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Where Oceans Meet: Subjunctivity in Flash Fiction

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Abstract

Constrained by a limited word count, the writer of flash fiction is compelled to distil a story experience into a small space. The relationship between reader and writer in the co-creation of the story requires a fine balance of what is and is not revealed, and what is revealed subjunctively through the craft of the writer. In this thesis I examine the work of writers who succeed at getting this balance right, and I attempt to hone my own craft in the telling of very small stories.

The first section contains definitions of flash fiction and story, and explanations of the influence transactional theory and the phenomenological approach played on my analyses. I also draw on some writers, such as Eudora Welty, Lydia Davis, Ernest Hemingway and Ralph Waldo Emerson who have contemplated the role of brevity and reader response in their writing. Then follows an introduction to my process of story analysis and the four readings of very short fictions. This section concludes with a discussion of the role subjunctivity plays in the writing of a flash fiction. In the second section, I present a preface and a collection of original flash fiction stories titled *Where Oceans Meet*.

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- *Flash Frontier*: “Class I Hemorrhage” as “Broken Promise”, “Dancers are a Hazard on City Streets”, “In the Weekend we went to the Beach”, Lento”, “Lost Bearings”, “In the Middle of a Ball of Wool” as “Miscarriage”, “Pests and Pestilence”, “Points of Origin”, “Sisters”, “Trampolining in the Matukituki” and “Where Can the Children Laugh”.
- *Best Small Fictions, 2017*: “Sisters”.

- *NZ Flash Fiction Day—Micro Madness*: “Blind Tasting”, “Two Milligrams and All is Silence” and “Your Father Carries Time in his Pocket”.
- *Sleep is A Beautiful Colour*, UK National Flash Fiction Day: “Iridescence”.
- *Headland Issue 3*: “Time to Go”.
- *We Society Poetry*: “10 in a Packet”.
- *Scattered Feathers*, NZ Poetry Society : “Whiskers on Roses”.
- *Bath Flash Fiction Anthology, 2017*: “A Complicated Birth”.
- *Raven Chronicles Journal Vol 25: Balancing Acts* : “As Seen Live on Fox News”, “Lost Bearings” and “The Damaged Ones”.

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Where Oceans Meet: Subjunctivity in Flash Fiction

Background

That readers, writers and critics are somewhat perplexed by the reinvention of the small story as flash fiction is not surprising. It may be considered as a new form, a reinvention, or merely the renaming of a short form of storytelling that has existed for a long time. By following the genealogy of small stories we see that very short story forms traverse the full history of literature with moments in ascendance and others spent in obscurity (Masih, Rourke). For example, in 1947 a guide to writing short shorts, during a time when periodicals held a wide readership, made the following claim: “In the decades since 1926, this capsule type of story has been developed into an artistic medium which now demands serious recognition”(Masih xxviii). This observation may well have been written in recent years as the small story has been revived, relabelled as flash fiction. No matter the branding, however, the very short story once again demands our serious attention.

The most recent ascendance of the very short form is due, in large, to flash fiction’s accessibility across a digital platform, with numerous websites, blogs, journals and competitions dedicated to the form, and a proliferation of online communities dedicated to the writing, reading and critique of flash fiction. Much critical debate has centred on constructing a definition for the form (Chandler, Masih, Shapard). Featuring both poetic concision of language and a capacity for narrative, flash fiction is not always easily categorised as either one thing or another in that liminal space between short story and prose poetry. The proclivity for literary forms to hybridise as writers follow the creative urge to experiment and push boundaries means that some texts owing more to the language of evocation than to the provision

of story have been included in the stable of flash fiction. In some cases, pieces that veer more to story are reclassified by the writer as either prose poem or flash fiction when it is expedient to do so. I have done this myself. In an interview, the very short fiction author Lydia Davis addresses this conundrum:

When I first began writing seriously, I wrote short stories, and that was where I thought I was headed. Then the stories evolved and changed, but it would have become a bother to say every time, 'I guess what I have just written is a prose poem, or a meditation', and I would have felt very constrained by trying to label each individual work, so it was simply easier to call everything stories (Skidelsky).

Robert Olen Butler's response to the question of boundaries between poetry and fiction has guided the direction of this study in seeking to discover how writers create 'story' within a limited word count. He explains, "to be brief, it is a short short story and not a prose poem because it has at its centre a character who yearns" (Butler 102).

Editor and writer Michelle Elvy pinpoints the two aspects of flash fiction that may be argued as essential features of the genre: brevity and the essence of a story. She writes, "Life happens beyond gimmick. And so does a really good story. The pulse is what matters. The essence, the pull, the rhythm and music. Not *strict word count*" (Elvy). However, the brevity of the words used is often the only congruous feature required of texts currently published under the label of flash fiction. Flash fiction *has* to be short. It is claimed that James Thomas, editor of *Flash Fiction* in 1992, first coined the term, although flash fiction is also known by many other names around the world (Masih xxxvi). For example, *minificción* has a long-standing tradition and pride of place in Spanish speaking countries, and in China, the very short form is known as *palm fiction* or *smokelong fiction* (Qi 15). It is under the label 'flash

fiction' that most current writers of very short fiction from New Zealand, USA and UK classify their works and so, for ease of understanding, I shall make use of this label, even when referring to stories published under the label 'short story' but which fall within the arbitrary 'flash' word count of up to 1000 words that I reference this study.

The word count for flash fiction sits along a continuum. At the lower end of the word count continuum, extreme brevity is an easily observable indicator of whether a text is flash fiction. The exceptionally short story includes 50-100 word 'micros', 6 word stories and Twitter stories of 40 characters, while the majority of flash fiction journals and websites set limits of between 250-500 words. Blurring of the boundaries between flash and traditional short stories occurs when the word count increases. Different writers and editors have extended their own boundaries to stories in the range of 750 words to 1000 words (Thomas 12; Masih xi). For this study, I selected primary texts that fell within the 100 to 500-word range. My intent in analysing the selected stories in this paper has been to illustrate what successful writers are able to do within the form, without distraction by the challenges of very short outlier word counts, or stepping into liminal territory between longer word counts and the traditional short story. This range also correlates with the majority of the stories in my own collection.

Such attention to the word count as a defining feature of the form indicates that there must be some advantage—either to reader, writer or editor—in the work being short. Aside from the space taken on a page or a screen, the comparatively short time taken in composition or in reading, a more crucial advantage is the role constraints act upon creativity. Cognitive psychologist Catrinel Haught-Tromp, in her work exploring constraints in the creative process, references Baudelaire, Braque and

Stravinsky among other artists who have expressed the value of such constraints. In summary of her own creative research, Haught-Tromp says, “Creativity depends on constraints, ...within which a deeper exploration of unusual associations is more likely to occur” (15). Because flash fiction writers are creatively constrained they must seek out efficient ways to convey meaning. In doing so they are compelled to combine, explore and transform the ways in which text may contain story. It is the ‘pulse of story’ that drives and directs the writing. By employing the terms ‘small story’ or ‘flash fiction’ to define the text, the writer is making claim to a form of story. This, in turn, means readers expect to find elements that fit with their understanding of ‘story’, an understanding based on prior experience of longer narrative forms. The urge to classify a text before, during and following reading is cultivated through experience because a genre description provides a shortcut, triggering expectations and guiding the reader in a way in which the text may be read. Knowing ‘what it is’ guides the reader in how to approach the text and adjust their reading style.

The terms narrative and story have become complicated by discourses that traverse literary, cultural and transmedial contexts. While there is much discussion regarding the discrepancy between the concepts and terminology of narrative and story (Martin McQuillan, Ryan), one of the more useful definitions to use for this literary-based thesis is H. Porter Abbotts’ approach of the work of the narrative theorist Vladimir Propp’s *fabula* and *sjuzet*: “Story is an event or sequence of events (the *action*), and narrative discourse is those events as represented” (19). Abbott goes on to state that the story—or what the reader constructs as the story—“only comes to life” when mediated through a narrative discourse (20). In response to Abbott, Marie-Laure Ryan (a scholar who takes a transmedial approach to narrative) says, “narrative

may be a combination of story and discourse, but it is its ability to evoke stories to the mind that distinguishes narrative discourse from other text types” (7). In this study I have used the term story to refer to the action/s related through the written narrative form of flash fiction.

In his introduction to *Flash Fiction* Thomas asks, “How short can a story be and still be a story?” and then claims that any answer will be subjective (11). Structuralist narrative theory (as represented by narrative grammarians such as Vladimir Propp, Kenneth Burke, James Phelan, Peter Rabinowitz) as well as structural guidelines for narrative and screenwriters has generated a great amount of discussion and detail on what constitutes story (Bruner, Campbell, Hoffman and Murphy, Prince, Rabinowitz, Snyder). Jerome Bruner, a cognitive and educational psychologist who worked on the development of a theory of the narrative construction of reality, states that literary theorists “suggest that there is a highly constrained deep structure to narrative... and that good stories are well-formed surface realizations of this underlying structure” (Bruner 100). Elements such as plot, character, temporality, place, point of view, conflict and resolution have all been claimed, in various formats and terminology, as essential components of story.

