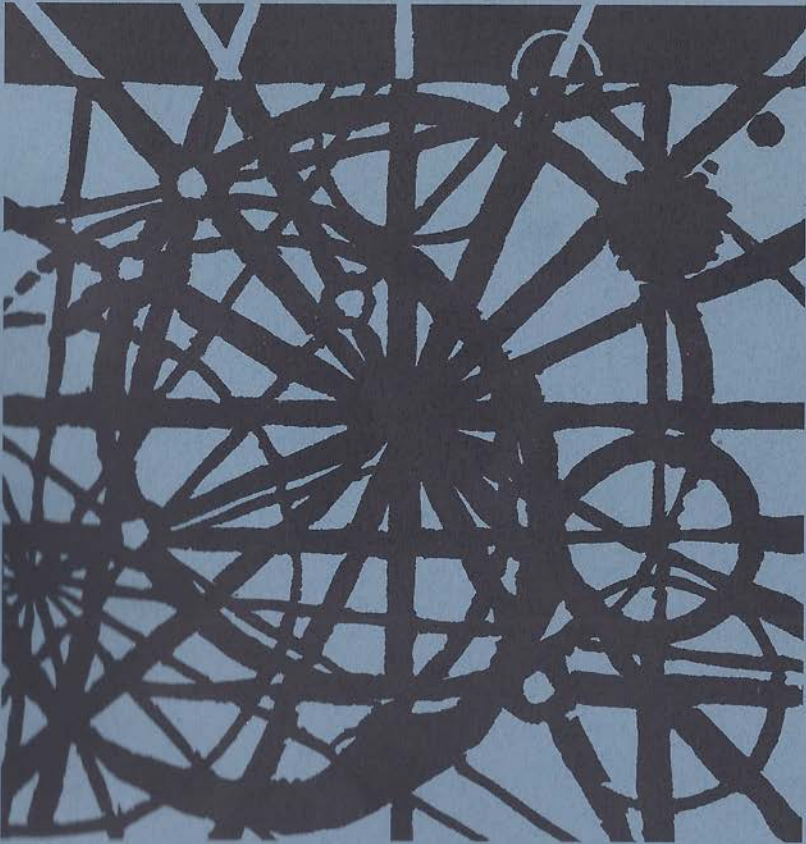


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PORNOGRAPHY,
HEROIN AND
GOVERNMENT:

ten tales from the city of roundabouts



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Strange Brew

by Craig Garrett

I still remember when I first tasted it.

Back then (it was a while ago now) I would sit on the footpath after school and chew grass shoots while I watched cars drive by. We weren't rich. My father worked in a clothing factory. My mother cleaned houses for a time. Then she was caught stealing. Now she works for the Government.

I remember hot summer days just sitting on the footpath. Watching. I'd wave at Holdens and give the finger to Fords. Once, two Ford drivers in their early twenties stopped, jumped out of their hotted up Falcon and threatened to teach me a lesson. I ran into my front yard, stuck both my fingers up at them and yelled, "Ford driving poofers!". Before they could get to me my older brother Sasha ambled out through our front door. Sasha was twenty (five years older than me) and when they saw him they went back to their car and took off down the street.

We were never close, me and Sasha. Never spoke much. He was a bit of a criminal in those days and had been in trouble since he was ten. First it was minor offences, but as he grew older the offences grew more serious. His last charge was 'aggravated assault and theft'. He was still waiting to appear in court.

"Thanks," I said. He nodded and waved for me to follow him inside.

I followed him to the kitchen where Sasha and Patrick, one of Sasha's many criminal friends, had been drinking all afternoon. Usually they drank 'liberated' beer or wine from some all night drive-through, but today was different, today they were drinking some sort of herbal wine. They weren't drunk, but they weren't sober either. I sat down at the

kitchen table.

"Have some," Sasha said as he placed a full schooner-glass in front of me. I took the glass and sipped. My throat felt cool. I took a larger sip. I'd never tasted anything like it before. I gulped down the rest of the dark red liquid.

"That's exactly what I did the first time I tasted the stuff," Sasha laughed, filling my glass again.

We sat and drank: bottle after bottle, hour after hour. I didn't feel drunk, but I felt something. Abruptly, Sasha slammed his empty glass on the table and announced, "That's the last bottle, let's go and have some fun." Turning to me, he asked, "You coming?"

"Yeah."

We piled into Patrick's old Holden and took off down the street leaving a dirty black exhaust cloud behind us. I looked back at the dark haze and watched its black form gathering over our driveway. Then things emerged from it: two-headed men riding animals that floated just above the ground, crying women with half formed goat-babies hanging between their legs, and grunting, man-eating pigs that sniffed the air.

I could see other dimensions and other realities. I could feel an energy pulsing through me.

I shuddered as more and more creatures assembled on our front lawn. As we sped off, I turned my attention to the front of the car. Patrick was driving with Sasha's hands covering his eyes.

"What are you doing!" I screamed, still not quite coming to grips with what was happening.

"It's all right," Sasha said calmly, "we've done this before. The wine gives us powers. Patrick sees without looking and I have the gift of persuasion. What can you do?"

"I don't know yet."

"Yes you do," Sasha said as he took his hands away from Patrick's eyes

and turned in his seat to face me front on. "I helped you before, so now you'll help me...right?"

"What are we going to do?"

"Steal some old bugger's pension cheque."

"Why don't you just persuade him to give it to you?"

"Because *violence* is much more fun."

Near the TAB on Wilson Street we found a likely candidate: well dressed and very old. Patrick stopped the car and Sasha went up to the old man. They spoke for about five minutes, shaking hands and nodding and laughing just like old friends. As they spoke a dark mist, like the one over our driveway, engulfed the old coot. Creatures from his past lives emerged from the mist: a lizard-man, a Minotaur, a leper, a flying body-snatcher and a mad herbalist. Soon he and his inner-creatures came and sat in the back of the car with me.

Ah...I thought, Sasha's gift of persuasion.

It was twilight by the time we arrived at the abandoned factory. In the half-light we took the old man into the building and beat him senseless. With each punch a different creature left his body and entered either Sasha or Patrick. They couldn't see them, but I could.

The creatures were attacking Sasha and Patrick from within. I had to help them. I'd promised. With new-found strength I jumped on Sasha and Patrick, biting their ears and scratching their eyes. I pounded the creatures from their bodies. I hit them to the ground and kicked them until all the creatures entered me.

Sasha and Patrick were curled up on the ground groaning. Blood was coming for Sasha's nose and mouth, and there were deep scratches across the right side of Patrick's face. The old man wasn't moving. I just stood and stared. And then I ran. I ran out of the factory, past our car and into the street.

The next morning, when the cops bought Sasha home, they asked me lots of questions. They asked me about the blood on my clothes, and as I told the story of the old man and the creatures I got scared and cried. I looked to Sasha for help. He looked straight through me. They asked me how I got home. I didn't know. They thought I was mad.

In the end the cops drove me to the factory. I showed them where it all happened. The old man was still lying there. The younger of the coppers bent over to check for a pulse. He turned to his partner.

Nothing.



For twelve years now I've been in and out of institutions. Sasha and my parents rarely visit. I am tied to my bed at night. The creatures are still around. I can see them. I'm not allowed much freedom.

Sometimes the doctors let me out in the yard for an hour or two. I sit down near the wire fence, chew grass shoots and watch the cars drive by.

Abby's Imaginary Friend

by Nicholas Riggs

They first noticed that Abby had the problem in primary school. Miss Wright, straight out of teacher's college, had asked the class what they wanted to be when they grew up. All the boys screamed that they wanted to be firemen and policemen and ambulance drivers and all the girls screamed that they wanted to be nurses and mummies and corporate lawyers. When it was Abby's turn to answer the question all she said was, "I want the voices in my head to stop."

Possibly, Miss Wright should have taken action there and then, but in her defence it wasn't unusual for a child to have an imaginary friend - even a hated one. Maybe if she had, the scope of the problem could have been fully comprehended, and the near tragedy that occurred at recess would never have happened. Kyoji Kyobashi came to class after recess soaking wet and covered from head to toe in scratches. When the teacher asked him what happened, he started to cry, and reluctantly said that Abby Michaels had tried to kill him.

