly. Like, more than most monks.'

'But monasteries are radically different alternatives to secular society,' I reply. 'If you want to live somewhere like this, somewhere that's meditative and non-materialistic and communal, you're not going to find that in academia. It's just another branch of the real world.'

He smiles. 'I think this is the real world.'

'It does feel like that when you're here.' I dump a bowl of dirty cutlery in the sink. 'I think a lot of people would prefer to live someplace like this, if they knew it was an option. And if it wasn't religious.'

'It has to be religious,' R replies. 'That's the whole point.'

'Yeah, that's the tricky part.'

It's my last day at the monastery. The festival starts at 11am, which is the same time my wife and daughter will pick me up outside the gates and take me to a family event. 'I can't get out of it,' I explain to monks and lay residents. Everyone seems genuinely sorry for me that I have to leave early. But I'm relaxed about it. I miss my family and I don't like festivals.

Although Kathina seems nicer than most. There's no PA system. No live bands. No food trucks with endless queues. The air does not reek of pot. More and more people arrive, mostly families: kids, teenagers, parents, grandparents. Everyone

seems to know each other. Everyone brings food.

The monks from the other Buddhist temples and monasteries in the region arrive in minivans. Processions of monks in brown, red, orange and yellow robes pour out of the vans. B informs me that the colour of the robes depends on the pigments of dye from the vegetation in the different countries. The monks cross the courtyard, pressing their palms in greeting to everyone. The diplomats arrive in black SUVs driven by guys in black suits with black sunglasses. Everyone here is dressed in their best clothes, except for me. I'm wearing track pants and a dirty T-shirt because I've spent all morning washing dishes, sweeping paths and running extension cords through the cobwebbed rafters of the cloister.

The walls at the front of the meditation hall slide open and the large Buddha statue in the shrine now looks directly out into the cloister. When the ceremony begins everyone sits on cushions in the cloister or the hall, while the monks sit on a raised platform before the statue, facing the crowd. Ajahn Kusalo sits in the centre, chanting hymns of greeting in multiple languages.

I stand at the back. I haven't thought about eating all morning but now that my bags are packed, I've cleaned out my kuti and I'm about to leave, I realise I'm starving. And the trestle tables beside me are piled high with food. There are stacked silver dishes of curry, and plates of breads; huge bowls of white and brown and coconut-scented rice. There are desserts, mounds of fruit, sliced mangos. There are cakes. And there are pastries, including mini chocolate eclairs filled with cream.

We're not supposed to eat until the monks have eaten. And that won't happen for a long time. After the opening chants, everyone will be given a paper plate which they'll pile with rice from the rice cookers, then they'll stand in a long line,

offering rice to the monks, who will take some from each person. Then there will be more chanting. Then the monks will eat. Finally everyone else will eat. Lunch is hours away and I'll be long gone.

But everyone in the room has their back to me, except for the monks, who seem to have their eyes closed for this stage of the ceremony. After a struggle with my conscience, which lasts more than one second but less than three, I turn, take one of the mini chocolate eclairs and place it in my mouth. I think it tastes good, but I swallow it so quickly it barely registers on my taste buds. When I turn around again Ajahn Kusalo's eyes are open and I have no doubt he saw me.

It's time for me to leave. But then, just as I'm about to go, something odd happens. A jogger appears. He comes from around the side of the meditation hall and runs through the cloister, right through the vast space filled with monks and children and diplomats and security guards and men in suits and women in saris. I know where he's come from: one of the trails around the hill comes out behind the hall. Occasionally people who live in the area walk or run along it. But they normally do this when the cloister is empty, which is most of the time, not when it's teeming with people and the air reverberating with chants.

The jogger is in late middle age. He's white—almost the only white guy here other than the Abbott, a couple of other monks and myself. He's bald and dressed in short shorts and a tight T-shirt, and he's in terrific shape, lean and muscular. He looks like an ad for a promising longevity supplement. But as he runs through, no one else seems to notice him. No heads turn as he passes, while he seems weirdly indifferent to the sacred festival going on around him; doesn't even glance at the choir of deep-voiced monks intoning songs from the

ancient past. I have this disconcerting sensation that I'm the only person who can see both the jogger and the crowd. And then he runs past me, smiling, and down the ramp and across the courtyard. I pick up my backpack and follow him. I feel a strange compulsion not to let him out of sight, so I break into a little jog myself, my backpack jostling on my back, my potbelly bouncing beneath my T-shirt. I chase him down the driveway and out through the gates, along the road to the intersection and into a different world.

Vincent O'Sullivan

Once

from *Things OK With You?*

Manuscript, forthcoming tbc

Once in my life I've been fishing. A brother-in-law assured, 'You don't need to talk out there,'

so we didn't. After an hour or so he lifted this reluctant silvery strip

from its hook and walloped its head against the ridge of the dinghy we sat in for those

aeons of hours off Rat Island, as some people called it, this acre or so

of shallow crumbling yellowy cliffs off the Herne Bay coast. That was fishing for me.

Oh, and another larger fish with scales a bit like threshing diamonds racked

in the cradle of the dinghy until its life went *phut*, a wet doused candle.

But until it did its heart I suppose it was tossed about in rage at air dreadful

as water might be for us. Until 'fishing' stopped and it may as well have been a sock.

Kirsten McDougall

from *She's a Killer*

Work in progress, forthcoming tbc

When I was seven, as a result of our house burning down and after we'd been to see the doctor about my behaviour, my mother had my IQ tested. It was an expensive test and we had to fly up to Auckland to do it. We ended up staying for three days because my mother got the test done twice. This was because I came out at 159, which is one point under the threshold for genius. They tested me once more to check and got the same result. My mother was exceptionally pleased with the result, as if I was an actual genius which accounted for why I'd lit the fire and told her my imaginary friend Simp had done it.

But my one-point-below genius never blossomed. I had the facility, the teachers said, but I lacked drive. They were wrong about that. I had drive in spades just nowhere to put it. I'd ace all my subjects easily, but it wasn't because I cared about them. I think that's what bothered the few teachers who thought they might push me. I just didn't care. Couldn't see the point. In the end they let me read books and when I was sick of reading I'd talk to Amy and stare out the window.

I went to university where I did a double degree in psychology and English literature because they were subjects that my mother thought would give me a well-rounded education. I did psychology because she said that clinical psych was very hard to get into so she thought it would give me something to aim for at last. She thought that doing English would help me make some friends because she'd seen an article in a magazine about how reading novels helped people understand one another. Amy went to Otago to do law which left me with no friends.

If you wanted friends you had to live in the halls. Most of the people in my lectures looked totally boring. What my mother didn't get was that I didn't have friends not because I didn't understand people. I understood them too well and I didn't like them.

I did honours in psychology and my grades were high enough to apply for clinical which I did because they said I should, and then, the cunts didn't let me in. They said in their report that I was brilliant but immature and that they'd take me back when I'd had some life experience.

It was the first time I'd failed academically and I didn't take it well. I knew I was the highest scoring student they had, and I was pissed off. How could they tell me to apply and then tell me I wasn't mature enough for their programme.