Each of these elements of story may be, and usually are, discernible within a longer text; however, they may not always be pronounced, or indeed present, in shorter or more experimental forms. But, according to Bruner, this does not negate these shorter forms as ‘story’. He advises, “We would do well with as loose fitting a constraint as we can manage concerning what a story must ‘be’ to be a story” (17). Yet, even the more simple approaches to defining story elicit differing opinions. Literary theorist, Kenneth Burke puts forward the idea that story involves “*characters in action* with intentions or *goals* in *settings* using particular *means*” (qtd in Bruner

20). Abbott argues that events and entities (characters) are the only two essential ingredients of stories, while setting is optional (20). Martin Cowley argues that another essential element of story includes the stipulation that “something is changed” (Jay 403). The concept of ‘Narrativity’ changes the question from “is this narrative/story?” to a suggestion that we regard, “the set of all narratives as fuzzy, and narrativity (or storiness) as a scalar property rather than a binary feature that divides mental representations into stories and non stories” (Ryan 7).

Writer Lydia Davis, in discussing whether her very short pieces are stories, says, "Even if the thing is only a line or two, there is always a little fragment of narrative in there, or the reader can turn away and imagine a larger narrative ... I think as long as there's a bit of narrative, or just a situation, I can get away with calling them stories" (Skidelsky). It is Bruner’s assertion, his loose fitting constraint—“narrative deals with the vicissitudes of intention” (17)—that manages to encompass much of the theoretical discussion I have been reading and serves well in approaching the reading of the primary texts as story. Bruner’s approach requires the story to have a character (the one with the intention, or the ‘yearning’ that Butler makes claim for), an action (the intent as acted upon, or not), as well as a fluctuation (change) between the two. However, these elements alone do not make a ‘good’ story. In the introduction to *Flash Fiction*, Thomas writes, “Like all fiction that matters, their success depends not on their length but on their depth, their clarity of vision, their human significance ...”(11). The ‘good’ story relies on the craft of the writer to create a text that has significance and is meaningful to the reader.

Transactional Theory and Flash Fiction

In all aesthetic writing, readers must weave together clues and fill in the missing narrative spaces. The flash fiction story generates greater opportunities for the reader to participate, and, in fact, relies more on their participation than a longer text with its more fully developed story elements. In guiding the reader's experience through a limited word count, the flash fiction writer is required to pay close attention to word selections, and to ensure the parts of the story that are left unspoken remain accessible to the reader. Because of these 'spaces' the reader plays a vital role in the transactional 'creation' of the flash fiction story. Writer and philosopher, Ralph Emerson said, "There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion (59)". Katherine Batchelor draws on Emerson's insights when she claims that flash fiction relies on both creative writing and reading. "Reading flash fiction requires an immediate action on the reader's part" (80). Transactional theory asserts that readers are not passive participants but active in creating meaning under the guidance of the text: the words and the patterns in which they have been written down by the writer. Louise Rosenblatt writes:

The reader's attention to the text activates certain elements in his past experience—external reference, internal response—that have become linked with the verbal symbols. Meaning will emerge from a network of relationships among the things symbolised as he senses them. The symbols point to these sensations, images, objects, ideas, relationships, with the particular associations or feeling-tones created by his past experiences with them in actual life or in literature (11).

In comparing the traditional short story to the novel, writer Eudora Welty said, “Less is resolved. More is suggested, perhaps” (Prenshaw 86). By extension, in comparing a flash fiction to a short story, even less is resolved and even more is left to the reader to infer. Welty’s ‘perhaps’ takes on greater significance for the flash fiction writer who, bridled by the constraints of a limited word count, must ensure they have provided sufficient *subjunctivity* to allow access to the story at its core.

Bruner defines subjunctivity using the second of the OED definitions: “Designating a mood...the forms of which are employed to denote an action or state as conceived (and not as fact)” (26). To be in the subjunctive mode, Bruner says, is “to be trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties” (26). Bruner also reminds us to consider the reader. He says, “So ‘great’ storytelling, inevitably, is about compelling human plights that are ‘accessible’ to readers. But at the same time, the plights must be set forth with sufficient subjunctivity to allow them to be rewritten by the reader, rewritten so as to allow play for the reader’s imagination” (35). Bruner goes on to explain, “the reader asks that crucial interpretive question, ‘What’s it all about?’ But what ‘it’ is, of course, is not the actual text—however great its literary power—but the text that the reader has constructed under its sway. And that is why the actual text needs the subjunctivity that makes it possible for a reader to create a world of his own” (37). *The provision of sufficient* subjunctivity becomes a key function of the flash fiction writer. With the limited word count constraints of the form they do not have the space to develop certainties and so must select and employ economical allusive techniques with the intent of creating meaning beyond the text.

Working with few words to express expansive ideas, flash fiction writers have to ensure that the things unsaid but essential to the telling, are tightly bound in the empty spaces, even though they are neither fully structured nor resolved. Michel

Foucault suggests that the reader's role may be "to recognise that all material excluded in the process of narrative editing and selection installs itself hauntologically within the material which the narrative presents" (McQuillan 25). This requirement for some 'guesswork' places a greater onus on readers to traverse the spaces, but also a much greater responsibility on flash fiction writers to assist them with the journey. It is through the 'incompleteness' of the story elements that the reader is invited to become a part of the storytelling process. Bruner writes, "...I believe that the writer's greatest gift to a reader is to help him become a writer" (37). The successful flash fiction story is a co-creation of the writer who provides sufficient fact and sufficient subjunctification, and of the reader who draws on their own resources and imagination to derive meaning and a fuller realisation of story.

A Phenomenological Approach to Flash Fiction

The mediums by which writers create meaning are the words they choose to use, the words they choose to leave out and the ways in which they structure and organise those words and spaces. The phenomenological approach to understanding literary works, as conceived by Roman Ingarden, perceives a work of literature as structured layers through which meaning can be brought into realisation (*concretisation*). Ingarden identifies one pole of concretisation as belonging to the reader (the *aesthetic*), an aspect that aligns his approach with Transactional Theory. His other pole he terms the *artistic*, the text as created by the writer. Ingarden's "stratified formation" (based on sounds, and building through words, sentences and the order of sentences) provides a tool to peel back the layers of meaning available to flash fiction writers (*How to Do Theory* 14 -21).

“Literary creation is, after all basically the making of choices,” writes Rosenblatt (51). Flash fiction’s brief word count forces the writer to make meticulous choices of words in order to provide the required subjunctivity, designating the mood if not the certainty, and allowing the reader to create meaning. Words must often play more than one role within the telling of the story, working as a literary shortcut to connect with the reader by shaping combinations of etymological and social meanings, sound, shape, tone, stance, allusion, motif, sensation, etc., and to work alongside other words in sentences and across a piece, to create text that becomes more than the sum of its parts. Wolfgang Iser, a founding scholar of the reader response theory, describes how Ingarden breaks down these interactions within a “stratum of meaning units” where individual words operate as “an intentional directional factor” within a sentence, and interplay with other words within the same and other sentences. The order and structure of these words and sentences, the “intentional correlatives”, then shape the content as well as the reader’s expectations and experience (*How to Do Theory* 14-23; *The Implied Reader* 277). Commenting on Iser’s reflections in *The Act of Reading*, Bruner says, “The text itself has structures that are two-sided: a verbal aspect that guides reaction and prevents it from being arbitrary, and an affective aspect that is triggered or ‘prestructured by the language of the text’” (24). Ingarden’s ‘intentional correlatives’ which writers may employ to pre-structure and provide shortcuts towards clarity and meaning for readers within the flash fiction form include such textual signals as: the words chosen, the order in which each part of the story is revealed, allusions to other textual forms and to historical/ social/ political constructs. It is through the interaction of these correlatives that the reader is able to “climb aboard” (Iser *TIR* 277) and become a co-creator of the story.

Introduction to the Readings

The flash fiction pieces I have selected for closer reading in this analysis possess what writer and editor Tara Laskowski refers to as the ‘linger effect’. She explains, “My favorite effect of good flash fiction is also the hardest to accomplish. Even though it only takes a few moments to read, the story should stay with your reader long after they’ve read the final word” (Laskowski). Each of the pieces included in my analyses below evoked both affective and cognitive responses for me upon first reading. A combination of action, characters, themes, sensations, images and implications lingered and encouraged a further, deeper reading. Given that these responses are ones I wish to provoke with my own writing, I was curious to analyse how some of the texts had been crafted to trigger these responses.

Two other aspects determined my selection of stories. First, I sought to identify the story provided within the text using Bruner’s loose fitting definition “narrative deals with the vicissitudes of intention” (17)—which requires a story to have a character (the one with the intention), an event or action (the intent as acted upon, or not) as well as a fluctuation (change) between the two. In each of the stories analysed below, I found character and event present and the intent—or “yearning” (to use Butler’s term)—of the character/ narrator was manifest. Change implies end to the original state, so I also sought stories that provide closure of some kind. Ends of stories are a motivating principle for both the narrative and the reader, and I was particularly interested in how the writers both pre-structured and realised the endings of their stories for the reader.

My intent for this study was to explore how a writer working under the constraints of a limited word count may craft a story that touches on the human condition to linger in the mind of the reader, and then to transfer this learning to my

own writing of flash fiction. Some writers are better than others at condensing a ‘good’ story into very small space. Many of the stories I read succeeded in containing elements of character, event and change as identified by Bruner’s “vicissitudes of intention” (17) as well as Thomas’s success criteria of depth, clarity of vision and human significance (11). However, as Richard Warnica observes in *The Incredible Shrinking Short Story*, the form is prone to banality: “By saying so little, many writers of very short fiction end up saying nothing at all” (Warnica). Treading the line between significant and banal is a risk for all writers; however the unforgiving brevity of the flash fiction form means that the risk of not providing sufficient depth and of missing the emotional centre of the story is acute. Facing this risk was my greatest challenge in composing the pieces in my flash fiction collection *Where Oceans Meet*.