Later, in the headmaster's office, Abby continued to look nothing like a schoolyard bully, but more like a rosy-cheeked, pony-tailed, and shy six-year-old girl. Mr Wilkinson, the headmaster, asked her if she had been in the boys' toilets and she nodded. He asked her if she knew she was not allowed in the boys' toilets. Again she nodded. They sat in silence for a while and the headmaster noticed that Abby was trembling with what seemed to be fear. The headmaster, in the most soothing tones that he could muster, asked Abby why she was in the boys' toilets. Abby was silent for a moment, and the headmaster could sense that even though Abby was only six years old, she was struggling with some internal demons. Finally Abby spoke, her voice cracked with fear.. "I was in the boys' toilets because I was told to kill Kyoji Kyobashi."

Later, Mr and Mrs Michaels were seated on child-size chairs, hastily relocated from classrooms to the headmaster's office to accommodate the small gathering. Between them sat Abby, who, despite all the soothing tones of adults around her, seemed to be just about to burst into panicked sobs. On the other side of the table sat the headmaster, and next to him the school's psychologist, all grey-flecked beard and sizable paunch. Mr Phibbs wasn't actually a child psychologist, he taught the fifth class. Reluctantly, he had taken the title of 'School Counsellor' in addition to his teaching duties because he had once flippantly mentioned that he had done two years of psychology at university.

Mr Phibbs smoothed the creases in his batik tie as he leant across the table towards Abby, his tiny chair creaking in vain protest.

"Tell me Abby, why did you want to kill Kyoji?"

"Because if I didn't kill him he was going to rape me," said Abby, but the panic on her face was now joined by a blank look of incomprehension.

The adults exchanged worried glances as they summed up the new development. Mr Phibbs persevered.

"What made you think he was going to rape you?"

Abby, who had been staring at her shoes for the duration of the conversation now turned her gaze upon the pseudo-psychologist.

"My friend told me."

Mr Phibbs looked questioningly at Mr and Mrs Michaels, who in turn looked bewildered and concerned.

"Who is your friend?"

"Her name is Pauline. She lives in my head. She tells me things. I don't like her at all."

"And she told you that Kyoji was going to rape you?" asked Phibbs, his voice betraying the fact that he wished he was somewhere else.

"Kinda. What she actually said is, 'I, and most Australians, want our immigration policy radically reviewed and that of multiculturalism abolished. I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians.'

That's what she says, but that's not what she thinks."

The adults exchanged puzzled looks as Abby continued.

"What she thinks is, 'They are gonna rape me with their tiny yellow penises, then they're gonna burn down my house and eat my dog'."

Later on, Abby sat morosely between her parents as they fired questions at the school psychologist.

"Why is she like this?"

"What can we do?"

"Will it happen again?"

Mr Phibbs, by way of answering, sat and nodded, as if summing up all that he had heard that afternoon. After a long pause he cleared his throat; the others looked at him expectantly.

"I haven't got a clue what to do. Your daughter is obviously very disturbed." There were squeals of protest from the other adults who considered his answer to be a little insensitive, but the squeals were short and sharp because deep down they all agreed with his diagnosis. "Many Australians are suffering from the same condition at present. There seems to be an epidemic of xenophobia."

A puzzled look came across Abby's face, her tiny jaw clenching as she asked, "Please explain."

Phibbs ignored the request and continued:

"I suggest that your daughter undergoes an extensive therapy program."

At this, Mr and Mrs Michaels tensed.

"Are you suggesting that we lock Abby up?"

Mr Phibbs' silence indicated that was exactly what he had meant. Mr and Mrs Michaels stood to leave.

"We must give serious thought to this. We honestly have to do what is right for Abby, and if that involves..." he hesitated, "a drastic step, we'll have to make that decision together."

The headmaster leaned across the miniature desk and shook Abby's parents' hands. Mr Phibbs circled around the desk and placed a consoling arm around Mr Michaels' shoulders.

"You should look at this situation as you would an illness; as if Abby

had gotten a case of the Chicken Pox. There are cures available, but they probably involve hospitalisation.”

Mr Michaels nodded as he ushered his wife and Abby out of the office. The psychologist and headmaster stood at the door and tried their best to look solemn and comforting at the same time, but only succeeded in looking bored. As the headmaster pulled the door closed on Abby and her problems they heard her say, “Pauline wants to know if we’ve been naughty. Have we mummy?”

“We don’t know Abby, we really don’t know.”

Pitstop

by Ben Farrell.

The Mazda is still miles away from Canberra when it shits itself and dies. It gives no warning - one minute it’s toiling its little pistons off, trying to climb a hill - the next minute it drops its guts all over the road. At first Pete thought they’d hit a ‘roo.

“Unrool,” he yells leaping out the passenger door as the car shudders to a stop, “roadkill stew for tea.”

But there is no blood on the bumper, no messy pile of fur and bones under the wheels. There are only pieces of metal hanging from the underside of the car, the hiss of the motor boiling over and the sizzle of the soles of Pete’s ug-boots melting on the hot tar. He wipes the sweat from his lower back and arse-crack with a hankie and watches Davo climb out of the broken-down Mazda.

“Fuck Davo,” he says “ya know ya can’t gun this little shit-box like ya do the Monaro. Ya mum’s gonna have our nuts, maybe.”

“Well,” says Davo, “if you didn’t prang me fucken Monaro, we wouldn’t have to drive this piece of crap. It’s your fault ‘cause you’re a fucked driver.”

“Are you saying I’m a fucked driver?”

“That’s exactly what I’m fuckin’ saying maybe.”

In the ensuing fistfight, Davo breaks Pete’s nose - forcing him to cry ‘uncle’. Beaten, Pete stuffs a hankie up one nostril to stop the bleeding, walks sullenly to the rear of the car and pushes. With Davo in the front pumping the accelerator, they eventually bunny-hop their way to the top of the hill and roll down the other side, trailing bits of metal and plastic all the way to a petrol station, which appears (so it seems to the two freaked-out booners) as if by magic at the bottom of the hill.

Twenty minutes later, Davo and Pete are sitting in the cafeteria of a very mysterious little petrol station, waiting for a diagnosis on the car.

It's hot in there, even hotter than out on the steaming highway. The fan doesn't work and the water cooler just lets out a warm liquid that stinks of piss and metal.

"Now then gentlemen - where was it you said you were going?"

The voice that interrupts their sweaty reminiscences is as deep as the pits of hell and as silky as apple blossoms. They look up to see Satan standing before them: glorious and evil with his night black overalls, glinting silver wrench, and flaming orange hair - greased to perfection. Davo gets his wits together first.

"Canberra...uh, Summernats."

"What is this thing Summernats?"

Pete jumps in, not wanting to seem a dullard in the presence of the Lord of Hell.

"It's a car festival, biggest one in the Southern Hemisphere - blokes come with their cars from all over."

Davo's eyes light up as he remembers, for the first time since they broke down, the purpose of their journey.

"Yeah, yeah, and there's burnout competitions and drag racing and naked female mud wrestling."

Satan looks at them sceptically, "And you thought to attend a gathering such as this in a Mazda 323?"

Davo is immediately defensive. "Well, see, Pete pranged me Monaro. Otherwise..."

"Bullshit maybe, it wasn't me. Some prick pulled out in front..."

Satan sees that blood may be spilled.

"Never mind all that. Your car shall be repaired; in fact, it shall be completely remodelled. My specially selected team of artisans is already at work, creating a car which will satisfy even the most depraved of your heart's desires."

"Will it be expensive?"

"Oh yes, very expensive. But you won't have to pay up front, if you take my meaning."

Davo and Pete nod. They both know the cost, and are more than

willing to pay.

"Well then, gentlemen - step this way."

The three walk down the hall to a grease-slippery work area, where a team of demons are already gnawing away at the Mazda's rust. The sound is like brittle bones of old people being broken over and over, and it sets Davo and Pete's teeth on edge. Across the garage, minions of Hell, dressed in the same black overalls as Satan, carry tongues and lips of liars and oathbreakers to the Mazda and stuff them into the holes left by the rust-eating demons.

Davo and Pete are only vaguely disgusted - worse things happen in the Western Suburbs. They watch silently as the blackest of hearts are ripped from the breasts of the vilest of murderers, and boiled up in a pot with the sticky remains of a small child's pet dog - killed while chasing cars. The revolting mixture is then coated onto the Mazda's balding tyres, hardening quickly into super smoky black burnout wheels from Hell.