So, I left a shit in the psych professors's letterbox. Not my own, just a random dog turd I'd found on the street. But I ruined the whole event for myself because I never waited around to see the professor's face when she found it. Well, I waited for 45 minutes, and when I realised that I'd probably have to wait all day until she got home from work, I left. I don't even know if she found it or her kid did. I stayed at home drinking vodka for a week and then I hitchhiked around the South Island picking berries and then apples, cramming my life experience so that I could reapply for clinical the next year. But when it came to it I couldn't be bothered. I made an interview time and then never showed up. When my mother asked why they hadn't accepted me a second time I told her that they'd told me I was still too immature and they'd said I should get a job, to advance my life experience further. My mother rang the psych professor and shouted at her. The psych professor asked her if she went around putting shit in the letterboxes of everyone who didn't recognise her daughter's brilliance. My mother hung up. She told me what

the professor said but she didn't ask me why I'd done it.

I got a job as a receptionist at Jones, Jones & Young, an advertising agency that had seen the best days of their business and was dying though I didn't know it at the time because they had a real Andy Warhol on one of the walls, a minor piece, I was told, and a fridge stacked with Coke and Stella Artois. The Director, an English guy called Henry, told me they had a policy of hiring brilliant young people to run the reception. He said they usually hired actors, but they loved the fact I had an IQ of 159 and was going to be a psychologist one day and that the kind of education I had would be valuable in their line of work.

In my first week Henry called me into his office and asked me if I would analyse a client he was having trouble with. From then on we had daily meetings which he called scheduling but were mainly me giving him my Freudian analysis of the staff and clients. I was also supposed to analyse new clients but there weren't many coming in by that time, so I concentrated on the clients that Henry knew could spend more. He was into Freud, which was kind of basic but when when I tried to move towards Lacanian analysis he told me he'd hired me specifically because I'd listed Freudian analysis in my subjects studied. After our sessions he'd tell me my analysis was mad brilliant and phenomenal.

For a while JJ&Y became my world. Every Friday night and sometimes on a Wednesday a bunch of us would haunt the bars on Courtney Place, usually ending up at Resort where Henry was friends with one of the owners, Jim. This was back in the day when you had to press a buzzer and someone looked through a camera at you to ascertain whether you were the right kind of person to let in. The first few times I was let in I felt really great, like I'd won a prize that I didn't know I'd

wanted. Even though I knew I was only being let in because I was with Henry and the crew, I felt like I'd been chosen. I'd been chosen by the chosen. It was the first time in my life I'd hung with a gang of people.

There was a rumour that Resort had turned away Liv Tyler when she was here making a film. People said it like the bar was too cool for her, but I knew the real story because Jim told Henry all about it. They'd been in trouble for going over their capacity and had been warned if they went over again they'd lose their license. Liv only travelled in packs of five or more, and they couldn't let them all in so she left in a huff. You should have kicked five people out, said Henry. Nah, said Jim, it's not the way I roll. Anyway, it's been good for business. Henry thought Jim was cool, but after I'd met him a few times and seen how he talked to all his customers like they were special to him, I could see he was just a businessman.

The people closest to my age were the junior creatives, Oli and Jade, but they paid me little attention because I wasn't creative. I knew that Henry had an enormous crush on Jade because he'd ask me to give an analysis of Jade a lot. Some days Jade would be really nice to Henry and the next day she'd ignore him. It really confused Henry. He'd say, Do you think Jade has a father complex? Henry was a bit confused about what an Oedipal complex was, but I knew what he actually meant by his question, which was, Do you think Jade likes me? I'd construct elaborate answers for him. I'd say, Jade shows an unconscious fear of her sexuality by the way she interacts with those in authority which points to a lack of boundaries set by her early paternal figure and a conflict in her id-ego about her father, and by corollary, other authority figures. Henry took this to mean that Jade needed a bonus. He told her that if she and Oli's work got the account for Slide, this new coffee brand

he was going for at the time, he'd give them a bonus. It was low hanging fruit, because it was obvious to everyone that Slide were going to sign anyway. Jade and Oli got their bonus and Jade continued to ignore Henry every second day.

I actually didn't mind Jade too much. I liked that she didn't pander to Henry's obvious need for her to like him. She was way cooler than Henry, way cooler than anyone else in the office, even Oli, her creative partner who was definitely a cool guy. She had Māori designs tattooed on her arms, and this was before tattoos had peaked.

The funny thing was, even though my advice rarely made a difference to Henry's outcomes, he never fired me for it. Afterwards, once I was fired, I thought back and realised that even if it was bullshit, he loved hearing my psychoanalysis. It was like when my mother used to read her star sign in the morning paper out loud to me, as if she was reading an instruction manual on how she should act that day. People liked to be told with certainty what will happen. Most people are scared of free will.

Then one night at Resort Jade started pashing Jim, the owner, and Henry started to lose it. He was already quite drunk, but he got really passive-aggressive. He called Jim over to our table and asked him if he could order the most expensive champagne on the list. When Jim told him he was quite drunk already and no, he couldn't order the most expensive champagne because it would be wasted on him in his current state and he could thank him in the morning, Henry stood up and tried to punch him. It was actually funny because of how drunk he was. The whole thing happened in a kind of slow motion. Henry pulled his arm back to swing it and Jim had time to step right out of the way before Henry's arm came around and hit nothing but the motion swung him in a half circle and he tipped over.

Henry crashed sideways into Oli's lap, knocking glasses off our table. Jim told us to get Henry home and Oli and I got him into a taxi. Neither of us actually knew where he lived and Oli had to run back up and ask Jim if he knew. Jim told him the address and even where Henry hid his key. I hadn't realised they were such good friends.

It turned out Henry lived on Lookout Road in a really flash house with a massive view over to Shelly Bay and the ranges. His living room was a room you stepped down into with floor to ceiling windows at the front. Oli said it was like the 70s conversation pit, but ironic. I'd never seen an ironic living room before, let alone one designed for conversation. At home, Mum and I only sat in our living room to watch TV.

We led Henry though to a bedroom off a long hallway that looked like his bedroom, it was hard to tell because it was so clean and tidy, more like a hotel room than someone's bedroom. We let him go and he fell onto the bed and Oli took off his shoes. I left him to it and went through to the ironic pit. There was a turntable set up, one of those systems with only a few buttons which was how I knew it was expensive. I chose a Björk record and put it on. Oli came through and stood on the steps to the pit, waving a small snaplock bag.

Look what I found in Henry's jacket pocket, he said.

What? I said. I'd only smoked pot a handful of times.

Snow, he said. Coke.

Huh? I said. I decided because I knew nothing I'd be better off playing dumb because Oli was too cool for me to pretend to know what I was doing.

So, you've never done coke before, one-five-nine, he said. I guess you're looking after all those brain cells.

That's what they called me behind my back, Jade and Oli. One-five-nine. I'd heard them doing it. But neither of them had

said it to my face before. It didn't sound mean, just teasing.

No, I said.

Tonight's your lucky night, said Oli, and he slumped onto the sofa beside me.

But, they're Henry's drugs.

Henry's out to it. He won't remember a thing in the morning. He'll probably think he took it himself.

Really?

Yeah. Anyway, he loves you, so don't worry.

He doesn't love me. He loves Jade.

He's in love with Jade but he thinks you're mad brilliant and all that.

Okay, I said. Oli tipped the coke onto the coffee table and pulled out a credit card to chop it up, just like in the movies.