My second goal within the close readings was to discover how words were purposed as intentional directional factors and how sentences were arranged to determine the production of story. In each of the following readings I discuss significant features that may be pertinent to my own work, as they suggest methods of providing a deeper story experience and a greater sense of ‘what is at stake’ for readers. In highlighting these techniques, I am not implying that these are ones that flash fiction writers *should* use. They are techniques that good writers used that helped me, as a reader, create meaning in response to their limited word stories. In Wayne Booth’s discussion in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, he says that analysis does not reduce the creative process to one of calculation, yet stresses that a writer “succeeds only if he makes us join the dance” (Booth xiv).

1. Minimalism and Epiphany: an analysis of “The Fish” by Lydia Davis

“Prose is architecture, not interior decoration, and the Baroque age is over”

(Hemingway *Death in the Afternoon* 153)

In “A Few Words about Minimalism”, the writer John Barth identifies the minimalists’ cardinal principle: “that artistic effect may be enhanced by a radical economy of artistic means, even where such parsimony compromises other values: completeness, for example, or richness, or precision of statement” (Barth). Omitting elements of a story does not need to mean that the reader gets ‘less’. Ernest Hemingway wrote in his memoir, *A Moveable Feast*, “my new theory that you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood” (11). Foucault’s suggests that the reader’s role may be “to recognise that all material excluded in the process of narrative editing and selection installs itself hauntologically within the material which the narrative presents” (M. McQuillan 25). By being active in the creation process the reader may be more deeply engaged; what is implicit will often have a greater effect than the explicit ever could. “The Fish” by Lydia Davis stands as an illustration of how a minimalist story can offer meaning that far exceeds the limits suggested by a word count. What appears at first a mundane and trivial scene of a woman looking at a fish takes on greater significance when worked over in the reader’s imagination. In the case of “The Fish”, our answer to Bruner’s crucial interpretative question “What’s it all about?” will likely lead us to imagine a story

partially constructed under the sway of Davis's text and the subjunctivity formulated within implicit connections.

William Nelles observed that "the very short story goes through a narrative wormhole beneath a certain length, and the actions narrated pop back out to full size" (91). Davis achieves this "full-size" effect by creating space for the reader to 'write in' the elements of story that are not made explicit. In "The Fish", she accomplishes part of this "full-size" effect by using the intentional directional factors of the scientific mode as well as structure and sentence sequencing to exemplary effect. Four aspects of Lydia Davis work "The Fish" that invite closer inspection are the tight focus of the action, blank characterisation, the use of a clinical writing mode and the construction and sequencing of sentences. Each of these aspects of her story enable the reader to take an important role in the creation a wider story of angst and regret than the one that appears to be 'told'.

The scope of action and the framing of "The Fish" are both small and effectively convey the interiority of the protagonist. Davis employs an impartial and omniscient narrator who shows us the mind of a woman as she stands over a cooked fish contemplating what it represents to her at a particular moment. This perspective places the reader in a similar position as the narrator—one who is looking down on the protagonist and contemplating the significance of her psychological state. Davis prompts the reader to take a similar analytical stance to the narrator by utilising some of the language and structures of the scientific mode. For example, she relies on only the sparse facts of the preceding and current actions of the narrative. Davis writes, "She stands over a fish" and "Now the fish has been cooked and she is alone with it" (33). In minimalist fashion, the reader is provided with few facts about the protagonist. We know only her gender and the fact of her status as an adult, as

indicated by the word ‘woman’. There is no name, age or circumstance provided, as is common in Davis’s writing. When asked about the lack of names in her writing in an interview in the *Paris Review*, Davis said, “I’ve always felt that naming was artificial” (Arguilar and Fronth-Nygren).

Within the sketched plot and characterisation of “The Fish”, Davis creates space for the reader to participate in the creation of the story. The blankness of the character invites and allows the reader to imprint herself on the protagonist. In referring only to “certain irrevocable mistakes [the protagonist] has made today” (33), Davis withholds both character details and the context of the narrative’s preceding events. As a result, Davis allows the reader to endow her own poor decisions and irrevocable mistakes on the woman, thus maximising the emotional impact of the story. That an affective response in the reader can be achieved through stark facts, set out in a scientific manner of observation, is evidence of Davis’s consummate skill as a writer for it is through deliberate choices of words and their placement within sentences, and the order of the six sentences in “The Fish”, that Davis provides the necessary information for the reader to work forwards and backward through the clues to co-create the story.

The title of Davis’s piece provides little context—it draws us only to consider a generic (yet specific) fish, as we might in a scientific observation. Yet, from this start of the very short story, Davis builds our expectation of a distanced, clinical observation, with each of the six sentences of the story revealing information set out as facts. The language used in the first five sentences is declarative rather than descriptive, the verbs each indicating states of ‘being’ and ‘thought’ rather than of action. The sentences are each detached from the others, as if they were bullet points. The fourth sentence begins with the word “but” yet does not easily connect to the

previous statement that “there is none else in the house” (33). The final sentence, almost half the length of the entire story, lists the states of the fish by way of closer detailed description and then returns to the woman looking at it with her “weary eye” (33). By withholding interpretation and emotional response, Davis’s “The Fish” functions like set of clues to a crime, and, as a result, the reader is drawn to supply the connections and correlations in order to solve the case.

That the clues are revealed in a certain order, each one building on the other, pre-structures the reader’s interpretation of what it is “the woman” has actually done. In the first three compound, declarative sentences we are told the facts of the case: She has made mistakes; the fish is cooked; she is alone with it; others are not there. We are told that she “has had a troubling day” (33). We do not have to infer the facts, but we do have to infer how they interact and fit together. The facts presented in “The Fish” may appear banal by themselves but it is the correlation of these facts that builds and gives structure to the potential story. The building of the story is work that is required of the reader who responds to the text under the sway of intentional evocative techniques employed by the writer.

Davis’s use of the fish as a symbolic tool by which the reader reaches an understanding of the woman’s state, may be seen as a minimalized example of multiple perspectives, one of the features of subjunctivity that Bruner identifies and describes as “beholding the world, not univocally but simultaneously each of which catches some part of it ” (260). The reader is led to make the connections between the two perspectives by way of the syntactical structure of two clauses within each of the first three sentences. In the first clause of each of the first three sentences the physical state of fish is the focus, and in the second clause the psychological state of the woman is emphasised. In the fourth sentence, the woman alone is the focus. By the

fifth sentence, the clausal order has been reversed with the woman first and the fish second. This fifth sentence ends in a question, encouraging the reader to provide a possible answer. The writer controls the order of the information in the sentences and the order of the sentences but it is up to the reader to “activate the interplay of the correlates pre structured by the sequence of sentences” (Iser *HTDT* 17).

Readers familiar with the normative cause and effect progression of plot assume the order in which events are listed is important. Placement of the events in the following linear structure prompts the reader to make causal connections between them: that ‘she’ is (a) thinking about mistakes she has made, (b) is alone, (c) has had a troubling day and (d) is now questioning her next action. The orders in which events and details are laid out in a text provide the reader with a set of expectations. With each new sentence those expectations are either confirmed, modified or frustrated and so the combinations and correlations between sentences act to create further meaning. As Iser says, “The sentence does not consist solely of a statement ... but aims at something beyond what it actually says (*TIR* 277)”. The order of the sentences in “The Fish”, in combination with the expectation of a cause and effect model of storytelling, leads the reader to infer that the initial “certain irrevocable mistakes” are the cause of the woman being alone, that this is now troubling her, that she does not want to be alone and that she had not planned on being alone because she has cooked a whole fish—too much for one person.

In the final, complex and elongated sentence we are shown the fish as exposed, alone and violated: “And yet the fish, too, motionless as it is, and dismantled from its bones, and fleeced of its silver skin, has never been so completely alone as it is now: violated in a final manner and regarded with a weary eye by this woman who has made the last mistake of her day and done this to it” (33). In the first half of the

story we have already seen the woman in similar states. She stands (still), is alone, and is herself disordered and troubled by thinking of her mistakes. The juxtaposition of the last sentence with the ones before it prompts readers to compare the descriptions of the fish to the emotional state of the woman who—stripped bare by self-analysis—confesses she has made her “last mistake of the day and done this to it” (33). This final mistake, like the ones mentioned in the opening sentence, is one that is demonstratively irrevocable. The cooking of a fish has brought about a physical change, one that scientifically cannot be undone. The fish cannot be uncooked; it cannot be put back together and returned to life. We are shown this through startling observational detail. It has been “dismantled from its bones,” and “fleeced of its silver skin” (33).