The two maytes are almost cumming in each other's flannies when they see the new exhaust pipe, fashioned from the arsehole of a flatulent Roman Catholic priest, being fitted to the rear of the car. They cry out in gut-wrenching, ball-busting joy as the damned carry out each new improvement. 'Roo bars are fitted, front and back - the heads of ex-footballers skewered together in a row with a metal pole forced through each set of cauliflower ears - solid enough to ram a bus full of pensioners on their way to bingo and still come out unscathed. The scrotum of a rapist is hung from the rear view mirror as a pair of fluffy dice. Cracked and faded vinyl is replaced with car seat covers of real leather - the tanned hides of teenage sunbakers. The backbone of the only National Party leader ever to become prime minister is erected on the roof - an aerial capable of picking up Cold Chisel from any radio station in the world.

The minions set about buffing the duco with the blood of an adulterer while Davo and Pete jump around and hug each other with joy. Soon, the car shines like the carcass of a freshly skinned rabbit and there is but one thing left to do. An obese child molester steps forward, cuts a slab of fat from his enormous belly, and wrings it out until the slobbering juice runs thick and greasy over the engine.

As the grease and oil change continues Satan leads the two delirious rednecks to his office and sits them down in front of his enormous mahogany desk.

“Gentlemen, you have seen a great and wondrous transformation. Your car will be the fastest, strongest, loudest and most repulsive in the universe. Use it as you will.”

Davo and Pete aren't really listening. They are dreaming about picking up chicks in their new hotrod.

“But first, your payment.”

They still aren't listening, so Satan places a pen into each of their hands and the contract in front of them.

“Sign here, please.”

Their hands are disembodied, mindlessly signing their names.

“Thank you. Here are the keys.”

They snap to attention. Davo grabs the keys and runs out to the garage, Pete hot on his heels. They leap in through the windows, Dukes of Hazard style, and Davo guns the engine. It wails like the dog so long without a bone that it gnawed off its own thigh - a beautiful sound.

They screech out of Satan's petrol station, leaving a thick and oily layer of tyre tread in their wake. They whoop and they holler and they cheer as they burn back onto the highway, gunning that Hell-spawned lump of twisted metal and flesh, that supersonic death-belching cool machine, that no good granny killin' maniac monster of a thing that the Mazda had become. They've sold their souls for the fastest car in the universe, and they're on their way to Summernats.

Several miles down the road a pearly white cadillac pulls out from an inconspicuous looking garage. The top is down and the hair of the two girls in front streams out in the wind like a pair of bottle-blond angel's wings. It is all clean lines, right angles and shining ivory duco - engine singing the battle-songs of the host of Heaven as it cruises up alongside the Mazda.

And on the neutral ground of the Rumpus Room Between the Worlds, God and Satan lean eagerly over their slot-car set, watching the little cars speed down the track. Ancient fingers clench tight around plastic accelerator-triggers and sweat pours from wrinkled brows as each urges his own machine to victory. The aeons-old war between good and evil continues...

Breaking Glass

by Sue Page

I'd heard it for a long time now. Never shrill but always there. And getting louder; making me lean forward to hear people, watching their mouths when they told me things. Watching lips and teeth and tongues and spit, so if I heard what they said I didn't know what they really meant because I couldn't see their eyes past their lips.

People at work knew something was different. They returned letters to me to be typed again; they checked the equipment for faults, and they asked me about some of the words I'd typed. But I'd keep smiling and after a while they'd go away. Some were angry when I watched their mouths and smiled. Like some private secret wasn't private any more, and they hadn't known they'd told me until they saw me smile. But I didn't want their secrets. I had enough already. All I wanted to know was what they were saying.

After a while they stopped sending me their tapes of letters and memos and contracts. So I would switch on the machine and listen carefully, and type what I thought the machine was saying when it wasn't saying someone else's words.

One day I received a letter from personnel. I think they were scared the machine would tell me something no-one else knew. Something they had tried not to hear for a long time. I knew I must be getting closer if they wanted me to leave. Even when they stopped letting me into the building, I would arrive with the others and stand in the car park or on the street and try to hear the machine through the concrete and carpet and doors and windows. But the hum in my head was louder now, and I couldn't hear what the machine knew.

The hum's making things difficult - harder to do. Like drive. Tonight

was the worst - I kept turning up the radio to drown out the hum. But the hum would get louder and the radio louder and even the ticking of the traffic lights when they changed colour was loud. I got so I could tell when to push the accelerator by that tick - counting down to it, hearing the other drivers brake. But one time I didn't hear, when the hum was too loud, and I couldn't see properly because the radio was hissing at me to put it exactly on the station and my hand wouldn't unbend to turn the dial the right way - just a little - and the SSSs in the song were trying to get me and someone hit the window and pulled faces at me, and I was going to pull faces back when I realised he was shouting at me. And when I thought that, I could hear the horns behind me, high-pitched and many, and it made me move, start pushing the car forward with the accelerator; and the man with the twisting face jumped, but I got away and the radio was still there but not so urgent for a while. But the hum had become shriller, faster, so that instead of being there all the time it was THERE ALL THE TIME.

But I couldn't listen to it. I had to get home, because in the room there was no-one to pull faces at me and pretend they were saying something when they were saying something else, and the machines at home didn't talk to me as loudly and there was no-one to jump at me and I wouldn't have to push the car up the hill with one leg and my other leg tight and sore and jerking because it wanted to push too and my neck stretched and my hands crabbed and the lights ticking.

There would only be me and the hum, and I could drink and the hum might get quieter, and if I had a lot of drinks it might go away, and if I keep drinking it might never have been.

But there wasn't much left. The hum had been there for many nights, you see, and sometimes it was louder and sometimes it wasn't but it was still there. If you sat and listened it made you do something - you had to do something - and I'd been doing a lot so there wasn't much left but if I wanted more I would have to see more twisting faces and I

didn't think I could.

The glass was there from the nights before, but when I looked it was shivering, quavering, faster and shriller and faster, and when I reached out it crackled and cracked and broke. Just broke. The hum, you see - the hum did it. It was doing the same to me - it was trying, but I wouldn't let it - I couldn't let it.

I picked up the glass, big bits and splinters, and held it, cradled it, searched it. Then I knew. I knew I could stop the humming. End it by being slow, gentle, careful, and making sure the line was straight and deep. The glass was so clear and thin and fragile the hum wouldn't even know it as an enemy - it looked so dead and broken and finished. Maybe that was what the machine was trying to tell me. That nothing was ever finished. I started slowly. Little cuts on my legs, tiny crosses and lines around freckles and scars and hairs to tease the hum, taunt it.

But it didn't believe me. So I started on my hands - just little, thin red lines all crossing each other and spreading outwards and ganging up, and I could tell it was starting to get scared when it realised there were so many of me. You see, if I wasn't there who could hear it? Who would listen the way I had?

I think it knew then that it had pushed too far, demanded too long, taken too much away from other things that needed listening to. And we both knew it couldn't exist without me and it couldn't stop without me. But it is a strong hum and has been here for a long time now. Long as I know back. But I've learned a lot, and know now as well as know then, so I realised the tiny lines weren't enough to drown it even when they linked and twisted and dripped together.

I'm laughing now because I know so much. The hum still doesn't understand, but it will. You see, it has to be a long cut, a strong cut, a deep cut - and when I make it slowly like this the hum will know.

Hollow All Delight

by Neil Hayden

For Beck was curious and Clancy had left his diary by the phone. Nothing, not a jot about her, no inkling of six months. Just guff about sunsets, eucalyptus fingers, and perspective. Thumping open his studio door, Beck tossed the diary at his feet, "There's no mention of me! You don't care."

Blinking, Clancy's eyes glazed off the wall and to the diary. "How Canberran-Hypocritical." Gazing vacantly about her face as if callously recognising her for that embarrassing second time, his hand reached for a fictitious cigarette in the second week of abstaining. "Excuse me, I have to look at a blankness."

Beck hated him, but not simply. So she leaned against the door jamb and mulled over the blank wall. Moving into his house she had jostled and jounced her stuff amongst his. When she came to the crowded studio there was this blank wall which she quickly cluttered with her old work. He uncluttered it out the window. If she wanted to share studios, his blank space must be respected. The second bedroom became her studio.

"You" she strolled over to the blank wall, "are a relic. Your oils. Anything modern..."

Clancy smiled contritely, "Synthetic trash."