Does Jade know Henry's in love with her? I said.

How could she not? He said. Frankly, it's a bit of pain. I'm guessing that's why she kissed Jim tonight. Anyway, we're hatching a plan to go to London next year and set up as a creative team there, so she just has to hold it together long enough to get a reference from him. Jade's really ambitious.

What about Jim? I said.

What about him? Oli waved his hand like Jim was nothing. He picked up a copy of *Architectural Digest* magazine that was on Henry's coffee table. Jesus, he said and waved the cover at me. Have you ever looked at this magazine? Rich people's lives. Did you know Henry came from a super rich family?

No, I said.

Yeah, fancy old English family. Jade says his dad's a lord or something.

For real? I said.

Yeah. She said he's here trying to prove himself slumming around with commoners. But that he'll go back to England

when JJ&Y folds.

What do you mean? I said trying to sound calm when really I felt a bit alarmed. Work is folding?

It's only a matter of time. Henry's chasing the wrong wagon. We should be moving into more digital technologies and gaming. That's where me and Jade are going next. But I don't think he really gets it.

Oh, I said. I had no idea about any of this. I paid no attention at work beyond putting calls through and buying coffees and making up some Freudian analysis to give to Henry, which actually took up quite a lot of my time because he wanted some everyday.

Oli ripped a page out of the magazine and then ripped that page in half and started to roll it up.

Not that this affects you. You're going to be a psychologist.

Yeah, I said.

Did you really put your IQ on your CV? He said.

I shrugged.

You did!

It's a selling point, I said.

My mother had made me put it on. I knew nothing about what a CV actually was at the time.

Anyway, I got the job didn't I? I said.

Yeah, said Oli, grinning at me. You did. He offered me the first line. Just sniff, he said.

I sniffed. My nose spangled like the time it did when I mistook wasabi for avocado and ate a spoonful of it in my sushi box. I felt a shot of electricity shoot through my body. I felt alive and like I could run a marathon if I wanted to. I stood up and started dancing to Björk.

Oli stood and danced too. At first he was dancing like a fool, making poses, so I started making poses back and doing

the running man which was the only actual dance move I'd ever done consistently well. I bumped his hip playfully and he bumped back and then before I actually knew how, he was pressed right up against me and we were kissing. I felt like there was a storm all around me, but I was steady at the centre and I was pulling Oli into my orbit like some sort of sex magnet. He stuck to me and we kept kissing and I could feel his cock getting hard in his pants.

You're a good kisser, he said.

I know, I said.

I hadn't actually kissed that many guys before. Only two and I'd only ever watched sex on TV, never actually had it myself. Usually I felt inexperienced compared to other people, but with the cocaine in my blood I dropped all that baggage. I felt confident and like life was a game I knew how to play and win at. I could win cooler-than-cool Oli. I could win anything I wanted. A part of me was also aware it was the drugs making me feel this way, but, in the moment, I didn't care. There was only now and I didn't want to be a virgin anymore.

I put my hands on Oli's butt and pulled his hips into me. He groaned slightly.

Cocaine makes me really horny, he said.

Me too, I said. Though it was the first time I'd taken it, I guessed that's what was happening. Also, Oli was good looking and cool and I'd never been so close to anyone like that before.

Shall we fuck? he said.

Okay, I said.

Yeah? He said.

Then I did something that really surprised me. Like I didn't know I could act like that. I turned around and undid my jeans and let them and my knickers drop to the floor and I bent over. I craned my head around in what I thought might be a sexy

way. Fuck me, I said.

Jesus, he said.

I heard him fiddling around with a condom and then he was in me, pushing his hips against my butt. It hurt but I didn't say anything. I was wondering whether I should do some of that groaning like women do in the movies when I heard him murmur, Jade, and then he gave a pulse and cried out. I guess that's when he came. I hadn't come. I thought we'd barely gotten started but then, I didn't really know either.

Sorry, he said. I didn't realise how turned on I was.

I stood up. My knickers and jeans were around my ankles. I tried to reach down and pull them up in a cool and sexy way.

It's the coke, I said, like I knew exactly what I was doing.

Yeah, he said, I guess it is. He took the condom off his cock and walked out of the pit and into the kitchen. I heard a rubbish bin lid close and water running.

I sat down on the sofa. My head was spinning. Björk was singing, *I'm going hunting*. I knew Björk was cool, but in a way I didn't understand. In those days I was exceptionally naive about what made something hip. My categories for such things had very strict rules which couldn't be bent. Björk definitely pushed at the boundaries of my rules, but if Oli and Henry liked her, then she must be cool.

Oli came back into the pit and handed me a glass of water.

Thank you, I said.

He sat down beside me on the sofa, not so that we were touching, but closer than he'd sat to me ever before.

That was unexpected, he said.

Yes, I said.

You know, he said, tilting his head on the side. A few people think you and Henry are screwing, when you have those long meetings in his office.

I scratched the back of my head. This was news to me. We've never even hugged, I said. I don't know why I said that because it made me sound like I wanted to screw him.

You're not really his type I guess, said Oli.

What do you mean? I said. I think I felt partly offended.

You're too smart for him, he said. You'd walk all over him. I mean, you do kind of walk all over him anyway.

What? I said. I didn't know what he meant by this.

You have Henry twisted around your little finger, he said. He thinks you're a genius.

I'm not, I said. I'm one point below.

What?

Genius level is officially 160 IQ points and above. I'm 159, as you know.

Oli gave a whistle. Tough business, he said.

Yep.

Oli reached forward and brushed some stray hairs off my face. It was a very tender gesture and it caught me completely off-guard. He looked at me with his green eyes, very seriously.

I hope you do become a psychologist, he said. You're too smart to work in advertising even if you're not officially a genius.

I looked down because I could feel a tightening in my throat like I was going to cry. Nobody had ever said anything like that to me before. I couldn't tell him the truth, that I was never going to apply for clinical again, because then he'd think less of me. If I told him the the truth then I'd go back to being merely admin, not admin-on-the-way-to-greatness. I wanted him to kiss me again, but he sat back. It didn't occur to me that I could kiss him. I no longer felt like a sex magnet. The coke had worn off. Oli and Jade were going to go to London next year to become fabulous rich creatives and I would be on reception

at JJ&Y while the business folded around me like a flatpack in reverse. Maybe I'd be the last person to lose their job. Someone had to answer the phones and water the plants and I couldn't see Henry doing any of that.

At some point we got up off the sofa and left Henry's house. We walked down the long hill back into town and the city lights rimmed the harbour and the water was a shiny black and I felt happy that I wasn't a virgin anymore and also a bit deflated because maybe I'd expected something different, something more than what it was.

Before Oli and I parted he touched my hand. Thanks, that was fun, he said, like we'd been to the park together or something.

Yeah, I said. We should do it again sometime. I tried to sound like I was a fun person.

Oli grinned. But he didn't say anything, he just waved his hand and we went home to our separate houses.

Monday at work was weird. Oli was exactly the same with me as he was before we had sex—whenever I tried to make conversation he just seemed like he was vaguely distracted. Henry was really really nice to Jade and she ignored him more than usual. When he said good morning to her she wouldn't lift her eyes from the screen. Instead of drinking their morning coffee at the common table, Oli and Jade would take theirs back to their cubicle and talk quietly to each other. Oli and Jade would leave together on the dot at 6 and I never got a chance to talk to Oli without Jade being there. I began to understand that to him having sex with me was just a fun thing to do on a Friday night. He didn't know I'd been a virgin until then. It wasn't like I'd had a massive crush on him or anything, or that I expected him to marry me, but I did want him to become a

little bit obsessed with me. I wanted to feel special to someone.