In the first half of the story the juxtaposition of the fish and the woman created a comic effect, and this is emphasised in the second, almost flippant line: “The fish has been cooked, and she is alone with it” (33). The second half of the story, however, recasts the fish in a tragic light, as a body on a slab that has been “violated in a final manner” (33). On re-visiting the second sentence we now bring a new perspective and a re-reading. Having cooked one’s own goose—or, in this case, *fish*—implies self-caused harm. The protagonist of “The Fish” is not merely alone, she is alone with “it”. In this case “it” is both the fish as well as her regrets from the first sentence. By now the reader, having previously been directed to link the experience of the fish with the experience of the woman is able to equate the tragedy of the fish to the state of the woman. With the clues all revealed and the confession made, the reader is aware that the fish is not the cause of the crisis in the woman’s life. There is a realisation that the story has something much bigger at stake than the action has indicated. The story is not ‘about’ the fish, as the title may have led us to assume. The experiences of the

protagonist's day and the condition of the fish are the agents for her final realisation that, just as she is responsible for the violation of the fish, so, too, she is responsible for the consequences of her other unspecified actions.

In accepting responsibility for her situation (she is not blaming anyone else for her current situation) she understands that, like the fish, she cannot return to her former state and her mistakes cannot be undone. This flash of insight is example of epiphany, the moment in which a problem is seen in a striking new perspective or an event or object is granted greater significance than it would normally entail. By reintroducing the trigger word "mistake", Davis reminds readers of what was foreshadowed in the first sentence, and, as a result, we must return to reassess and modify our expectations. The sequencing of the actions and the epiphanic conclusion lead us to look for another greater reason for the protagonist's regrets. The cooking of the fish, neither large in action or consequence, leads us to the conclusion that the irrevocable mistakes referenced in the first sentence are the true cause of her weariness and lack of appetite. Using the clues provided, we may infer that she has caused harm to someone with whom she had intended to share the fish, and that this harm is the reason for them no longer being present. In this epiphany we see the yearning of the woman, not necessarily to put things right, the state of the fish shows that this is impossible, but rather to be the sort of person who does not make such mistakes.

Davis is known for her precision to sentence detail as both a translator and writer. Andrea Scrima says:

Davis' sentences clarify. They *insist*. What is more, the continued reassertion of a thought and the perseverance in its reiteration frequently correspond to the respective narrator's participation in a series of situations that find her hapless

and misunderstood, situations that are highly distressing. Davis is concerned with correction, revision, rectification.

Davis herself grapples with the importance and challenges of authorial word choice and sentence construction in another story “Foucault and Pencil” (151) and so we may assume, given the writer’s interest in sentence construction, that both the sentence length and the placement of punctuation in “The Fish” are part of a deliberate intent of guiding the reader to meaning. I suggest that they also add to an overall effect of the scientific, analytic mode that was first established by the title. The first five compound and declaratory sentences (14,12,12,7 and 12 words respectively) could be notes taken as observations. They have a brisk and efficient tone. The fifth sentence is structured as a question for further investigation, the answer not being immediately obvious. The final sentence of 58 words (divided by a colon 30:28) has the effect of both a summing up and also of a splicing apart, mirroring the dissection of both the fish and the woman’s psychological self-analysis. In the third sentence, “The fish is for her—there is none else in the house” (33), Davis employs a dash, a device often used to indicate connection or conflict. In this case, both interpretations could apply. The reader has been prompted to look for the connection, and also finds the emotional conflict of the woman now being alone.

Foucault’s ‘hauntological’ effect of missing information is only possible when the material presented by the writer provides the reader with sufficient subjunctivity—the clues formulated in the right order—for the deeper, unexplained story to be realised. In “The Fish”, Lydia Davis does just this, and achieves something greater than the sum of the mere 115 words of text.

2. Maximalism and a Changing Register: an analysis of “The Lunar Deep” by David Mellerick Lynch

“The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom” (Blake)

Minimalism of style, as catalogued by John Barth as “a stripped-down vocabulary; a stripped-down syntax that avoids periodic sentences, serial predications and complex subordinating constructions; a stripped-down rhetoric that may eschew figurative language altogether; a stripped-down, non-emotive tone” (Barth), is common among many flash fiction pieces. However, although minimal in word count, flash fiction is not limited to a minimalist style. In “The Lunar Deep”, David Mellerick Lynch employs a maximalist approach to designate a subjunctive mood. He draws heavily on intertextuality to trigger presupposition and to provide cultural code for a much wider, universal story context. Because this hypothetical outcome depends heavily on the conditions of the reader’s cultural repertoire, Lynch gives pre-eminence to particular allusive language features, clearly directing the reader’s awareness and consideration of their purpose in the text. In using hyped-up language, liturgical structures and a change of tone and register alongside deliberate speech acts he contrasts the epic with the mundane in a father-son relationship.

In the first sections of the text, Lynch provides allusions to the Bible, science, architecture, astronomy, literature and myth. The rhythmic organisation of the language and the weaving of so many inter-textual and mythical elements place his flash fiction in the context of an epic poem. This epic style is then played against the ordinary and earthy realities of dementia and death in the second part of the story. The

grandiose language serves to emphasise the significance of the father figure and contrast this with the insignificance of a life reduced to profanity and ashes. After having read many pared-back stories for this study, I was re-excited me about the power of polyphonic prose by the exuberance of the language used in “The Lunar Deep”. I was compelled to re-read this one out loud to feel the way the language and phrasing established a tone that played against the sentiments expressed.

“The Lunar Deep” is laid out in four sections—or perhaps phases of the moon—as the narrator contemplates with humour and pathos his father’s decline into dementia and the subsequent rupture of family. In the opening sentence (48 words) the father is first referred to as “my old Dad” (89). Whether this term is affectionate or disparaging is ambiguous. We are then shown him “as his wits weighed anchor” taking on biblical proportions in his own mind; he “decreed himself a Noah of the still and the dead and went about with a note pad cataloguing stones and stars and other bleak insensate things that they might be redeemed, at Judgement Day, from the final deluge of obscurity” (89). This opening sentence, with its water and biblical references sets a stylistic tone for the first half of the story, as well as prestructuring a comparison to the ending where the father is reduced to obscurity and dry ashes. Although the cataloguing can be seen as the father’s attempt at his own redemption, to make a sense and a purpose of life, the narrator son handles it in a tone of amused condescension. This tone, conveyed by “but a man should, after all, enjoy the ballast of a hobby in his decline” (89), also continues throughout the first half of the story.

The sweeping narrative is interrupted by the father’s voice as he recites the names of craters of the moon, resounding at first with allusions to calm and liquidity. “Sea of Serenity ...Sea of Tranquillity. Seas of Moisture, of Islands, of Rain” (89). This technique creates a ritualistic effect, as if the father is reciting his responses in a

creed, or as incantation. Recitation of the moon's craters is repeated three more times within the story, separating the sections of text narrated by the son, and each time signalling a shift in register as well as a shift in the father's dementia. Each time the crater names are invoked they provide supplementary context for the changes in the father's state. "Sea of Clouds. Sea of Crisis ... Ocean of Storms" (90) precedes the third section in which we are shown the hurt and heartbreak, the failure of humour and the tonal switch to the earthiness and profanity. The crater names later act as a calming and softening effect after the rant against the mother: "Sea of Fertility. Sea of Nectar" (90). In the penultimate line, when the father speaks of his own death, he says only "Sea of Cold" (90). Providing further repetition of this rhythm, the son repeats the structure 'X of Y' six times throughout his narration in the first half of the story; "deluge of obscurity", "job of slow and rococo care", "texture of interstellar satin", "flavours of pebbles", "rules of sonnets", "student of Diana" (89,90). This repeated grammatical pattern serves to reinforce the cadence of epic poetry or worship evident in the first two phases.

In the second section, the father's obsessions encompass oddities listed and connected via techniques of poetry such as alliteration and meter:

He sketched snail shells and twigs and the texture of the interstellar
satin. He compared the flavours of pebbles. He learned, in a book, the
rules of sonnets, apostrophising the quintessence of the dust on the
mantelpiece, the histories hidden in the skins of petrified worms (89).

This elaborate language describes objects that may be read as insignificant, transitory or elusive, objects that are difficult to catalogue scientifically, yet the two references to poetic technique (apostrophising and sonnets) indicate that the father is able to poeticise these objects. The text directs us, once again, to look on this poetic

cataloguing with bemused condescension—“the neighbours thought he was a grand fellow” (89)—before the introduction of the nudity, a literal stripping bare. This exposure of his humanity is an embarrassment and “certain nude excursions” (89) mean that the father is confined to the garden shed where he continues to catalogue out of sight. We are shown this through another metered list: “he scribbled, scissored, classified, mused, compiled”(89).

In the next paragraph, the father’s tenuous grip on earthly reality slips further as his fascination with the moon escalates. He purchases a telescope and determines to “become a student of Diana, eternally” (90). The reintroduction of allusion to mythology prestructures the death and yet the addition of the word eternally indicates the father’s denial of death, his own grandiose ambition to be eternal. Surrounding this assertion, the father and the moon are each described in words indicating fragility and drying: “watching the moon’s frail shirked husk cling, falter and submit”(90), the father haunts the night (already a ghostlike figure), picks at his dinner and trails a finger across the window. These words and images designate a mood of expectation that the father and the moon are reaching a final phase.