Beck accused, "That's facile," while formulating: *pro*, Clancy had attracted her because of his arrogance; *contra*, he was arrogant.

"You're right. The point is I am not a lateralist like yourself. I can only learn a few languages, one of which is oils."

Beck considered herself a beaten housewife. The way he bruised her. "Face it," Clancy cut into her thoughts. "You are the product of a system which has turned you into a technician rather than an artist." Beck returned, "But your oil paints are..."

"I was talking about a mindset."

Beck groaned. Clancy had waltzed around the issue.

Beck turned to appraise his current work, a cubist overlapping of gray blocks entitled *Near Crab, my Barn Care*. Another bloody anagram from a rag man. A few comments arose which were stopped by the knowledge that she did not possess the skills to overlap grays. "Can - berr - a," Clancy smiled grimly while his fingers mimed smoking. "It sticks in my mouth." He stared past Beck to the wall, she may as well have not been part of his life.

Turning from him she espied the Tower blu-tacked on the window. She traced the Tarot card, "What's our future?"

"I believe that the only way to foretell the future is to be ignorant of meaning."

"In other words you don't know."

His hands mimed an open book. Talking tired him when there was no punctuating cigarette.

Beck really wanted to win an argument, none of this stonewalling Clancy built.

"You've proved your point," Clancy conceded. "Now get out, you're clouding the wall."

A bully. Beck decided it was time to make a stand. In the middle of *his* wall.

"So," Clancy lumbered out of his chair, favouring his good leg. "I make the coffee. Sturm und drang, meine liebchen."

"That's unfair, and I don't want bloody coffee," she shouted as he limped out.

Beck incriminated herself. Getting the last word in, regardless, was one of her less endearing features. Something she strove to control. Scarring a finger through *Near Crab* she reconsidered the problem: *pro and contra, he was like other men in bed*. But self-assured and

independent.

Once she had packed and left for three days without a word. When she came back, Clancy made coffee. His response to any catastrophe. She would have liked to know Clancy when he was into drugs and Ricki Lake.

His lumbering run.

Half turning to meet Clancy, his lips bruised on to hers. Beck's left hand clung to his back while the right pummelled his chest as he waltzed her on to *Near Crab*. She punched him when he let her go. "Sorry." He gazed critically at his canvas. "Well done."

The kettle whistled.

Beck shouted at his back, "My clothes, you bastard."

On her way to changing out of her smeared jeans and singlet, the photo in the hallway, 'Et In Arcadia Ego,' caught her. A chiselled hollow in the desert, a splodge of willow in a golden hole surrounded by spinifex. An aerial shot, Clancy never flew in Australia: she rushed to the kitchen, then chuckled as Clancy spilt coffee on the grimy bench. He scooped the coffee and other detritus into the plunger.

With a more detached eye she observed: three years her senior, not handsome, not elegant, a very not fellow. Yet people bought his stuff.

"Hollow, hollow, hollow, all delight," Beck quoted from Clancy's diary. "The picture in the hallway?"

"You," Clancy quoted one of Beck's axioms while filling the plunger, "don't respect personal space."

"You have no respect for your lover."

Clancy smiled, water-pale, that merged into a taut lipped regard of self in the kitchen window, "Tennyson."

Beck tapped her foot.

"Gawain's ghost appears to King Arthur and moans 'hollow, hollow, hollow, all delight' on his frivolous life haunting his death."

"You don't believe in an afterlife, nor death."

Clancy melted into his reflection while Beck smiled: she may even brave his coffee as a peace gesture. At last, an end.

Clancy dowsed his cup with sugar in his regard for the taste of basic things. "But I am scared of the afterlife in life. The haunting of the living by life."

He sipped his coffee.

Beck pointed out, "Apart from your old drugs you stay clear of death."

"No," his free hand crumpled into an old cigarette packet. "The hollow in the hallway."

Beck laughed, Clancy's eyes became blank.

"I was searching for a fossil, slipped and broke a few bones," he tapped his leg. "I could not get out: they found me a few days later."

Imagining herself in such deprivation made Beck nauseous.

Clancy turned to leave, "On the chopper I had strength for one photo."

"But?" Beck asked, banishing pictures of a dry lipped Clancy fumbling for his camera in the back of a helicopter. "But?"

"No," Clancy scowled, then turned to Beck. "I'd like to know more about you."

"You never ask."

"I like self revelation."

"It's something you never do."

"You're right," he said. "You're so right."

Pro, he had acknowledged Beck to be right; contra, not that he was in the wrong.

Her computer beeped for Save.

"Replications," Clancy crumpled the cigarette packet into the bin as he glared through her door at her screen. "Junk food."

Clancy's definition of art required sweat. Physical labour was art,

computers were for games.

The studio door slammed behind Clancy.

"Clancy, answer me."

The bolt shot home.

"Coward," Beck punched the door. The urge bubbled over to say more, he left things to be said, and she fell silent.

Recycling images of plastic shopping bags and trolleys caught her attention. Shopping bags and trolleys, two items to be met with anywhere: they were contemporary, they were relevant. Clancy's oils had nothing on trolleys and plastic bags.

Dissatisfied, still. Clancy was still the undiscovered country. Still, still and hollow, not worth thinking about, let alone love. *Pro, Beck knew why she loathed Clancy; contra, love, her and Clancy?*

When she chose Clancy she determined that history must not repeat. It was her opening. Conceptual. Clancy had strolled around delicately spilling wine and cheese. Coming to Beck's video of the Artificial History of Permed Hair he laughed. She escorted him to the door. The curator had castigated Beck for maltreating the artist. Walking out to the car park she had demanded an apology. Clancy took her home. She laughed at his art, he kissed her. In the beginning is the seed...

Her stomach contracted, her breathing stopped: her world was hollow. The computer beeped Save.

Beck tapped on Clancy's door: what are Eucalyptus Fingers?

Sleepy Time for Adam

by Michael Hughes

Adam loved sleep - loved it. In fact, as far as Adam was concerned, there was nothing better in the universe than being all snugly in bed under a doona, neither too hot nor too cold, with a fluffy malleable pillow that could be scrunched up into any desired shape for the perfect head-on-pillow arrangement. Yes, Adam loved sleep, but due to life's many interruptions he was faced with a constant battle against the forces of wakey wakey.

Adam attempted any and all avenues to prevent the dreaded *Sleepus Interuptus*. He avoided any extracurricular activity that may cut into his sack time, including the scout movement and organised religion. He had two night masks (for a total sans light experience) as well as a urine flask purloined from a hospital so as to cut down on toilet time after lights out. And after the nightmare of early morning schooling had passed, Adam sought out the ultimate profession to ensure 'sleep-time' was in his favour. He became a university student (briefly he considered unemployment, but realised that the unthinkable might happen - the CES might actually find him...*shudder*...a job).

However, after two and a half years of 'utopic' sleeping conditions, Adam was facing a crisis - a crisis that threatened to forever more randomise and cut into his sleeping routine. It wasn't tutorials or lectures, he had already nullified that particular quandary by basing his courses/subjects/avenues-of-academia solely on the afternoon-ness of each particular subject and their respective exams. No, it wasn't that. You see:

Adam got a girlfriend.

For almost any post-pubescent heterosexual male, having a girlfriend is

the best thing ever achievable, provided, of course, she puts out. Not only did Adam's girlfriend put out, she was a sexual marathon machine who kept going and going and going, seriously damaging Adam's ability to perform in bed, sleep-wise.

Adam met Tracy at a party thrown by one of his flatmates. The noise woke him up, so he walked downstairs to join in the fun as he did have some semblance of social sensibilities (and he was quite thirsty after a hard day's sleep). Tracy, his intended, was leaning against the fridge at the time and Adam thought her to be the sexiest thing he had ever seen - the way she tilted her beer to her lips, her tingling bell-like laugh and her *bazooms* from here to eternity. Indeed, not only were these breasts some sort of heavenly fleshy playground equipment to be slid on, swung on or sat on, but to Adam they were also two of the sexiest, most perfect pillows he had ever wanted to fluff.

Sideling up to Tracy, Adam squeezed himself around to get to the fridge, getting a good squiz at her tits on the way. Tracy knew what Adam was doing - it was not hard to work it out. Women, once they hit puberty, pick up some sort of 'I'm being perved on' perception that comes with the whole body development thing. Tracy knew Adam was looking up and down her endowments, hell most guys did, but he was a tad more obvious. After popping his tinny he had not only introduced himself to them, but he had also proceeded to absent-mindedly spill his VB all over them - can and all.