Henry kept calling me into his office to get me to go over what happened on Friday night. He couldn't remember much past ordering expensive champagne, he couldn't even remember drinking it. He said he wanted me to give him any intel on Jade that came my way. Like what sort of intel? I said, thinking maybe he was finally getting more interested in Lacan. Henry looked at me hard, I just want to know if Jade is seeing Jim, he said. He wasn't even asking from a psychological perspective anymore, it was just flat out—is Jade seeing Jim?

I had no idea how to find this out. I couldn't ask Oli, because that would be weird and I couldn't ask Jade straight out. I tried to eavesdrop but every time I got near their cubicle all they seemed to be talking about was the job they were working on. I thought about going to Resort to ask Jim directly, but I wasn't sure they'd buzz me in if I wasn't with Henry or the others. It was much easier analysing Jade for Henry than it was finding out what she was actually doing in her life.

Then, on Thursday before lunch I went to the loo and Jade was standing over the basin reapplying her mascara. She looked like she'd been crying.

Oh, hi, I said.

She glanced at me briefly and said hi and then went on brushing her eyelashes with her wand. An insect in my stomach stirred and rose, something in me that I needed to purge. It was a feeling I'd had before. The first time I ever had it was when I was young, maybe four or five. We were in the supermarket, and there was a little girl sitting in a trolley looking at her mother who was holding a box and reading the nutritional information on the side of it. The girl was small and sweet. Looking at this little girl I felt an unbearable feeling rise up,

as if her presence was a reduction agent for whatever it was I contained. It was bubbling inside of me, impossible to contain. The only way I could get rid of it was by hurting her. I wanted to hit her right out of her trolley, but I knew that wasn't right.

As my mother pushed our trolley past the little girl I reached out and pinched her chubby leg that was hanging out of the trolley seat. I felt her soft fatty skin between my index finger and my thumb and I pinched it as hard as I could. It only took a second and then my mother and I were past them. The little girl's face froze in confusion, and then she screamed and started to cry. Her own stupid mother had been distracted by a box and hadn't seen what I'd done. I didn't turn around, just trailed my mother down the end of the aisle. My mother did turn around. She didn't like it when I misbehaved in the supermarket and I could tell the small girl screaming annoyed her. The trapped bubbling feeling in me had gone and I felt deeply satisfied.

When I saw Jade in the bathroom that day I wanted to push her over and hold her down on the ground and press the sole of my hand hard into her eye socket and smudge all her eye makeup off. But I didn't.

Henry wants to see you in his office, I said. It wasn't true.

She didn't look at me, just kept touching up the ends of her eyelashes like she was on some endless quest for lash perfection.

Now, I said.

Tell Henry that Oli and I will be there in ten minutes.

He doesn't want to see Oli, just you, I said.

Jade gave a loud sigh and turned around her arms crossed over her chest.

She definitely had been crying. The rims of her eyelids were swollen and red. I wondered if the pressure from Henry was getting to her, maybe she and Oli would leave before next year.

The idea irritated me. Not of Jade going, but of Oli going too. How could he possibly become obsessed with me if he wasn't here?

Tell Henry . . . her voice cracked and she stopped. It doesn't matter, she said. She hung her head and I saw a fresh tear roll down her cheek. Even crying, she looked cool and somehow, still pretty. I could feel the thing in me, a giant force of energy waiting to be let out.

You brought this on yourself, Jade, I said.

What? she said.

The way you tease Henry, nice one day, a bitch the next. Then kissing Jim at Resort in front of him, I said.

What I was saying surprised me because it sounded like something my mother would say about a character in one of the TV shows we watched. If a woman got followed home at night she'd say, well, she shouldn't have been out alone like that.

You have no idea what's going on here, she said. You think you're so smart and yet, there's so much you miss.

Well, it obviously bothers you, I said. It's obvious you've been crying in the bathroom over the mess you've made.

Jade shook her head. Oli tells me everything, she said. Did you know that?

What? I stopped then. The trapped thing stopped bubbling.

She sighed again. I know you two stole Henry's drugs and then you had sex in his living room. Oli told me.

I couldn't believe Oli had told her. I leaned back against the toilet cubicle, hearing the dull thud of my heart beat. I couldn't look at her, so I looked at the tiles. One was cracked and I tapped it with my toe trying to lift the cracked piece up. So Oli told her. That surprised me. Perhaps that meant he was a bit obsessed with me. Maybe he talked to Jade about me like

Henry talked to me about Jade.

I don't know why I said what I said next. Perhaps I was asking for guidance, for her to tell me what it meant.

When we were having sex he said your name, I said.

As soon as I said it I regretted it. Out loud it sounded bad, like it wasn't me he was interested in at all.

Now it was Jade's turn to look shocked. She actually dropped the mascara out of her hand. It clattered on the tile floor and rolled over towards me. Fuck, she said.

I don't think he knew he said it. He was high, I said.

Oh my god, she said. Oh my god. I'm so sorry.

I was confused by her apology. Why?

Well, that's so . . . she paused.

What?

Humiliating, she said.

I felt my face go bright red then.

I mean, for both of us, she said. He's my creative partner, not my . . . we're not . . . Oh my god. Did you think we were . . .

No, I said. I didn't. Otherwise why would he have sex with me? I just thought he was confused and maybe he'd talked to you about me.

Her eyes widened at me. Fuck, she said again.

I had to do something then, so I kicked her mascara hard like a ball and it rolled and bounced off the wall under the sink and ricocheted back and under a toilet cubicle.

Are you angry at me? she said. You're angry at me when it's the men who cause the problems? You're a child.

Jade just didn't get it. She couldn't see it was she who was causing the problems. If she was subtracted from the sum there would be no problem.

I'm not a feminist, I said.

Feminism wasn't something I thought much about. I wasn't

against it or into it, but I didn't want to side with Jade just because we were women.

Oh my god, she said.

So why were you crying then? I said.

Not that you care, but I was crying because my nana just died.

Oh, I said. I didn't believe her.

Thanks for your sympathy. I'll probably be away next week at her tangi, so you can work on Henry while I'm gone.

What do you mean? I said.

I know you sit in there making up psychoanalytical bullshit.

You should stop listening in on other people's conversations, I said.

Jade shook her head. She packed up her makeup case and left the toilet. She didn't try to get her mascara back.

I went into a cubicle and sat there for a while. Then I went back to my desk, packed my bag and left for the day.

For a few days I watched TV and didn't get out of my dressing gown. I told my mother I had the flu and she rang in sick for me.

Then one night, I left the house and went out walking. Before I knew it I had walked up Mt Victoria and was outside Henry's house. All the lights were out. The potplant where Oli and I had found the key the night we took Henry home was still there and I lifted it and felt around. The key was there so I let myself into Henry's house.

Inside, it was very quiet. I supposed Henry would be sound asleep. I knew he took sleeping pills because he had trouble staying asleep through the night due to a feeling of dread that woke him most nights. He'd told me all about this feeling but not what lay behind it.