We again hear the liturgical chorus of moon craters, this time with the father bidding the son to recite along. This is the first time in the story we have been shown a connection between father and son, up until this point the son has been an observant narrator. The invocation, “Sea of Clouds. Sea of Crisis ... Ocean of Storms”(90), releases a storm in the third section where the register of the language loses its measured cadence and changes to profanity. In the first instance of a deliberate speech act, the son calls his father “a fucking lunatic”(90), an attempt at a joke that fails. The father’s behaviour is no longer amusing and is now addressed in non-human terms, as if he has lost his humanity. He exposes “balls like diver’s leads”, and “for a while he

went on all fours, like a werewolf” which the son jokes seemed “appropriate” (90). These attempts at humour are set aside as the narrator becomes aware of his mother’s pain. This leads to the confessional, “I began to hate him” (90). The reasons given in support of this hate are at first mundane: “...it didn’t help that he was forgetting where to put the milk or find his hat or how to work the telescope or what my mother’s name was...”(90). In mid-sentence—an especially long one at 89 words—the voice switches to the father’s unpunctuated and reported speech. Lynch writes, “what was her name for Christ’s sake, the slut the bloody bitch she’ll smother me with my pillow while I sleep you’ll see” (90). With the lyrical language and rhythmical patterns of the first half abandoned, this change of tone, in one deranged and unmeasured speech act, serves to mirror the father’s loss of touch with earth and reality. His dementia has moved into a phase of paranoia. The son is able to calm him by asking about the moon, to which the father’s reply is to recite; “Sea of Fertility. Sea of Nectar”(90). As the story reaches its final phase, the father, resolved now to his mortality if not to reality, lays out his wish after death to be “flown by unmanned probe to the deepest crater on the dark side” and to “crumble peacefully to lunar dust” (90). The story ends with what may be a final couplet (a tentative hint towards the sonnet?); “Sea of Cold. / We scattered his ashes in a dried out rockpool” (90). The son’s initial yearning for a father lost to dementia, his musings on the failure in the end of familial love, the futility of cataloguing, classifying and moon dreams results in an act of doing the best, or the least, that he can do to meet his father’s wishes.

The flash fiction form permits Lynch to explore avenues of theme, voice and style that may be extremely difficult to sustain in a longer piece. In short forms the use of over-hyped language can be handled effectively in small doses, whereas in longer texts these features have a potential to overpower and create a distance

between the reader and the story. Other maximalist features, such as inter-textual references, can also be explored within a flash fiction, providing subjunctivity for the reader without becoming a distraction. The trick, according to A.L. Kennedy is that it should appear that you can sustain the idea, the character voice or the tone: “It should appear to be possible that you could extend it or expand it because what you want with a short story is that it chimes with the reader because you’ve made it perfect enough that it resonates before and after itself” (Kennedy). In “The Lunar Deep”, Lynch gives this impression in that he sustains the contrasting liturgical and profane registers for just the right amount of time for the effects to be recognised, without overwhelming the emotional centre of the story. James Thomas says that the success of flash fiction depends “not on their length but on their depth, their clarity of vision, their human significance—the extent to which the reader is able to recognise in them the real stuff of real life” (12). David Mellerick Lynch’s choice to use poetic language structures, elaborate detail, and symbolism, has its effect in contrasting the grandeur of existence in the first half of the story with the mundanities and anguish of real life in the second half. The universal becomes personal.

3. The Bizarre Interrogation: an analysis of “When Gorillas Sleep” by Frankie McMillan

“Don't bend; don't water it down; don't try to make it logical; don't edit your own soul according to the fashion. Rather, follow your most intense obsessions mercilessly” (Rice 3).

Flash fiction can only be successful when reader and writer create the knowledge together, the writer providing subjunctive coherence via selected words and structures, and the reader earnestly working, using their own resources, to shape meaning from those chosen words in that chosen structure. The use of the ‘bizarre’ would seem to work counter to this desire for meaning, and yet bizarre events and characters are prevalent in flash fiction. When well managed by the writer, the bizarre can be used to both unsettle and engage a reader; it creates a shiver of interest, an immediate engagement based on disconnection. In order for the engagement to be sustained, disconnection must be countered by connection with something recognisable in the yearning of the character.

In “When Gorillas Sleep”, Frankie McMillan uses the setting and structural organisation of an interrogation to create a sense of both intimacy and dislocation. In this story of 278 words, the circumstances of the narrator may seem bizarre and distant from our own, but the human longing for contact is easily recognisable. By way of an intimate, conversational and confessional tone, the text engages the reader in the plight of the narrator who is socially isolated but yearns for intimate contact. At the same time the foreign setting, the unusual ‘crime’ and the framework of an

interrogation echo the disconnection the narrator feels from humanity and, perhaps, reality.

McMillan establishes the polarities of disconnection and connection in “When Gorillas Sleep” through the story elements of time and place, as well as within the structure of an interrogation. The plot is compressed within three time frames. We are presented with the implied crime in the past, a frustrated interrogation in the present of the participants, and the ultimate confession and appeal placed in the immediate present of the reader. The setting also establishes dislocation for the reader early on in the piece. We are dropped into the unfamiliar setting of a room on a conservation park in what we assume is Uganda where an interrogation is already underway. The interrogation is a trope within television and movies, and one with which McMillan assumes her reader is familiar.

Allusion techniques, by word or textual structure, to other text types and media, or to historical, social, political ideas, work as subtle subjunctive shortcuts to guide a reader to certain modes of perception. Bruner speaks of ‘the realities’ being left “at the horizon of the story as matters of supposition—or, as we shall see, of *presupposition*” (14). These techniques only work under the supposition of a reader’s prior knowledge and, in the absence of other indicators, can be problematic if writer and reader do not operate from the same base. The inter-textual structure of an interrogation in “When Gorillas Sleep” immediately indicates to readers that the participants are set with an imbalance of power and control. We are also provided a shortcut to a recognition of the motivations of the two main characters: the intent of the interrogator is to elicit a quick confession whilst the motive of the narrator is to prevaricate until, in this case, his final, direct appeal to the reader for understanding.

Rather than have us view the interrogation from a place of distance, as is the norm when watching a television drama, McMillan immerses us in the disjointed perspective of an unreliable narrator who reports the past and the present and makes direct addresses to the reader. The interrogation is not about finding out the truth. We are given both truth and lies in quick succession. In the opening sentence, “I never touched the gorilla, I say. I got better things to do” (McMillan). It is the words “I say” that provide the reader with the first insight into the narrator’s unreliability. To ‘say’ something is not the same as it being real—just as the term ‘so he says’ is used to indicate scepticism. This opening is followed up by the presentation of the gun and the narrator’s confession to the reader: “I know it will have my finger prints all over it” (McMillan). The text has provided two different versions of the story from the start, one addressed to the park ranger and one to the reader.

This dual storytelling is a difficult pretence for the narrator to maintain, and his own sense of disconnection becomes evident as both his attention and the sentences fragment in the penultimate paragraph. “All the trees? I ask. I’m just stalling for time. I’m just stalling. I’m just. I stare out the window” (McMillan). While the narrator lies to his interrogators throughout the first paragraphs, his confession comes directly to the reader in the coda as a series of interrogative questions. The challenges laid down—“You ever laid your hand on a gorilla’s chest? You ever felt the warmth of wiry hair, the roughness under your palm? Ever lain down with your brother, your ear listening to his heartbeat?” (McMillan)—provide the reader with his possible motive, and seemingly making an appeal for understanding. It may even be that the narrator is accusing readers of sharing, or at least understanding, his all too human desires.

McMillan develops a disconnection between the humans in the story through the actions played out and language expressed within the interrogation room. The unnamed narrator is playing a game, delaying the inevitable before he is caught out in his own secret desire for connection, something he clearly does not experience with the other humans in the story. McMillan makes efficient use of physical verbs to indicate the park ranger's frustration with what must seem such obvious lies in the face of strong evidence: the ranger "plonks" the bag, "bangs" his fist, and a "drop of sweat runs down his forehead" (McMillan). Twice, his words "*Listen up*", the only direct speech in the piece, are shown in italics. This appeal for attention from the park ranger to the narrator mirrors the narrator's final appeal to the reader. The park ranger's focus is not on the man being interrogated, or even a concern for the gorillas; his fear is reserved for the threatened funding cuts and his own job. McMillan provides further distance between the park ranger and the narrator/reader by having him speak in clichés: "Twiddle our thumbs while Rome burns", "go down the tubes" (McMillan). The arrangement of the sentences within the interrogation scene and their flow when read aloud contributes to the effects of tension and imbalance between the characters. The third sentence is punctuated by the interruption and italicised "*Listen up!*" This provides the reader with a breathless, panicky stream of narration and then a shock and a sudden image of violence as the park ranger bangs his fist. This banging of the fist is a common trope in movie or interrogation scenes and is often a precursor to, or implication of, violence.

While the 'yearning' in this story is one for connection between living beings, McMillan shows us that the narrator does not consider the park ranger to be a human worth listening to. The narrator asks a question, but the ranger doesn't listen for the reply. Instead, he stares out the window. In comparison, the gorilla/ brother is

definitely worth listening to, and the protagonist has gone to great effort to hear its heartbeat. McMillan's reference to specific body parts throughout the story adds to the theme of connection/ disconnection. In the human context we see hands in a number of forms: "fingerprint", "twiddle our thumbs", "fist", "hand", "palm". The narrator denies "touching" the gorillas when the accusation has only been that he was tranquilising them. The other human body parts mentioned are the narrator's tongue ("being held") and ear ("listening for a heartbeat"), and the park ranger's "forehead". The gorillas are described in terms of their individuality (their nose prints and heartbeat) and in terms of both warmth and roughness (chest and hair). Finally, in the last sentence we are led to make the connection between a gorilla and a 'brother'.