Tracy refused Adam's offer of a vigorous tea-towelling of the spill and cleaned the mess up herself - leaving him to hover around nervously with a spare tea towel in case one was not enough (he wisely restrained himself from asking for his can back). However, despite the 'Exxon Valdezing' of her breasts with VB and his speaking directly to her *cleavage* when introducing himself, Tracy kind of liked Adam.

She had actually met him before. Adam's flatmates had included his

bedroom on a previous tour of the house and Tracy had seen Adam, cleverly disguised as a lump sprawled across his bed with his cute red hair peeking over the edge of his doona. While she hadn't fallen head over heels in love, something motherly clicked deep inside her maternal well, and she decided to go to the upcoming party and see what he looked like from the hairline down.

Suffice it to say, after many beers, some cask wine and a bottle of Bundy she and he abandoned all restraint and ended up in Adam's bedroom. Clothes were flung everywhere - Adam so frenzied he threw his Levis out the window onto the tree outside. Once naked, they leapt into the sexual proceedings with she admiring his relatively muscular, but frighteningly pale body, and he playing 'Mr Activity Centre' on her upper torso.

Adam and Tracy became inseparable. She around at his place every night, spending almost every waking moment watching Adam sleep. But after the first hundred or so sexual episodes, and after the couple's sexual repertoire (i.e. the do's and don'ts) had been established, the effects of the constant sex had begun to seriously cut into Adam's sleep-time.

But it wasn't just the sex that was a problem. Adam was having to share his king size double bed with Tracy, infringing upon his standard Jesus-like centre-of-the-bed-with-arms-outstretched sleeping pose. Admittedly, she did come with inbuilt pillows, but after sex she was more irritated than titillated at his request to continue using her, or them, in the manner to which he had become accustomed.

Thus, instead of adding to Adam's quest for the perfect sleeping experience, she detracted from it. Because Tracy had a natural propensity for bed hoggishness, something had to give. Since Adam was a 90s sort of able-to-read-a-Cleo-in-a-public-place snaggy type, it was going to be him. But Adam didn't want Tracy to go. Despite her

bed stealing ways, she was great fun to be with and made him feel all squirty inside. However, he couldn't just tell her he needed more bed space, so Adam came up with a solution:

He would fake a coma.

Adam had it all planned. Figuring that since he had been with Tracy, he had lost a total of seventy-two hours of quality sleep-time, he decided that with just three days in hospital, he would be back on track. Furthermore, in the future, with a quarterly repeat comatose performance, he'd be able to completely compensate for his beloved Tracy - queen of the sleep pattern disrupters.

The day came and Adam primed himself with just enough sleeping pills to send him under in five minutes, well below the 'sleep of the dead' line (a.k.a. the Marilyn Monroe threshold). Feigning illness, he rang for an ambulance, claiming to feel faint, woozing around in front of his flatmates and Tracy, then promptly collapsed, leaving them all in shock.

The paramedics arrived and examined him. They agreed he had lost consciousness, an accurate diagnosis as Adam actually had (the pills having done a good job, and he could have got an Oscar for his coma patient portrayal anytime: 'So brave - so still...five stars!'). They loaded him up on the gurney, hurried him out the door and pushed him down the stairs.

However, a spanner was thrown into the works - ironically, for want of a spanner. One of the gurney's wheels was loose and on the way down the second flight of stairs it dropped off, causing the trolley to lurch abruptly.

Adam sailed over the railing and plummeted down the stairwell like a corpse to a sea burial. A sickeningly loud crack could be heard

reverberating back up the stairs as his head connected with the concrete.

"Jesus mate - it's lucky he's already out of it" said the first paramedic as he staunched the bleeding from the massive head contusion Adam received from body-meets-ground.

"Bloody oath, mate" replied the other, looking around nervously to see if anyone had noticed. Ditching the gurney-sans-wheel in the dumpster, they carried Adam to the waiting ambulance and sped off.



Three and a half months later, Adam spends his days in the vegetable ward alongside fellow excursionists to the realm of comatose. Tracy visits every other day, cradling his head against her chest in an effort to spark him back into life, but, alas, to no avail. However, despite his incommunicado state, a faint smile hovers at his lips. After all, deep down inside, it's probably what he always wanted.

The Foot

by Paige Perkins

I was lying on my bed when the foot burst through the wall.

I had a big old bed then, with two duvets and seven pillows. There was so much bedding that you could never be sure you were in there alone. One night I wasn't - a burglar climbed through the open window, straight on to the end of my bed. If it hadn't been for him knocking the water jug down, I probably wouldn't have noticed.

That wasn't the first burglar we had, either. The house in St Kilda was one block away from Fitzroy Street. Every night you would wake to the sounds of people shooting guns, or screaming in fright. For a girl from a good family, it raised ethical questions. Was I supposed to rush outside to offer help? Should I call the police? It didn't come naturally to me to lie in my bed and ignore it, but by the time I left St Kilda I was blasé. So much so that Poisonous Julie accused me of being soulless. I had made the mistake of telling her about the sculptor who was kicked to death outside the TAB - it turned out he had a photograph of me in his wallet. But that's another story.

The foot belonged to Peter.

Peter lived in the room next door. He was the son of the Swedish cultural attaché. Seriously. That's one of the few things I knew about him. He drove me crazy because he had a policy of revealing as little about himself as possible. For a girl like me, ready to tell anybody anything, he was a frustrating house-mate. It had started as a way of avoiding making mistakes. He thought that if he refused to talk about himself, no-one would be able to say he was uncool. They would have nothing to base it on. Funnily enough, it worked. No one could think of anything bad to say about him.

This early success led him to expand his policy of non-communication. He figured that if he voiced no opinions, no one could disagree with him or quote him out of context. That way he could avoid being seen to have an uncool opinion. It worked. Everyone thought he was very deep.

Deep. As a goal. It was ethereal, and for many of us, ephemeral. It required much more maintenance than having a haircut or buying the right coat. Peter achieved deepness by negative input.

He also achieved deepness by dabbling at the coalface of political correctness. Despite receiving a weekly allowance from his parents, he affected an air of casual poverty - one result of which was that he never bought his own cigarettes.

He read newspapers that were so underground that their printing presses were hired out by the hour, and he was post-vegetarian before most people had even caught up to couscous.

When the foot came through the wall, I realised Peter was chasing another credential. He was experimenting with homosexuality.

This amounted to giving in to the attentions of our friend Marcus. Peter was no expert, but he guessed that Marcus was on call to provide a little social cachet to expatriate Canberra Grammar School sons of the diplomatic corps like himself, burdened by their essential whiteness and richness.

Peter conducted it all in his usual air of secrecy. He didn't want to declare his shift in allegiances until he'd tried it out.

For something that was supposed to be a secret they made a lot of noise, but if you live with a motorbike in your sitting room and a saxophone player in the front bedroom, you expect a certain amount to go

unnoticed. As a point of fact, I was wearing earphones anyway. I had a walkman cradled on my chest reciting Italian verbs. I wanted to be able to shout "Eh, Paolo! Come stai? Molto bene! Ciao!" outside the Black Cat on a Friday morning. I took my position as Brunswick Street's rudest waitress seriously. I was aiming for haughty, but rude was close.

I had some stiff competition. There wasn't a single waiter on the street who wasn't really a painter or a singer or a photographer. The fastest cappuccino was about twenty minutes. In a strange sort of way, like a bus driver who regrets having to pick up passengers because it slows down his schedule, the coffee houses on Brunswick Street fed off the fact that they gave bad service.

If you wanted to *eat* or *drink* then you were in the wrong place. The regulars wanted to be seen with a short macchiato but they wanted it to last for hours; the waiters didn't want to fetch them another one every ten minutes. In a strange way it balanced.

Peter's crashing and grunting was louder than it might have been, because the wall was made of plasterboard. My room and the one next door were really two halves of the original Victorian drawing room. They had high ceilings with heavy plaster cornices and elaborate ceiling roses, painted blood red. A gilded Grecian archway, supported by plaster columns, had once served as a conversation piece and now served as the structure to support a cheap dividing wall to cadge two rents.