I walked softly over to the conversation pit and stood at the top of the stairs, looking at where Oli and I had danced. We'd had sex there almost a week ago. Björk had been playing while I had sex for the first time. That was good choice, I thought and I congratulated myself even though I still didn't get what made Björk cool.

I didn't know why I was here. If Henry woke and found me it would look weird, I knew that. It could look like breaking and entering. Well, not breaking because I used the key, but definitely entering without an invitation even though we were friends. Right at that moment, I didn't care. I was someone that men had sex with because they couldn't have sex with the person they actually wanted to. I was someone who entered people's houses uninvited. A feeling of tiredness suddenly washed over me and all I wanted to do was to lie down on Henry's expensive leather sofa and sleep. I knew that if I did lie down I would fall asleep until morning and Henry would find me and I wasn't sure what I would say then.

I turned to leave and as I walked towards the door, I heard sounds coming from down the hallway. A moment ago it had been quiet but now, I could definitely hear people, or two people. I tiptoed over to the entrance to Henry's hall and listened. A woman was panting and moaning in a way like you're supposed to when you're about to orgasm and I heard a man, Henry presumably, grunting in an unattractive way. Then I heard Henry's voice saying, Ah, Jade, oh fuck Jade, oh Christ. And then it was quiet again.

A few moments later I heard them talking. I could hear Jade's voice and Henry's but I couldn't hear what they were saying. I left the house. I left Henry's house, putting the key back under the dumb pot plant.

I walked down the hill in a daze. It was a windy night and

dark purple clouds were racing over the city. Watching them made me feel like the breath was being ripped out of me. When I got home I lay in bed wide awake feeling completely bewildered. My IQ was one point below genius yet all these things happened around me and I didn't understand any of them.

The next day I went back to work. Jade wasn't there. Henry said she was going to her nana's tangi. He asked me to organise some flowers to be sent to the marae. I said I didn't think that was culturally appropriate and Henry said, Just do it please. At 4pm Henry called me into his office. He had a very serious expression on his face and for a moment I thought he knew that I was in his house last night listening to him and Jade have sex. But it wasn't that.

He said that JJ&Y were making cuts and would be closing in the new year when he would be going back to England. He said he was sorry but they had to let me go.

When? I said.

Today, he said.

What?

He said I could stay on for three months until they closed, but if I left now he could offer me three months pay. He said he'd prefer it if I left quietly.

Who's going to answer the phones? I said. While you're making cuts? I imagined Henry walking around with a pair of snips, cutting up whatever got in his way.

He said they'd answer their own phones, and that mostly people emailed anyway.

I thought we were friends, I said.

Henry gave me a funny look. We are, he said.

Friends don't fire friends, I said. Did Jade put you up to this?

She's got nothing to do with it, Henry said, but he took a small pause before he said it so I knew he was lying.

Look, he said, it's more a matter of last in, first out. You're getting paid.

I sat in the chair across the desk from him. I'd sat here for months talking to him about psychology, regurgitating all the stuff I'd learned in my degree and now he sat there looking back at me like he barely knew me.

The other thing is, he said. And please don't take this the wrong way, but you can be, ah, quite manipulative. I don't think you mean to be, I think you're probably bored, but you do need to learn to be more plain dealing with people.

I stared at him for a good long time.

I heard your father is a lord, I said.

Henry looked down and sighed. That's correct, he said.

So I guess you're going back to England to be a lord's son, I said. And live in a castle or whatever lords do.

Henry smiled coldly. Something like that, he said.

I nodded. In a way Henry was right, I didn't care too much about the job. Apart from going to Resort on a Friday night, it was boring, but I didn't think it was fair Henry was getting rid of me first or to call me manipulative when he was the one asking me to psychoanalyse people he wanted to have sex with.

You can go and do your clinical studies, he said. You need to do more than work on reception. You've got this brain, you should use it.

Sure, I said. I was sick of people telling me I had a brain and I should use it when they didn't know anything about me or my brain.

The next year I got a job as an administrative assistant in the enrolment office at the university. I was to help with

integration, which was what they were calling it then. Every few years they changed the words for what I did. Mainly my job was answering phones, and making sure potential students got to speak to the right course advisors. I've been in that job more or less since I was fired from JJ&Y over ten years ago. The only thing that has really changed about my job is what they call it. Now I manage the cascade of enquiries.

Sometimes when I think about it, which I don't do too often, it feels like I've been asleep for ten years.

A year after Henry fired me I was waiting at the dentist's and flicking through *Hello!* magazine which was full of stories about English celebrities and minor royalty. I liked *Hello!* because the articles were so relentlessly nice about rich and famous people you just knew it was sarcastic. Like if a famous actor's wife wore an ugly dress to a red carpet premiere, *Hello!* would write an article saying she'd made a bold choice, when actually what you knew they were saying was, haha she looks like shit. About fifteen pages in there was a story about Lord von Schmitt's son on his special day and there were Henry and Jade, staring at each other like they were in love.

The story was about their magical wedding day. Jade had showcased her original style in a stunning tea-length wedding dress with a sparkling sequin embellishment and a summer-ready green and white bouquet which included native flora from New Zealand, her place of birth. I noticed that her sleeves were cut to her mid-forearm so you couldn't see her tattoos. There was a quote from Lord von Schmitt himself saying that Jade had brought a love of nature out in his son. They were planning to live in Oxfordshire on a working organic farm. They called it that, a working farm. Jade, formerly a designer, was using her artistic talents to create branding for the farm's

produce. Ten percent of profit from sale of the produce went to a small African village the couple supported. They were working closely with farming executives from Duchy Farm because Henry and Jade thought that Prince Charles had been a radical influence when it came to organic farming and they wanted to do what he'd done with Duchy.

I wondered if Oli knew about Jade and Henry? Maybe he'd always known she'd side with the money and title, and really, who wouldn't?

I'd only seen Oli once since I'd been fired. I was walking up Willis Street and he was coming towards me. He had his arm around a woman who had long blonde hair pulled up in a bouncy ponytail and they were drinking takeaway coffees. I looked away like I was staring at something across the road and walked quickly past. I don't think he noticed me. But I wondered for the next few days if he'd ever said my name out loud when he had sex with his girlfriend.

Sue Orr

from *Loop Station*

Work in progress, forthcoming 2021

For Dame Margaret Sparrow

My mother took me to the airport, that Friday morning in May. We'd stayed the night before in a motel just a few steps away from the runway, or so it seemed. I dreamed that night of staring out the plane window at the necklace of ruby taillights across the city counterpane below. I'd never been in the air, I don't know how I knew to dream this. I dreamed, too, of watching enormous engines tumbling from the armpits of jet planes, crashing through the motel roof. Through the bedroom's glittered ceiling (all the rage in the seventies) and onto my bed, onto me. Entirely missing my sin-free mother, snoring fitfully in the other single bed in the room.

We arrived at the motel after dark, around eight o'clock I think—we'd eaten dinner before leaving home. *May as well* my father had said, unable to look at me. He hadn't looked at me for weeks. *Save having to find something to eat so late in the city.* My mother drove into the motel carpark, hunched herself over the steering wheel and squinted through the darkness, seeking the office. There was nothing to distinguish it from the other parts of the squat, utilitarian breezeblock building except a single bare lightbulb, burning strong above the bug-screened door.