The final revelation of the narrator's very human yearning for connection operates in a way that is oppositional to the framework of the interrogation, and is, therefore, endowed with greater emotional impact. The register in the final passage of "When Gorillas Sleep" changes from prevarication and evasion to one of direct appeal. The narrator's questioning of the reader forms another type of interrogation, but in this instance the interrogation functions as an appeal for connection rather than an expression of distance. In "When Gorillas Sleep" McMillan leaves us with the intimate image contained in the clause, "your ear listening to his heartbeat?" The 'you' in this line is the implied reader, and we infer that the heartbeat belongs to the gorilla/ 'brother'. In comparison to the fragmented and almost staccato sentences of the penultimate paragraph, the final three questions flow with a more even metre in a cadence that provides a lilting structure to the final lines of the piece.

A bizarre or sensationalist event, such as the one that forms the centre of "When Gorillas Sleep", might be employed by less competent writers to joke or shock but this is not the case in Frankie McMillan's writing. In "When Gorillas Sleep",

McMillan turns any disconnection the reader may have felt with the setting and events into a connection with a common human desire. The use of the interrogation structure, the breaking down of the narrator's defences as he relates the events and the intimacy of his direct questioning of the reader all act to breach the space between disconnection and connection. Within the space of a very short story, McMillan asks us to examine the psychological complexity of a character with both recognisable and bizarre yearnings. She then leaves us to make the connection with our own wants and desires.

4. Prestructuring the Sudden Ending: an analysis of “Sticks” by George Saunders

“... the body and end of a short story is bone of the bone and blood of the blood of the beginning” (Stevenson 336).

Flash fiction writer David Gaffney writes of the last line of a flash fiction piece, “It should not complete the story but rather take us to a new place; a place where we can continue to think about the ideas in the story and wonder what it all meant” (Gaffney). Flash fictions cannot rely on wrap-up resolutions, as there is often too little to wrap. Nonetheless, a minimal sense of closure is essential to satisfy the reader’s expectation of story. Often this is as simple as Martin Cowley’s essential element “something is changed” (Jay 403). Saunders’ very short story “Sticks” represents an example of how an expert writer can supply this element of change more than once in order to reach an ending that resounds long after an initial reading. Although the change is ostensibly seen within the character of father, it is by changing the expectations of the reader that Saunders prestructures the suddenness and ensuing emotional impact of the ending, providing the surprise element that Bruner speaks of as “a response to violated presupposition” (46).

In “Sticks” a shifting timeframe and a shifting emotional journey is condensed into a 392-word narrative that ends suddenly. In prestructuring this ending, shaping the content as well as the reader’s expectations and experience, Saunders makes use of intentional word choices, social references and a sequential structure that requires the reader to modify expectations a number of times. He then frustrates these expectations with the suddenness of the final sequence of events. That the reader

has been misdirected amplifies the shock effect of the final compound sentence (54 words) in which Saunders presents ending after ending until the story arrives at its literally ‘throwaway’ closure. The fulfilment of Roman Ingarden’s ‘intentional sentence correlates’, Wolfgang Iser writes, “takes place not in the work but in the reader, who must activate the interplay of the correlates prestructured by the sequence of sentences” (*HTDT* 17). The combination and sequences of words, ideas and sentences provides subjunctivity to the reader, denoting a way to respond to the text that is not made explicit. Iser claims that sentences in literary works are “always indications of something that is to come, the structure of which is shadowed by their specific content” (*TIR* 277). It is only in retrospect that we realise the sudden ending of “Sticks” was signposted in the middle.

Within the ratio of word to text, the ending of a flash fiction piece carries a vast amount of the ‘story weight’ both in the mind of the writer and the reader. For the reader, the place where the story ends is immediately obvious. The white space where the text finishes is often on the same page as the first sentence so the signifiers that longer stories usually provide are not required. The reader can literally see the end approaching. John Gerlach identified five signals of closure in American short stories: ‘natural termination’, ‘solving the central problem’, ‘manifestation of the moral’, ‘completion of antithesis’, and ‘encapsulation’ (8). The importance of the closure of “Sticks” is clearly indicated by George Saunders using all of these five signals. There is the ‘natural termination’ of the father’s death, thereby ‘solving the central problem’ of his dominating presence as asserted by the narrator. Through the ‘manifestation of the moral’ (in this case the moral may be that we are predisposed to act like our parents) there is an implied ‘completion of the antithesis’ (the circularity in which the victim, the son, has revealed his own meanness and inability to emotionally connect).

Gerlach's fifth signifier, 'encapsulation', or coda, is present in the time shifts to the death and the house-sale. If we don't see these codas coming this is because they are not signalled physically on the page.

"Sticks" portrays a shifting picture of the narrator's relationship with a father whose odd behaviours have led to a sense of alienation. This alienation is encapsulated in the ending where the narrator seemingly callously relates the father's death and the discarding of the possessions he valued. Saunders' skill here is contained in the fact that a different reading of the ending is prestructured from the story's opening. A first clue to this prestructuring lies in the title of the story. It is not until we are halfway through the second, and final, paragraph that we discover that the "sticks" of the title may symbolise the children in the story. This new information indicates that the centre of the story is not the father's behaviour, but rather how the children, particularly the narrator, are affected by this behaviour. This recasting of a central element of the story allows us to understand that it is the whole family who have been damaged and discarded at the end of "Sticks" and to contemplate the narrator's ability to reconcile the father's behaviour with his own.

Saunders also provides a clue to look deeper into the narrative in the first, ambiguous sentence—one that may be read very differently from first encounter to subsequent readings. On a first read we are presented with a potentially charming family scene: "Every year Thanksgiving night we flocked out behind Dad as he dragged the Santa suit to the road and draped it over a kind of crucifix he'd built out of metal pole in the yard" (29). The cultural symbols in the first part of the sentence suggest something wholesome and familial: Thanksgiving, a Santa suit and children "flocking" behind their Dad signify, for the majority of readers, the combined concepts of family and fun. (Certainly American readers will immediately identify

with the scenes directly, but even others will understand, from popular culture references, the centrality of these family festivities.) The words in the second part of the sentence, on the other hand, have more ominous sounds and associations and indicate the ways in which the children experience their father: the Santa suit was draped over a crucifix (cruel punishment) that he'd built out of a metal (cold) pole (rigidity). This sentence also mirrors the final one: both beginning with sentimental imagery and finishing with indifferent, or even cruel, imagery.

In the subsequent sentences of the first paragraph, the text suggests a modification of initial expectations of a happy family to reveal the father as the children experienced him. We are shown a controlling, parsimonious father whose one “concession to glee” (29) is the decorating of a pole in the front lawn. These carefully selected words both emphasise the inauthenticity of this display and provide a glimpse of the ironic voice of the narrator. The placement of the pole provides a public face not in keeping with the private face we are shown through the narrator's perspective. The pole is dressed up for special days in keeping with accepted American cultural/ social norms of Christmas, Thanksgiving, Super Bowl, Fourth of July, Veteran's Day and Halloween, but when Rod has to “clear it with Dad” (29) if he wants his football helmet back, we get another hint of something sinister in the family dynamic. The costumes—Uncle Sam, a soldier and a ghost—are each figures of authority or fear.

Saunders use of ‘off-key’ verbs to describe the father's actions in supervising their food consumption—he “shrieks” and “hovers” (29)—have a jarring effect, and in doing so draw attention to his anomalous parental behaviour. The selection of a particular expression is indicative of a writer's intent. Words that deviate from the norm or the expected, act in a subjunctive manner to modify meaning. Jerome Bruner

says that the choice of words along the vertical axis (Jakobson) is a matter of authorial intent, “whether to preserve reference as literally as possible, whether to create an atmospheric change by metaphor, whether (as Jakobson and the Prague School urged upon poets) to ‘make it strange’ so as to overcome automatic reading” (22). In “Sticks” the strangeness of the word choices and images combine to draw attention to the alienation within the father- child relationships. The children have no agency or voice in the relationship. The narrator only “sat there blinking” (30) when asked by his date about the pole. By the end of the first paragraph, Saunders’ narrator has painted a negative image of the father and elicited the reader’s sympathies with the narrator and his siblings.

The start of the second paragraph resets the story with a dramatic jump in time. The children “left home, married, had children of our own, [and] found the seeds of meanness blooming also within [them]” (30). This final revelation, having been given an emphatic position at the end of the list, is not reinforced within the remaining text, yet it lingers in the mind of the reader, its significance only to be realised in the final sentence of “Sticks”. The narrator, having revealed this fact about himself and his sibling as if by accident, returns our attention to the pole. This time the changing costumes of the pole, with “more complexity and less discernible logic” (30), commemorate Groundhog Day, an earthquake in Chile and the death of the children’s mother. This new mode of pole decoration suggests that the father is moving away from the acceptable all-American costumes of earlier in the narrative to painful global and personal events. The associations with the strange and the painful, and the earlier prompt regarding loss of logic, direct the reader to correlate these costumes with deterioration of the father’s sanity, thus serving to engender a readjustment of empathy in the reader. Introducing the “talismans of his youth” (30)

immediately reinforces this readjustment, reminding us that he had a life before fatherhood. The army medals indicate active service and introduce the possibility of trauma. The tubes of Mom's makeup may point to the father's capacity to love. Indeed, why else would he have kept such "talismans"? This detail also triggers the idea of another way of dressing up, of representing yourself as something you are not. Since we associate the pole with the father, the costuming of it can be read as the ways in which he is trying to represent himself as normal in an 'American' sense. With new information, readers must modify previous information. The mention of the father's "only concession to glee", for instance, may now indicate a state of depression rather than an attitude of severity.