The art dealer who owned the house had retreated upstairs behind Franco Cozzo wrought iron gates after the place was burgled for the fifth time. They left behind a wild colour scheme of chocolate and forest green walls designed to show off their prized acquisitions. The flimsy plasterboard wall seemed like an act of desperation and resignation.

Peter always was a loud fuck though. I can remember the first time we did it, I was a bit shocked.

Getting his clothes off was like trying to put your hand into a washing machine on the spin cycle. He was laughing like some kind of maniac and had the palest, smoothest skin I had ever seen. He must have had six hairs on his entire body. Before I could take my shoes off, he had broken the zipper on the back of my dress in a frenzy of tugging and had shredded my pantihose. It was all over in about eight minutes.

Weeks later, we had been naked in every corner of the house. He never slowed down, I couldn't keep up. It didn't last.

Still, I was surprised to be replaced by Marcus. Peter apparently didn't want us to see him, because he snuck him in through the laundry door. How he thought he could fuck without waking the entire house is beyond me. Even with earphones on, I couldn't mistake the sounds of smashing furniture. Over the top, like the mad women's aria, came the robust wailing of Koko Taylor singing Wang Dang Doodle. "Ci verdiamo!" I chanted, turning up my volume, "Si, mi piace moltissimo!"

My bed-head started to shake. I heard the crash of the wall heater in the next room as an elbow collided with its delicate grill, splitting it apart and showering shards of porcelain on the floor. The whumps and thumps increased. My bedside lamp fell off its table. The saxophone player yelled out from the front room. I couldn't hear what he said but it was bloody. I started to laugh.

With a crack like a rifle shot, the wall next to my bed burst apart. For one breathless moment, everything stopped. A foot was sticking through the plasterboard. My eyes bulged.

The next morning, Peter was gone.

He hitchhiked up the Hume to his parents', so that he didn't have to give over any information. He couldn't stand being questioned. We didn't see him for two weeks. By the time he came back, there was a seven foot paper maché celery standing in front of the hole. But that's another story.

The Arrival of a Mosquito Virus Perhaps: A symptom of some substratum anomaly

by Gavin Bertram

Chapter One

The sun is at the centre of the sky a week after New Year's day and me and Betty are walking down Gravity Street on our way to the hospital. It's hot enough to make a dog vomit; cicadas buzz in time with lawn sprinklers; the sun melts various species of insect and spider together as the vicious creatures fight and/or fuck on concrete lawns under concrete lamp posts. I turn my head westward and see a swarm of beetles enter a glass house and explode upon entry, beetle muck and the blood of haemorrhaging gardeners (their hands and forearms protruding from under thick green ferns and staghorn shoots) compounds on the glasshouse floor, the first soup of its kind that summer...

Betty turns her gaze upon me, looks at me with dark brown eyes (tinges of pale grey surrounding) and tells me about disease-carrying mosquitoes that have recently travelled to the suburbs from a swamp in the lowlands. She heard about it from a TV weatherman. "You've got to watch out for those fuckers; bloodsucking brutes they are," Betty says, my fingers clawing at my feet that are suddenly itchy, that are clad only in socks.

[Betty, I'm told, is a pathological liar, but I always believe things she tells me because they're always more interesting than things most other people say.]

"I must be reminded to keep an eye out then," I say, noticing that I have chunks of melted asphalt stuck to my socks.

I also notice (for the first time) (turning my head, looking up) that Betty is eating strawberries out of a plastic cup with a plastic fork. She

is also eating the strawberry leaves (eating everything) - without thinking it would seem. I ask her if such an act could be damaging. "It's just like eating lettuce," she says, then stops, makes a sharp left, walks across somebody's front lawn, pulls a leaf from a shrub (shrub sitting in a colourful window box annual), pops it into her mouth, and begins chewing. She speaks to me from across the front lawn with a mouthful of vegetation: "See what I mean. Just like eating lettuce."

A beetle buzzes past my ear and lands on Betty's head.

Just one of life's little signals, I think to myself, but whatever could it mean?

"It could mean any number of things," says Betty, who is telepathic. I look past Betty and see that the owner of the colourful window box annual has appeared at her window with a book in her hand.

A gun slides out from between soft leaves of paper, the woman shoots at Betty, the bullet grazing the side of Betty's head, knocking her to the ground; the bullet buzzes past the side of my head, a lead-set beetle screaming past my ear (hair on the back of my neck standing to attention).

Hence our previously mentioned need to visit the hospital on such a wretched summer day.

Chapter Two

I am looking at Betty's blood, fearful and anxious.

A surgeon is operating on Betty's skull with a sharpened spoon...there is a gun in a holster wrapped around his waist...a nurse appears holding an aluminium machine (aluminium that is corrugated) that has an aerial protruding from its centre...

"Get that transistorised Meccano Set away from my Betty!" I spurt forth (melodramatically) as the nurse attaches the machine to Betty's face. Betty's face, I notice, has an expression on it similar to an expression I once saw on the face of a half-human/half-cat four-year-old. I saw the infant through a window, it was watching a movie called Black Bucket of Love which was about a man who roamed friendly suburban neighbourhoods killing people's guinea pigs and selling the meat on the black market for surprisingly large profits. The baby's face, as it watched this movie, was frozen into a masklike visage (plaster-like and exaggerated) that signalled fear in numerous places: its mouth was open in such a way that its teeth held a certain kind of shape and shading that was at once vampiric and dullard-like; the eyes were wide, glazed over with an almost frozen sheen of tear-liquid; the nostrils were flared; the blonde and barely visible eyebrows (stuck to its forehead like Muppet-felt) were arched up on the left side and down on the right. A ghastly sight then and a ghastly sight now...

I pull the surgeon's gun out of its holster and point it in the general direction of everybody. Two thug-like nurse-figures grab me from behind and remove me from the operating room.

"Where's my surgical revolver?" I hear the doctor ask as Betty's visage recedes before me.

Chapter Three

Outside in the waiting room (framed by cotton-covered lounges), after a bunch of bastard thick-necked nurses have clubbed me a few times and stolen all of my money and corn chips, my muse appears (wearing nought but feathers; a velum of translucent skin binding honeyed innards). Glowing and yellow, it floats inside a light bulb that hovers over my head...Sending feathers down with sound waves, it speaks to me in the voice of my postman, who is a castrato...It reminds me of an idea I had once; an idea that is an experiment.

All it involves is pretending to black out in a building or a public place, perhaps in some kind of institution, preferably in some kind of institution. Finding out what happens to you after you have appeared to have blacked out is what the experiment is all about.

Who knows whose hands you'll fall into; who knows where they're going to dump you, I think to myself as I drop to the floor hitting my head on the sharp corner of something (muse's house/light bulb smashing on the way down, yellow glass and blood mixture splashing against cotton lounge chair cover).

I begin to black out, not as planned.

Of course, it would have been better to have been conscious, I think to myself as the fetid/fluorescent contours of the conscious world recede before me.

Chapter Four

I wake up (lying on my side) with a rubber-gloved hand in my arsehole. There is a crow sitting on the side of my head, whispering into my ear. The crow floats upwards as I turn and look at the cold-handed back-door-interloper behind me - a man wearing grey robes and grey headdress, only his eyes and ears visible. The hand is removed - black hand-hair pressed close to skin beneath transparent rubber - the grey-robes man looks at me with pale grey eyes, tells me his name is Professor Pyodhr Anthracite, asks me what my name is. I don't tell him.

The crow now sits on Professor Anthracite's shoulder, pecking at the meat within the man's ear-hole.

I ask Professor Anthracite if I am dreaming. He tells me about the

labyrinth he found himself trapped in when he spent a year flicking through television channels. Various intratextual signals and signifiers were found by Professor Anthracite within the walls of the television screen.

Chapter Five

I open my eyes and I am in an elevator in a hospital, curled up on the floor. I see my Grandfather above me: my Grandfather, who should be dead, who should be imprisoned within the papier-mache and chicken wire walls (these building materials having magical containing properties) of Australia's least popular tourist attraction, 'The Big Artichoke'. 'The Big Artichoke' which is buried ten feet beneath the ground (access via unlit/spider-infested/- shit-stained concrete sewerage tubes - bring your own torches and rubber suits) between two weeping willows that exit the ground ten kilometres outside Australia's most detrital, most avoided, and most putrescent town (it is going to the dogs) - South Paddington Smeghole, NSW.