It was raining—just a misty drizzle. She inched the car into a space far from the glowing light. There was only one other car in the entire carpark, and she parked so close to it I couldn't open my door to get out. 'Stay there,' she said, as my door nudged the vehicle next to us. 'I'll go in and sort it out.' Sorting

it out—sorting me out, me and my situation—had become a catchphrase muttered by my parents during the recent weeks. *You'll have to sort this out, Rhonda* I heard him say, the night we discovered my situation. I heard the way his words caught in the back of his throat, before he said her name. The burn of her shame coloured my face as I clicked my car door shut again.

She returned to the car in silence but her own face mirrored mine. There we were, two glowing Lowrys. Yet I was cold. I remember that. I remember the chill of that late autumn night, the way it soaked my bones.

The room key glinted in the clutch of her fist as she started the car and reversed it out of the space. I tried to guess which unit door might be ours. She swung the car in a wide half circle then pulled back in, just two spaces further along from our former park. 'We could have walked,' I laughed. 'It's not even raining that hard.'

'I'll unlock the door, you wait here.' She ignored my wisecrack, reaching behind her to grab her overnight bag from the back seat before turning to face me. Her eyes were wide and she was wetting her lips with her tongue, again and again, as though slightly mad with thirst. She breathed in sharply, as if to say more, but no words followed. The flush was fading from her cheeks.

She was frightened of me, of being tainted by me, of being seen with me outside this motel organised for us by the mysterious women of Sisters Overseas Services.

I woke before the five o'clock alarm the next morning, hungry, eyeing the chilly bin in the corner of the room. My mother had packed cereal, milk and bottled peaches. Exactly four teabags, although it wasn't clear whether she intended to use them all. I usually had Milo, there was no Milo in the

bin. But then, there was nothing usual about this excursion. From where I was looking, by now, her shame clouded every moment, dictated her every action. Of course she'd packed a breakfast; we'd not eat in public. There was a box full of teabags on the tiny kitchen bench—we would not be using those. We would leave no trace of having been here, in this SOS-approved abortion pitstop.

I slipped out of bed and silently opened the cupboards, seeking out a bowl and spoon. I picked up the entire chilly bin and went into the pale pink bathroom, closing the door behind me. There, sitting on the lidded toilet bowl, I prepared my breakfast. She appeared at the dark doorway just as I was lifting my second spoonful to my mouth. A silhouette, her lumpy body visible through the cotton of her nightie. 'You can't have that, Erica' and she stepped forward and snatched the bowl from my lap. The milk spilled over the side, splashed onto the grubby grey tiles at my feet. 'It says. In the folder. No food, on the day of the . . .'

'Abortion,' I said.

While I showered, she dressed and ate all the breakfast. Then she busied herself reading and rereading papers from the brown folder, her librarian glasses perched on her nose. The effort she went to not to look at me, not to catch my eye, broke my heart. She'd already told me, many times, what would happen inside the terminal. I was to go to the Pan Am check in counter and seek out a woman wearing a bright red cardigan.

'What if there's more than one in a red cardigan?' I asked.

'There'll only be one will be looking for you,' she replied.

'Won't you be coming inside? With me?'

'They say the parking's terrible, at the airport. They say it's impossible to park nearby'. My mother turned away from me. 'I'll drop you off. You'll be okay. You just need to walk inside

and find the sign.’

She had nothing to go on other than what she’d been told by the woman from SOS. Neither she nor my father had ever been on an aeroplane. But, even now, it still feels particularly strange—cruel—that she wouldn’t come into the terminal and deliver me safely into the hands of the woman in red. Was she frightened of seeing someone she knew—some tanned, wealthy woman returning all relaxed from an overseas holiday who, spying us across crowded terminal, might exclaim *Rhonda! And Erica! Where are you two off to?* Of course she was. But there was more than fear behind her cruelty towards me that morning. From the very first day that my pregnancy had been confirmed, she and my father had demanded to know the name of the boy. They asked, cajoled, threatened, bribed, pleaded. I didn’t have the words to tell them. Her fury had peaked, troughed and peaked again before flatlining to an obdurate coolness towards me. Refusing to enter the terminal felt to me like her final, pathetic salvo at my silence.

More hunching and squinting over the steering wheel, this time through the maze of signs directing traffic in and out of the airport. She found the drop off bay and pulled in. We both got out of the car and I took my travel bag from the boot. I was surprised to see her begin to cry; tiny sobs punctuating the sharp breaths of fear she’d practised in the car the night before, in the motel parking lot. ‘You’ve got the brown folder haven’t you. It’s got everything in it. The money . . . and everything. You can’t lose that brown folder.’ I hugged her goodbye. ‘Don’t worry Mum. I’ll sort things out. Tell Dad. Things have been sorted out.’

I ashamedly declare this now—I was glad to be rid of her pitying, stoic, terrified presence. I was going overseas. To

Australia! A place I'd only ever seen on television. A country with pet kangaroos called Skippy and cute boys called Sonny who knew how to whistle them to heel. The brown folder and its contents did not interest me. My condition interested me only in the fact that it would be gone later that evening. My journey thus far, from the back seat of a red Vauxhall to the footpath outside Auckland International Airport had been asymptotic, circling closer and closer to that boy without reaching romantic touchdown. I stood on that footpath, in the darkness, and watched my mother's tail lights disappear around the corner. I waved, just in case she was watching in her rear view mirror.

And there she goes, breathing so sharply she's in danger of hyperventilating. *Coming over all funny* was her medical terminology for the state that she'd find herself in, from time to time when *things got a bit too much*. So she's in the driver's seat, pulling out from the parking space, into the traffic, wondering how a librarian and a postie are going to pay off a loan shark who gave you the money for your daughter's abortion. She thinks about how she is fifty-five, and has never been able to save enough money to go anywhere on a plane.

Elizabeth Knox

Faulty Valve

from *Night, Ma* (a memoir)

Work in progress, forthcoming tbc

My mother lived in Picton for seven and a half years. I'd visit several times each year in the school holidays with my son. We'd catch the late sailing from Wellington. The ferry would get into Picton at nine, and we'd walk to Mum's, Jack wheeling our bag along the frost-glossy pavers of High Street.

After Jack had his post-puberty growth Mum began to find thing for him to help her with. She'd save the heavy work for her tall grandson by, for instance, getting him to shift a pile of pavers from the gravel driveway to the tiny courtyard by the sunroom she'd had built on in 2004. Then, after we gone back home, she'd change her mind about what she wanted, and would shift everything again.

I'd phone and she'd confess. 'My back is a little sore because I returned all those pavers to the driveway. They weren't the right thing after all.'

'Mum! Didn't you have a plan? We thought you had a plan.'

I'd scold and fret and remind her of her osteoporosis, for which she took Fosamax once a month, a dose that kept her confined to the house for a day while it went through her system causing almost hourly bouts of diarrhoea. Mum's hips were at fracture level, and her spine below that—held together by her gardener's muscles and whatever habits of uprightness and cohesion even brittle bones retain. She was a woman who would break, a lifelong coeliac, diagnosed late in life.