Partway through the second paragraph a new phase occurs in the father's behaviour. Interestingly, Saunders chooses to keep multiple shifts in the temporal environment within the same single block of text in such a way that the ending is obscured. After being painted bright yellow, the pole is wrapped in cotton wool (protection from the cold/ a softening), and provided with a family (the narrator uses the non-emotive word "offspring" reinforcing the sense of familial alienation) of wooden crossed sticks. These changes to the pole act to signify the father attempting to reinvent his earlier, happier days. In a scene of desperation, the father then uses the pole as his only means of communication to beg forgiveness with his adult children, who "stop by". The "letters of apology, admissions of error and pleas for understanding, all written in a frantic hand" (30) and strung up in public, present an arresting image of the father's dirty laundry in the public view. This image works as an illustration of the father's profound shame and regret. That it is the previously uncommunicative father himself who exposes himself in this way suggests that his is an act of desperation. The capitalisation of "LOVE" and "FORGIVE", as well the

placement of the question mark mid-sentence, appeals to the reader as much as to the “offspring”. Up until this point, the sequencing of sentences and ideas in the second paragraph has compelled the reader to modify initial responses to the father. By this stage the text prompts the hope that the father will, in fact, find the redemption he seeks. Furthermore, as readers we see the end in sight in only two to three lines within the same paragraph.

Despite the changes in perspective we have already been subject to, previous story experiences prompt expectations for a resolution. The layout of the text does not indicate a further shift but, in the second part of the final sentence, Saunders frustrates our expectations for a positive resolution. The sudden removal of the father denies any hope for reconciliation: “and then he died in the hall with the radio on”. The couple that buy the house “yanked out the pole and the sticks” and in a final and literally throwaway act discard the metaphorical pole and stick family; they are “left by the road on garbage day” (30). There is no forgiveness in this ending, with the pole and sticks, the central symbols of the family, represented as waste. The final act by the new owners is an inadvertent cruelty. The multiple ‘endings’, which continue from the previous action of the appeals for LOVE and FORGIVE? alongside the major events of the father’s death (the sale of the house and the final invalidation of the pole and sticks), are presented in the same run-on sentence. This pattern mirrors one evident in emergent child writers, whereby story is sequenced as a list of events, one after the other, with the repeated transitional use of ‘and then’. This child-like approach highlights the previous ‘add-on’ narrative structure and creates the effect of an unreliable, still childish, narrator rushing to a conclusion and dispelling with unfamiliar emotions that may be too challenging to confront. The clue we were given earlier, regarding “the seeds of meanness” in the narrator, is manifested here. The

emotional meanness, an inability to express love or true feeling, is illustrated in this detached, throwaway ending. The narrator, in relating his father's death, remains a hurt child.

For the flash fiction writer, decisions to end the story at a particular point, the methods used to bring about the closure for the reader and the provision of both factual and subjunctive meaning sufficient for a reader's shift in perception are all central. Each element of a story prestructures reader expectations. In cases where story endings take an un-signposted twist, or promises are broken, the piece will fall flat for the reader. In George Saunders' "Sticks", however, the prestructuring for the apparent surprise ending was present all along.

Conclusion

A challenge implicit in writing flash fiction is to meet the reader's expectations of story such as character, setting, crisis and redress—at least in essence—within the limited word count of the text. A compressed story may be achieved through suggestion yet, if the textual signals are too vague, the whole piece unravels and meaning for the reader is lost. Through the readings and analyses of the very short forms in this study, I became more attentive to the techniques by which writers create implicit rather than explicit meanings. It is through the provision of subjunctive moods within the narrative that the reader's imagination is triggered and they are guided to create a 'reality' of story, even though some of the expected elements of story may be absent or finely sketched.

One criterion I have sought to gauge the essence of 'storiness' is a 'yearning character' (Butler). In each of the analysed stories such a character is evident. In "The Fish", the barely characterised woman at the centre of the story yearns for something that could not be undone, the lack of detail allowing room for the reader to imprint her own regrets. In both "Sticks" and "The Lunar Deep" the narrator/son demonstrates yearning within a dysfunctional father-son relationship, and in "When Gorillas Sleep" the narrator turns his own yearning for connection to the reader in the final lines. Through this yearning, each of the characters is endowed with 'intention' (Bruner). In "The Fish" the intent of the woman is presented factually with the use of the displaced third person; she is "thinking about certain irrevocable mistakes". In the remaining three first-person narrations, the intentions of characters both within the story and also the intention of the narrator in relating the story to an audience, remain in the subjunctive mode. This requires the reader to decipher intention from the 'evidence' provided. With the evidence provided subjunctively, various readings are possible as

the text activates a different set of external references and internal responses in each reader. Subjunctification deals with uncertainties, so some of that meaning remains “at the horizon of the story as matters of supposition” (Bruner 14).

Within each of the stories, the characters act on their intent through the series of related events, or Propp’s *fabula*. In “The Fish” it is not only the single event of the cooking of the fish that is related but, by association, the other “irrevocable mistakes” the woman has made which are left as spaces for the reader to fill in. Each of these actions or events develops to provide Cowley’s essential story element: “something is changed” (Jay 403). By the final words either the character, or the reader’s conception of the character, has been altered in some way. The reader, having invested a short time in which they have considered the plight of the characters, is left with an awareness of “their depth, their clarity of vision, their human significance ...” (Thomas 11). In meeting each of these criteria, the writers studied demonstrate the potential for the very short form to be validated as stories, and these particular examples as ‘good story’.

We understand through transactional theory that text takes on meaning when realised by a reader; however, as Iser points out, “this in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text” (*TIR* 275). The text sways the reader towards certain meanings by providing subjunctivity. There are a number of techniques available to the writer with which to create a subjunctive mood within a limited word count. Intertextuality can be seen as an effective tool in very short fiction. “The Fish” used a minimalized scientific approach. “The Lunar Deep” maximised the use of liturgical and epic language. By contrast, but also using an intertextual approach, “When Gorillas Sleep” establishes the stance and mood for the reader via the well-known tropes of the interrogation.

Word choices, and the order in which they appear, are the keys to providing meaning within a limited word count story. Words become ‘implications’, pointing a reader towards unspoken sensations so that the text may become more than the sum of its parts. As in poetry, the very short form of flash fiction requires the writer to make meticulous word choices, not only related to meaning but also its sounds, connotations and evocations, in order to create and combine etymological and social meanings, and to help shape the sound, tone or stance of the piece being written. A writer’s use of a deliberate strategy draws attention to that section of text and in doing so indicates a purpose to the reader who then responds under its sway. In the pieces examined here, strategies such as metaphor and motif, ‘off-key’ word choices, repetitions of words and patterns, and by dialogue, as well as by the use of unusual punctuation placement such as hyphenation, and the use of capitalisation or italics are used to draw attention to sections of the text. In addition to the use of single key words and expressions to guide readers, yoking of words, within and across sentences, prestructures this reader’s expectations and experience of the text. The “intentional correlatives” take on greater meaning by way of their interaction. In both “Sticks” and “the Fish” the correlation of ideas within and between sentence sentences played an essential role in establishing presuppositions for the reader, and in the case of “Sticks” then forcing an adjustment of these suppositions. The three-part structure of “When Gorillas Sleep” and the four-part structure of “The Lunar Deep”, with their adjustments in stance and tone, draw the reader to also adjust her reading stance.

Distilling a story into the very short form forces writers to scrutinise word selections, not merely to fit within the specified word counts of flash fiction journals and competitions but, more importantly, to guide the reader to a coherent understanding of the text. If ‘not enough’ is suggested, if the reader is not guided by

deliberate word choices, or the sequence and structure of the sentences, if key story elements are missing, then the reader will not be able to create meaning based on the text. This is why, as Bruner says, the “actual text needs the subjunctivity that makes it possible for the reader to create a world of his own” (37). Furthermore, Bruner says, “Stories of literary merit, to be sure, are about events in a “real” world, but they render that world newly strange, rescue it from obviousness, fill it with gaps that call upon the reader ... to become a writer” (24). Flash fiction offers the writer a form of storytelling with the potential to tell ‘real’ stories in new and strange ways. The challenge to the writer is that the ‘gaps’ be held together with the provision of skilfully crafted subjunctivity in order to engage readers in the creation of story.

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PART 2

Preface to *Where Oceans Meet: a collection of flash fiction*

In reflecting on my purpose in choosing to write a collection of flash fiction I have given due consideration to narrative theorist James Phelan, who speaks of an approach to experiencing fiction that “assumes texts are designed by authors in order to affect readers in different ways” (20). Phelan goes on to qualify literary critic Wayne Booth’s assertion, “We experience every work under the aspect of its implied general kind, or genre” by replacing the word genre with the word purpose or purposes the variations of which “enhance our affective and ethical engagements” (142). I have had to ask what it is I wish to convey with this collection, and why choosing flash fiction as the medium enhances the reader’s engagement. My own compulsion in reading and enjoying flash fiction is most often contained in the effort I am obliged to make in order to co-create meaning. I appreciate the precision of language, and I gain satisfaction from finding the clues and ‘solving’ the puzzle. Wolfgang Iser says, “A literary text must ... be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader’s imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only pleasure when it is active and creative” (275). By relying so heavily on subjunctification, “trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties” (Bruner 26), I hope readers of my flash fiction stories will enjoy the same creative process in ‘figuring’ them out.