My Grandfather above me: who has false teeth made of tanbark, is staring down through a window in the elevator's left side wall. A white and evil mask floating against partly opaque window glass, his false teeth that are made of tanbark, that are ragged and fanglike, drip with saliva mixed with tanbark dirt - mud from the brown jagged teeth of an impotent vampire.

There is a sword on the floor of the elevator (a signal...?). There is a chink in the wall of the elevator behind which my Grandfather's heart should be - *just like a magician's box...* I insert the sword into the chink. "Hello, Grandson," my Grandfather says.

"Hello, Grandfather," I say, wrapping my arms around my knees, pulling them up to my chest.

My Grandfather: mouth opened and gleeful, clutching a shovel in his hand, tapping it on the window glass.

Chapter Six

I come to and Betty rolls into the room on a wheelchair. She has a bandage around her leg, around her left knee, and a bandage around her head, covering one ear. I am lying in a hospital bed.

"Hi Betty," I say eating a bowl of rice crisps.

"Hello."

"How was your operation?"

"It was all right. Except I got shot in the leg. And the doctor introduced mutant mosquitoes from the swamplands into my bloodstream while I was unconscious. That goddamn carpet-bagging wolf-in-sheep's-clothing has got a lawsuit on his hands!" Betty exclaims, pointing her index finger into the air.

"The diabolical madman!" I ejaculate (melodramatically), rice crisps and milk spraying from my mouth within a cloud of furiously ejected spittle.

"Conversation not irrigation," Betty says (monotonal), sipping from a thermos of coffee that she has removed from the cup holder on her wheelchair.

Betty turns her gaze upon me, and speaks again: "And how did your operation go?"

"What operation?" I ask in reply, swallowing my last mouthful of rice crisps.

Chapter Seven

I arise and I am infected by a virus that is transmitted by way of the utterance of a magic word (a virus that is received upon hearing this magic word), a word perhaps whispered into my ear by a crow I came into contact with a short time ago.

Fucking crow, I think to myself as I eat some more corn chips.

The bottom half of my face is a black mess of rotten meat. I encounter

an androgyne who closes a dictionary around my head. The virus disappears. My face falls off. There are corn chips stuck to it.

Chapter Eight

I regain consciousness inside a bed in the hospital menagerie/vivisection room. I am reminded of the pets back at my house (dogs and cats mostly), reminded of their hijinks...watching them much like watching a silent movie...I think of their faces, the way they were looking at me when I woke up this morning - *fearful faces*...

I think to myself: What if a doomsday signal appears before me and I cannot unravel its mysteries before the crucial hour?

A Doomsday scientist enters my room, points out various intratextual signals and signifiers, suggests meanings for each, tells me that there is a tv in the next room, and then closes a book around my head.

In the distance I can hear the sound of a muffled voice asking a question. I don't know if the question is coming out of my mouth or out of the tv in the next room:

"What, by my green candle, is going on while I'm sleeping?"

Chapter Nine

I arrive in the conscious world and I am infected by a disease that was introduced into my bloodstream by mutant mosquitoes from the swamplands. I am in a hospital room, I notice several gut-wrenching portents all around me; all of them point to the fact that the end is near. I watch in horror the black and white shadings of an archaeologist as he digs up some kind of ancient artefact that is shaped like a curtain, that has the texture of plastic, that is said to smell like the ocean, that issues sounds similar to the sound made by a face rubbing against a tv screen. Painted upon the artefact are various hieroglyphs most of which

resemble (in various and varied ways) the shape of artichoke hearts.

“That’s not an artefact that’s a goddamned shower curtain,” the archaeologist says, not realising that he is wrong in saying such a thing. The artefact strangles the archaeologist and incorporates him into its own form, adding a hieroglyph representation of the archaeologist’s heart to the list it displays on its cutaneous layer - see then: a hieroglyph list of the hearts of those it has incorporated (see there then, among the hieroglyphs, trapped inside the black silhouette of an artichoke heart: the white shadow of my dead (...?) Grandfather).

The artefact’s exposure to the above-ground world effects the release of the artefact’s evil essence, which could very well be a form of evil that the above-ground world has never seen. The world sighs with a kind of relief that is felt in the anticipation of seeing something new; imaginations work overtime picturing the form the evil will take. The evil appears before the world...the world sighs out of boredom, annoyed by the repetition involved.

Tabitha

by Cassandra Vuksa

Tabitha padded down the dark alleyway, occasionally sniffing overflowing garbage bins in the hope of a free meal. But all the food she smelled was rank, so she crept on. She hadn’t had much luck at all tonight, but she didn’t mind. She simply enjoyed the smells of the evening, revelled in the cool, damp smells of the earth and concrete, the fresh breeze, the smoky smell of the fires burning within the houses.

The pickings were lean in the outer suburbs, no doubt other cats and stray dogs had been there before her and had taken the most succulent scraps, so she decided she would have to hunt for her meal. She didn’t mind that at all.

Tabitha cocked her head as a dog barked from a neighbouring yard. She leapt onto a fence and picked her way along it toward the sound, reflecting upon the idea that cats were afraid of dogs. She wasn’t, but then she knew she was a fairly large example of her species, so she didn’t blame the other cats. Dogs were stupid and prideless and liked to bark simply to disturb their feline neighbours. But they were big, and could be vicious. Tabitha considered it her duty to other cats to reduce the dog population; it was their duty to her, in turn, to deal with the rats and pigeons.

The little terrier was yapping madly up at Tabitha where she crouched. It ran in circles and leapt up towards her. Absurd animal. Silently she jumped down into the yard, almost landing on top of the creature, which scurried away briefly before running back with its tail wagging attempting to lick her. With a hiss of disgust, Tabitha lashed out, snaring the dog’s head. It yelped as she pulled the terrier to her and sank her teeth into its neck, purring as it struggled, its blood running down her throat.

Then it stilled, dead.

A square of light appeared on the lawn; she heard someone scream from within the house. In a flash she was over the fence and through a laneway between houses, still clutching her kill.

She ran for a few minutes, across the suburb and into a storm water channel, and then decided she must be safe, for she could hear no sounds of pursuit. She hunkered in a shadow and ate.

The dog was delicious. It must have been young because it was very tender. Still warm too. Good, good! She noticed one of her kind creeping towards her, obviously hoping to share the meal. She was in a generous mood and didn't mind its presence, so she tossed it a portion, which it pounced upon eagerly. She supposed it had never had the chance to taste the hated dog's flesh.

Finished, she began to lick her paws, cleaning them carefully, and then she washed her face. Blood was good, but it was impossible to be rid of once it dried.

Her hackles rose as she heard the wail of sirens. Such an unnerving sound! It wasn't likely that they were after *her*, but she was cautious by nature, so, leaving the remains, she stretched and began making her way back to her lair, a comfortable dark place under an abandoned house on the edge of the city, not far away. There she would stay until she was sure it was safe.

She was halfway to her lair when she realised the sirens were drawing closer. She really might be in danger; she knew what those sirens could mean - she'd seen it happen. The Catchers caught strays and took them away. And they...Put Them Down. *She* wasn't going to be Put Down, *oh* no!

Taking the most covered and private paths she knew, climbing over fences and walls and from tree to tree, she made her way to her lair, doubling back several times to confuse anyone who may be trailing her. Once she saw the Catchers in their blue uniforms pass within metres of where she crouched, but they would never see her from within their terrible machines. Their blue and red flashing lights and the keening sirens had given her enough warning to hide from them.

Because of her cautious route, it was late when she reached her lair and crept wearily under the house, towards the nest of paper and fabric she had collected to sleep in. She felt that a nap was in order.

Wait! Something wasn't right. She strained her ears and peered through the dusty darkness, her muscles tensed. The shadows were wrong...The Catchers! They were here, waiting for her.

With a speed born of fear, she spun and dived for the gap between the boards. She knew she must escape. A shadow moved near the entrance, but she slipped between the boards before it could throw the net it held.

There were shouts behind her as she fled, keeping low to the ground. The blood and meat of the young dog gave her the energy she needed. Her breath rasped in her throat. She didn't know where she was going, just that she wanted to get away from the crashing behind her. She darted across the road and into the forest beyond the city, heading for its heart. Let them try and find her there.