At eight she broke her femur falling over on grass. No one in her family could understand how she'd managed it. Who

pitches over on smooth ground and breaks a leg? They always mentioned it as if it was an accomplishment. The bone took five months to knit. Her mother kept her out of school, and her father—the Secretary of the South Island Workers Union, a union which represented the casual labourers of harvests, fruit picking, and shearing time—would take her with him when he went to meetings, held in the memorial halls of little country towns, or those sitting on groomed wedges of lawn at rural crossroads. The halls two miles from this place, and four from that. In cold weather Mum's father would carry her inside and she'd be settled in a comfortable chair by the stove. Other times she'd stay in the car with a bottle of soda and would watch the horses, parked in the shade but still in harness, and the cars, all of them stationary since most of the rural road's usual traffic would be at the meeting. There was maybe a hawk or two. And she always had a book on the go. Her time out of school had hardened her habit of reading.

I remember sitting at my Auntie Thel's kitchen table with my other aunts, Joan and Shona, while they told me, with old indignation, how when they all shared a room in their Invercargill house my mother wouldn't let them put the light out till she had finished her book.

'But *how* would she not let you?' I asked. Mum was smaller than her sisters—so small that in two years, not consecutive, her mother persuaded the school to keep her back so that she wouldn't feel uncomfortable among all the big, developed girls. 'Was it her personality?' That I could believe. I wanted my aunts to say so, and confirm my belief. Mum's quiet force was the sunshine in the long perspective of my teen years. There were habits of being she had that I wanted to have. For instance, Mum never troubled herself with feeling ashamed or self-conscious if she got even the slightest intuition that some

person's remarks were intended to make her feel shame or self-consciousness. She'd hear the dog whistle of malice. Malice always firmed up Mum's resolve. I wanted to be like that.

'No,' said Shona. 'Heather's bed was by the light switch. The bedroom was cold. If we got out of our beds and switched off the light she'd turn it straight back on. She'd keep it up. There was no convincing her.'

'So, Mum,' I asked, 'how long did it take you to move all the pavers back to the driveway?'

'I didn't do it all in one go. I'm not silly.'

My mother was a person who thought with her hands. Which isn't to say she wasn't given to contemplation—she was, she very much enjoyed telling or hearing stories about what people said and did. She and I would spend hours analysing why such and such a person might say this, or do that. She was neither believer nor doubter, cheerer nor caviller—just endlessly interested in people. In their behaviour and reasoning, how they organised their idea of themselves according to their view of the world. How that view of the world might be deduced from what they did, and how they explained themselves.

I think I'm a novelist partly because of those conversations.

For Mum, ideas about the world were a glove around the hand of how people behaved. The ideas covered and concealed, protected and decorated, while the hand acted and could act without ideas. Accordingly, almost all of Mum's reading was novels, where ideas are embodied and dramatised, argued, proven or disproven in story.

But when Mum came to make things, she always began with her hands. She had to have the thing in front of her. Two yards of orange and white cotton gingham. A freezer full of Black Doris plums. A gap in the garden where a hebe might go nicely. Mum

wouldn't have been a contented or apt online shopper. Indeed, once going out involved a wheelchair, it was suggested to her by daughters that EziBuy or Farmers had websites, and that browsing and choosing from those websites might be less of a bother. After all, she *had* shopped out of catalogues—Living Nature and Postie Fashions—‘with variable success,’ she’d say. In 2010, when we’d take her out, she’d get in among the racks, pinching fabrics to see which kept a crease, and delving for the label low down inside the garment, the label that would give her its percentages, cotton to polypropylene, Tencel to spandex. There’d always be too many carousels crowded in too small a floor space, even in quarter-acre sized stores. Whenever she sent me away to return a lap full of garments that might have done—before she found better ones in the rack of knickers and bralettes for twelve-year-olds—I’d lose sight of her altogether. I’d only be able to locate her by triangulating the direction of the gazes of other shoppers, who would be peering with a mix of pity and alarm at the wasted little woman with the staring blue-grey gaze forcing her wheelchair through wobbling carousels with sleeves and sleeves trailing over her busy hands.

Mum reasoned and calculated by touch. She built a rock garden at Paremata, perhaps having planned where to put various shrubs—depending on wind and sun—but certainly not planning where the rocks might go. Dad had acquired them. He’d driven over to the Wairarapa and backed onto some riverbed. He’d made a ramp with a couple of two-by-tens, and used a crowbar to free boulders, then main force to roll them up into the boot of the Torana. He’d driven back home with great care, the drive wheels not really doing their best connecting with the road on the upward slope on the Rimutaka Hill and, on the downhill, the weight in the boot propelling him rather too quickly. Dad put the stones roughly where Mum wanted

them. Got them down from the kerb on Bayview Road. But of course Mum changed her mind, deciding, for example, that it would be better to make a hole and sink the sharp end of that particular rock so that the flat side would offer a warm seat to anyone wanting to perch between daphne bushes to drink their coffee.

I have a very clear memory of watching her, out in the mud, in her old tramping parka, her hair plastered to her forehead, bulldozing a boulder up the slope. She was five foot and usually weighed around sixty kilos. Her fingernails were always cracked and often spotted with black blood blisters.

Mum is holding the tree trimmer and performing a kind of dance with her tall partner, the *Prunus Negra*. She positions the trimmer's toucan-beak blades, then hauls on the nylon cord that closes them. There is a rain of purple leaves, a crack, and she steps deftly back for the branch that drops at her feet. Mum has secateurs. I don't know what she's doing with them apart from threatening me as I go past on my way about some activity far less hands-on. Sometimes I worry about her and offer my help, then cause her great amusement by vigorously attacking a branch with the blunt side of the saw. Mum shuts one eye and lifts the weight off the valve of the pressure cooker. Mum squeezes the pillowcase stuffed with crushed apples and tied to the bathtub tap in order to release juice that is brown now but, with boiled sugar and extra pectin, will magically become jewel-pink apple jelly. Mum stalks a blowfly around the lounge with her fly swat, saying, when it lands on the light shade, 'Oh come here, bother you.' Mum slides open the glass door of the mouse cage and lets our pet mice out into our bedroom where they run around all day, their tails high with happiness.

Mum's house in Picton was at the quiet landward end of Wellington Street. Its core was a Skyline garage, zincalume made to look like weatherboards. It had been insulated and lined with rimu tongue-in-groove. It had a verandah at the back facing the garden, and a very quaint garden shed that might have made a sleepout if any of us had ever had the energy to remove its military-strength built-in shelving. The shed was a haunt for wētā and for clumps of pine needles that blew in under its roof and which I was always mistaking for wētā.

When Mum bought the house it had a fishpond with frilly-finned goldfish and frogs. The pond was a great source of delight to my three cats, who boarded with Mum in her first winter, while we were renovating our house. The cats grew thick coats in the Marlborough cold and insisted on sleeping with Mum in her single bed.

Mum kept the pond till the cats went back to Wellington, then had it filled in. She found a home for the fish with a neighbour, had the pond pumped, and left it to dry out over a few summer weeks. The frogs all departed for the wetland near the Catholic Church. Mum put in an order for gravel in two grades, road metal to fill the hole and pea gravel for a top layer. What she envisioned was a little space where she could set a chair and table and from which the winding rock-lined path would proceed to the shed, the raised beds, the peach trees espaliered on the corrugated-iron fence, the thicket of bottlebrush and kōwhai. Wellington Street was the first flat garden Mum had owned since the backyard in Pomare with its few apple and apricot trees, and narrow concrete path to the Hills Hoist. The Wellington Street house was fully fenced, the fence well over the statutory two and half metres. Fergus called it the Tinny House. It looked like a fortress, but it was very private and sheltered—and by the time Mum was well-

established, it was quite lovely.

But Mum's gravel terrace never eventuated. The builders came with their gravel, a mix of clay and rotten rock they called 'spoil' or 'fill'. Mum had kept out of their way and hadn't known what they were pouring until it was in and flattened down. Rain arrived as they were finishing. The puddles that formed on the quickly eroded surface were the colour of clay slip and ran off along all the little paths. Mum was almost in tears on the phone to me. And this was a woman who scarcely ever cried. She couldn't believe they'd been so stupid. She couldn't believe they didn't know the difference between fill and gravel. She couldn't believe they wanted her to pay to remedy the situation. She'd paid them already and, as for her original instructions, she had nothing in writing.

Things like this happened to Mum once she was elderly and on her own. What I thought at the time was that far too many men find it terribly difficult to listen to older women. It can be hard to fix your eyes on a lined and downy face without the incentive of flattering reciprocal attention. Your mind tends to wander. I'm right about this. But also, Mum's enjoyment of people was a hindrance as well as help to her. It won her sympathy and loyalty—something that became clear to me once she was ill. But in her enjoyment she'd sometimes be taking too much pleasure in the interaction she was having with the builder, or the shop assistant. They'd be busy. She'd be friendly. She'd be asking about their day, or offering an opinion, or generally probing the tempting mystery of their separate personhood, and sometimes people just don't have time for that. Other times she was a star. The Portuguese man in the fish shop and the Lebanese man at the halal butcher and the woman in the deli in Newtown, Sydney, would ask my sister Sara about Mum over all the months between her visits—

because Sara hadn't really talked to those people much before she came in with her conversationally adventurous mother, and that mother had really been *interested* in them, in who they were, what they did, and what they liked. Possibly Mum just had to tell the men sorting her pond about her plans for the garden. They were time-poor, she was expansive, so she got spoil instead of gravel.

I loved to listen to Mum talk. She was a good storyteller. And when I told her my stories she was always engaged, and sufficiently sympathetic, though if she thought I had something out of proportion she'd say so. She wouldn't get angry or impatient if I kept explaining why I was right, or justified. But I had to be clear about it, and wholly convincing. She was very sensitive to falsehood and folly, and really almost happy to hear them from other people. She preferred to approve, but liked to be amused too. She liked to be puzzled—which I think is a quality few people have. But, whatever, daughters were to be sensible. Or I was. And, to a lesser degree, Sara was.

I'd go with Jack to Picton and, on our second night—our first dinner—Jack curled up on the divan in the sunroom with Mum's big tabby Cheeky tucked in the crook of his knees. A large cat, solid of muscle, soft of fat, thick of fur, who appreciated the sizable docking bay behind Jack's bent legs.

Early evenings Jack would read. Mum would cut up Cheeky's nightly helping of chicken breast then, when he didn't immediately come to get it, she'd slip the plate under his nose wherever he was sitting, on the couch, on the carpet, on the divan in the sunroom. Even when his back was firmly turned to the noise of the kitchen Mum would pursue Cheeky with food. Then she'd do food prep while I washed the wall above the splashback, too high for her short arms, and too obscure

for her eyes, which were now missing fly specks and little bits of concretised garlic. While we worked we'd have white wine. Mum had started mixing hers with lemonade. 'It's too astringent neat,' she explained. 'It makes me cough.'

She was coughing quite a bit. Things were 'always going down the wrong pipe'.

Our talking always meant dinner was slow—and later anyway than home, where it better suited Fergus's blood sugar management to eat around six-thirty. When Fergus was first diagnosed with type one diabetes, when Jack was still under two, I thought the rigid regular meal times were a terrible oppression, coming as they did on top of the still quite recent constraints of parenthood. But they were better for everyone. Dinner on the table when everyone was hungry. Dinner for adults and child—no special children's meals, which many of the women in my neighbourhood served at five-thirty, so that the children would be bathed and ready for bed when the husband came in from the bank or insurance firm or minister's office. At our house we still eat together at six or six-thirty and have the whole evening ahead of us to write another chapter, or check the proofs, or read the manuscript of the book, or watch television on a computer, as Jack and I did for several years, snuggled up in my bed, head to head, my laptop between us.

At Picton, dinner was late, and rather than complain Jack would quietly come into the kitchen and shut himself in the pantry. We wouldn't notice. Some time later Mum would go to fetch—say—arrowroot to thicken the gravy. She'd open the doors and there would be Jack, leering at her. He did it often and got the same satisfying reaction every time. She'd jump, then burst into her deep giggles, and prod him out of the way with the backs of her wrists. 'What are you doing in there? Are you hungry? Would you like ...' Crackers and chicken pate,

crackers and Barry's Bay cheeses. Mum loved to feed Jack, loved to see the butter on his chin, or the pile of stripped pork bones on his plate.

I can stop now with the sacramental everyday. Those visits for Jack, from nine to fifteen, from minigolf on the shore reserve to lying on the divan with his feet thrust out of the covers and propped up on Mum's adjustable sewing chair, in the dark, his face lit blue, silent but for the chattering-teeth noise of his gamer's thumbs on the buttons of his Nokia, texting his girlfriend.

Going to Picton to visit Mum always made me happy. It's happiness I remember. That's the foreground. But someone has cut holes in the backdrop. There is a slip just before the start of the track to Bob's Bay and it's come down on one of the stray cats who live in the bush above the yacht club. It has rained. The cat's black fur is washed and dried and, lying there, its body absorbs the light like a little hole in the world. *That.* Or I'm coming in at five on the two o'clock sailing in a blue winter dusk. A heron is our pilot, skimming in, its body and reflection bent wingtip to wingtip. Picton is lying under the smoke of its hearth fires, and that's the only smell, wood smoke. I can't smell the beech trees on the headland. Mum is there to meet me at the ferry terminal. She cries when I come down the gangway. This woman who never cries. And the next day when I come in from my favourite waterfront café, where I've gone to read the weekend papers Mum doesn't get, I find her sunning herself in the sheltered courtyard directly inside the Tinny House fence. She's still full of feeling. That's what I think it is. I think I shouldn't have gone out. Before she speaks I can see the motion of a muscle trembling in her cheek because the sunlight is shimmering in the soft down there. Her voice

cracks and wavers. Did I go past the Trade Aid Shop? Was Shona—her youngest sister—volunteering there this morning?

‘I didn’t go that way. We can check later when we shop. Have you got a cold, Ma?’

‘I’ve hardly spoken to anyone today,’ says Mum. ‘It takes a while for my voice to warm up.’

I sit beside her on the bench and ask about a plant, her new *Muehlenbeckia*. She tells me about its pot, which she got in the Pottery Barn at Blenheim. She runs the engine of her voice. I listen to that faulty valve, and think nothing of it.

Contributors

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James K. Baxter (1926–1972) was a New Zealand poet and playwright. He produced a huge number of poems, as well as plays, literary criticism, and social and religious commentary.

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