They might be noisy, these Catchers, but they were very fast. Several were actually keeping up with her, although the rest had lost her trail. The trees were closer about her now, and she could hear the pursuers cursing as the branches and thorns whipped at them. She was nearing a safe place, a dark cave, where they would never be able to find her. She would have to wait until they gave up the search, but she didn't

mind that.

Her pads burned from running, but she kept going. She would be there soon, and those trailing her would fall behind. Slowly the panic eased its grip on her. She *would* survive.

With a terrible crashing roar, several Catchers jumped out from the bushes ahead of her - how did they travel so *fast*?

Knowing there was nowhere else to run, Tabitha threw herself at the smallest of these new arrivals, screeching. She latched onto it and bit at its face and throat, drawing blood. It tried to push her away, screaming too; she heard a sound like a sneeze and felt a sudden pain in her shoulder. Releasing the catcher, she turned and looked incredulously at the dart sticking out of her flesh, just as they threw the net over her.

Realising that was the way they would Put Her Down, Tabitha began to wail and struggle. Thrashing about wildly she sank into the waiting darkness.



When Tabitha awoke it was to feel surprise that she *was* awake. It appeared they hadn't Put Her Down after all, which was very unusual. All stray cats were Put Down, especially ones who had attacked and killed dogs the humans valued. She opened her eyes slightly.

She was lying on a ledge, covered in a big piece of material. It was not ripped like the ones in her lair. The ledge was soft and springy, puzzling her. Several other inexplicable objects were placed about the room; such as a white bowl that sprouted from the floor, too big for a water dish, even for her, yet with water inside. A window sat high in the wall above her head, with bars in it, and, in the opposite wall, a

series of bars ran from floor to ceiling. On the other side of the bars was a Catcher, she recognised him from his blue uniform, and another human in a white coat.

Now she understood. She was at the Pound.

She sat up, staring at them with slitted eyes. The human in the white coat began to speak to her in a soothing voice. She could not understand what he was saying, but she remembered one time she had seen a human talking to 'its' cat. The human had used the same tone of voice, and she realised that this human wanted to be friendly. Maybe take her to its home.

Tilting her head she began to purr. She would be nice to this human...for a time. She was sneaky, and she didn't mind waiting. She didn't mind at all.

Fish

by Elisabeth A Matthews

Celeste had a heavenly body.

Her mind seemed to exist on an ethereal level, as though she were looking out from another world. She had an aura of sadness, as if she was adrift and alone in sacred skies. Maudlin and melancholy, Celeste was like that. But in the dark, submarine caverns of her mind she dreamed of oceans.

And I believed I could see the seas in Celeste's eyes. At times the stormy rolling of waves; at others the glassy calm of windless oceans; and occasionally it seemed as though the moods of her eyes were accompanied by the sound of the thunder of the seas roaring like a military jet skimming the belly of clouds. There just for an instant. And then gone, except for the lingering vapour trail of her smile.

I fancy that I was the only one who saw and heard these things and I know that I'm the only one who can now solve the mystery surrounding her disappearance. Although to me, there is no mystery. The clues were all there - the shattered windows, the water, the fish - you just had to know how to interpret them.

In the police report I'm credited with being the one to discover her 'disappearance under suspicious circumstances'. If indeed, that's how it should be described. My friends think so. Personally, I don't. You see, when I visited her house there was, and I still believe this, no cause for alarm. Celeste was nowhere to be seen, it's true, but she often disappeared to spend solitary days at her beach house where she could tumble out of her bed and into the slick, slippery salt cool of the sea. My friends still cast accusatory glances at me for not calling the police sooner. But then, they don't understand the situation. Not like I do.

Celeste's city house was still submerged in pools of early morning cool when I arrived to deliver a parcel that had been sent by accident to my house, addressed to *Marie Celeste Waterstone, c/- myself*. That a parcel for her arrived at my house wasn't unusual. We had once been lovers. But that had ended almost two years ago - she was too inaccessible - although we've remained, unusually, good friends.

Salmon, her watery blue Siamese, sat outside on her bedroom windowsill, calmly watching the creaking to and fro of that time of day. Celeste would be out in the courtyard having breakfast, so I walked around and let myself in. Salmon slinked past me. But Celeste wasn't outside as I had thought; and as I opened the back door the boom of the surf pounding the coastline roared through the house and about me. Frightened, I looked around and into the air to discover that it was only a jet that had split the sky overhead. Salmon arched her back, her whiskers a-prickle with fear.

I left the parcel on the kitchen table. And I remember noticing as I put it down that the address was written in her own hand. I hadn't really noticed that before. How strange.

The kitchen was cosy with the aroma of toast, perfectly cooked to golden brown; a slice still stood in the toaster; it had popped up only moments ago. A cup of tea sat by the kettle, still steaming. An ice cold jug of milk sat by it. Beads of condensation hadn't even begun to swell and run madly down the side. "Celeste?" I called out, pouring myself a glass of orange juice. As I did so a flash of light caught my eyes. Against the wall, just for an instant, the dragonfly dance of sunlight reflecting off water. Only for a moment. And then gone. Puzzled, I searched for its source, but there was nothing. However, I did find something else.

On the sideboard below where the light had flickered was a book, "*The Marie Celeste - What Really Happened?*" I opened it and scanned the

pages where Celeste had underlined paragraphs and written "Not True, Not True, Definitely Not True!" followed by fierce, black exclamation marks. Celeste had always been obsessed by her name. She had been named after a nineteenth century ship which had been found floating, abandoned and adrift, miles off course, looking as though the crew had completely disappeared mid-bite in the middle of their meal, mid-sip in the middle of their Madeira. No-one aboard was ever seen again: the ship was said to be cursed. I didn't really understand why her parents chose that unlucky name for her. But then, we had never met.

As I put the book down I caught a memory of Celeste. Celeste alone on the beach, staring out to sea, staring into another world. As I settled down next to her she looked at me earnestly and whispered sadly, "My family knows what really happened to the *Marie Celeste*," and with that she slipped into the sea with a graceful, fluid movement, to surface again like an otter, with the same dark, melancholy wetness about her eyes. I smiled. My odd, fey creature. But she swam off before I could ask her what she had meant.

Salmon was yeowing from the hallway. I followed her into Celeste's bedroom and noticed under the windowsill a glistening pool of water. Peering into it, the puddle seemed fathomless. Perhaps a ghostly trick of the morning light. I knew before I bent over to examine it, though, that it would have the rawness of ocean brine; and it seemed that the atmosphere of the room was crowded with the salty stench of seaweed, which conjured childhood memories of driftwood, seaglass and the flotsam of shipwrecks.

From the corner of my eye I noticed Salmon was crouched, poised to pounce over an object on the bed. I turned as something suddenly heaved and arched into the air, all flip-flopping fins and breathless gasping. I jumped backwards with fright and saw Salmon pounce with a growl. There on the bed a fat, sleek fish panted and fanned its gills with a dumb shriek. I was shocked and felt an eerie chill crackle about

my body. So she had finally done it. It was all perfectly clear now what had happened and I had just missed saying goodbye to her. All that was left was the fish that had been trapped in this world when Celeste left it.

But there was absolutely no need to be concerned now for Celeste.

The cup of tea was growing cold in the kitchen. I looked about me. Everything was just as Celeste had probably left it only fifteen minutes ago, except for the parcel and my glass of orange juice. Suddenly I was overcome with curiosity - why had Celeste addressed a parcel to herself and sent it to me? I snipped the string and tore off the paper. Inside was a cardboard gift box and a card addressed to me with no further message. I shook the box but it sounded as though there was nothing inside and it felt too light to contain anything. I put it to my ear like a conch-shell and could hear the winter-whisper of coastal breezes. I was bemused by Celeste's need for mystery and pulled off the lid, screaming as a wave roared out of the box and thundered across the kitchen, dragging me, spluttering in the breaking surf. I landed by the back door as the wave shattered the windows and sluiced down the stairs and into the garden where it subsided.

As I stood up, wet and shocked, I saw a bottle at my feet. It was a barnacled crystal decanter and lodged in the crust of ocean fossil was the decanter tag which I prised away. Engraved on the silver disc was the word "Madeira".

Salmon growled and cowered in the hallway. Exhausted and bruised, I picked her up, placed her in a basket and carried her back home.

The police have decided to close the file on Celeste; her name is now lost on a list of missing persons. Only I have run my hands over the mermaid slipperiness of her legs and felt the faint ridges of scales beneath her skin.

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