As a writer I gain immense satisfaction from the way in which a limited word count necessitates a greater specificity in language and an attention to the intricacies by which a story may be distilled into a small space. A.L. Kennedy says that the

writing flash fiction requires is: ‘the most concentration that you will [need] as a writer’. She goes to explain:

[Y]ou’re certainly in the kind of territory that poets have appropriated, where every word counts on the page. The demands are very similar; you have to have the musicality because it’s short, you have to have the shape on the page working because it’s short, you have to have these boiled down beautiful multi-layered descriptions of things because it’s short (5).

Flash fiction allows me to experiment with both my love of poetry (some of the pieces in this collection started as poems) and my natural inclination to tell a story. *Where Oceans Meet* is a collection where story at times collides full on with the poetic while in other stories the undercurrents of poetry are barely noticeable. They are stories in which characters yearn for connection but sometimes find, as in the title story, that “when the vectors of the oceans’ wave fronts meet at an angle sometimes they cancel each other, sometimes they compound with spectacular results”.

My initial proposal was to build this collection around restrained, suppressed and faltering voices and the difficulties in maintaining open discourse between diverse individuals and groups. Flash fiction, with its constraints, compression of language, and the need to build what is not said into the writing, offered a compelling device through which to explore this theme. This collection has led me to a deeper exploration of the potential for flash fiction to provide a significant story for the reader, one that lingers beyond the confines of the word count.

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Where Oceans Meet

A collection of short short stories

By Heather McQuillan

"When you go to school and study music you're told the smallest interval possible is a semitone. But I'm interested in the sort of notes you can get that fall between the cracks of the keys of the piano."

Terumi Narushima

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Where Oceans Meet

To the left of the lighthouse at Cape Reinga, Te Moana-a-Rehua/Tasman and Te Tai-o-Whitirea/The Pacific collide in plumes of give and take. Lance goes to the effort of explaining this tussle of undercurrents while tourists wearing plastic ponchos listen in. Olivia resists the urge to leap.

Hungry, but to show respect for the tikanga of the site, they drive south, turn off and, in 900 metres, locate a picnic place. Olivia goes right, puts the bag down in a sheltered spot but Lance steers left. He demands a view of the sea.

They tread over a confluence of curled worm skeletons and rust red cominella quoyana quoyana shells. Olivia rattles a couple in her raincoat pocket, repeats the name as a mantra. Lance does not share her interest. The sea is in view but he does not cease until he has located just the spot. They eat sandwiches. Weighted raindrops fall.

Once home, seeking to understand all that has taken place, Olivia discovers—via Google—that when the vectors of the oceans' wave fronts meet at an angle sometimes they cancel each other, sometimes they compound with spectacular results.

A Loose Filling

She has found her own mishmash of comforts. See, aren't they husband and wife, companions, sitting in armchairs, side by side, with the footrests up? But the documentary on TV features a woman her own age opening up about teenage rape, of a man who should have been trusted.

She turns to the man she has trusted for over thirty years. "She's so brave."

He nods but does not catch her eye.

I could say now, she thinks, but her teeth grow huge, heavy. After all this time. The cavities of her teeth have been filled with lies, pressed down, clamped to dry.

The voice-over mentions 'one in four'.

Her tongue presses into the roof of her mouth, wets her lips. "One in four," she repeats. Oft-rehearsed words swell her jaw, "When I..."

"That's rather a lot," he says as if he agrees with her and she with him.

"Doesn't seem right, does it?"

She pulls the lever to release her footrest. The hinge is stiff. "Cup of tea?" she asks and goes out to start the washing up.

With her hands in water that is almost too hot to bear she runs her tongue over the amalgam in her molars. Silver, copper, tin, mercury.

A Post-Traumatic God

Tāwhirimātea tried to stand his ground but was outnumbered. The ground he stood on was his mother's unstable belly, doughy and stretched from so many sons. She let him down in the end, as all mothers do. Let go of his hand.

This he remembers: darkness humid with sweat and the sourness of spilt milk, the hau, the beat, the pulse, pressed tight between his parent's renditions of love, their keening drone, beneath the shouting of his brothers and the TV turned up too loud.

This he remembers: the rupture, the coming into the blue lights and sirens and the whero of eyelid blood when he closes them against the glare. His mother convulsing, his father gone, brothers scattered.

This he remembers: a stranger's hand on his shoulder. The weightlessness of feet that have nowhere to stand. The weight of swallowed words deep in his belly while they click Bic pens.

In resting he is jolted. Thought spirals into cyclone cones—always back to the eye of the storm. He's tried the recommended doses but they don't work for him so he pulls sharply from the bed he shares with a thin-boned woman, takes his clenched fists away from her frail flesh and he runs. His feet tread heavy along his mother's backbone, along the length of the coastline out to the headland, where he howls at a cloud-blackened father-sky and slaps his chest until the skin burns.

This he knows: cold air and the taste of blood in his throat and the taste of endorphins that will bring him, finally, to rest.

Tāwhiri sits on the paint-peeled seat outside the takeaway shop. He is waiting for the skinny woman to fetch him back in her beat-up car. Sweat stains the curves of his white singlet. His father is hazy today. His mother has not rumbled for some time. His brothers are pencilled scars on the horizon.

Mothers of Miners

She remembers him as a boy of about six, his pockets filled with rattling stones. He scoured tracks in the dirt, drove toy cars at speed. The earth and him, they were one. When his legs pounded, the impact formed strong bones. Fibula, tibia, femur. Smudged nose, mud-caked knees. These are things for a child. Now, his mother kneels in the soil, buries her fingers in it, and feels for him. Sometimes she digs deep and her nails clog with dirt. She does not love the earth, scrubs it from her skin, scrubs at the memory of his handhold.

Her son lies idle while overhead costs are counted and instead of sleep, she sharpens a metal pole against the whetstone she keeps in her bedside cabinet. Each dawning, she thrusts the point into the earth to forge a breathing hole for him, drilling down until she reaches rock. Always the rock. A solid wall of those who keep him from her.

The mother walks towards locked gates and at each footstep hears his bones crunch beneath the gravel. She gathers the shards and clasps them to her breast. She has seen the grainy photos. The bodies, clothed and curled, not turned to dust. She has heard the lies thrown before her like crumbs for a simple sparrow to peck at. She dreams a note, scrawled when he realised no one was coming for him. *Take me back to the sunlight.*

Trampolining in the Matukituki

I reached the knoll first, nothing to boast of. My pack was lighter. Kyle carried both the Primus and the billy.

My hands were chafed from pulling myself skyward by tree roots. I raised them. Let my heart's echo-beats subside. I inhaled the mountain's breath. I am Hineahuone, a girl made from clay. Kyle strode to the edge to take Rob Roy's photo. His lens focused on the mountain's white-crowned head, its chest – battle-scarred with waterfalls, – its challenge.

Tarns, like torn patches of sky, littered the tussocks. On the next rise the bivvy sat, squat and orange. Beside it, the trampoline was a yawning rectangle.

I reached the hut first. As I lay on slices of glacial rock, heaviness ascended my legs, pressed my heart to the mountain. The taste of blood rinsed my throat. Cloud-swatches of greywacke painted the sky. Jarred by grating pipes and screws as Kyle assembled the Primus, I rolled onto the trampoline's sun-warmed netting. My weight sank to unfathomable depths. I coiled to protect my bloated lungs. Breathe out, clay girl. Breathe out.

The billy simmered as I jumped—hesitant bounces at first, fearful that the thwomp-slap-thwomp would prompt an avalanche. Legs straight and bent, arms up and down. My body a curled ammonite, I bowed to Rob Roy in somersault after somersault. I sneezed.

While Kyle checked the map by Primus mantle, I counted the distances between us.

When daylight arrived, in cold slices of watermelon pink, the trampoline was gone. Kyle had already set off, not waiting for me to finish tying my bootlaces. The breath from my nostrils blended with the mountain's mist. I reached the conclusion first but there was still the long walk home.

At The Border Crossing

We have her under surveillance well before she approaches the bramble fence, the basket on her arm already half-filled with blackberries. It is not hunger that drives her to stray across the borderlines. We recognise another appetite in her swaying, veiled tread. It's why they assigned us this post. We will not approach, not yet. Let her think she has escaped detection.

Let her hold that faith.

Maybe we are in error. She could be a people smuggler. We have seen one woman cut a path and pull another through then carry on picking as if such mitosis were an inconsequential thing. We did not reveal their duplicity for we are here to curb that different urge.

Be patient.

See, our vigilance is rewarded. She reaches, covert, into the thicket and drags back with a closed fist. Sharp-eyed barbs rasp her skin. Her white wrist, streaked red, turns treason's flag. She repeats this two times more then, nonchalantly, returns to picking.

We will allow time for her pulse to decelerate before we apprehend.

She holds calm, offers up the basket of gleaming fruit, but when we thrust our hands in, squeeze purple juice, her agitation is revealed. Sweat ponds in her pores, tiny licks of saltwater in rock pools. We yearn to touch our tongues to her top lip and taste again that blend of defiance and dread.

We extract tight-rolled wads of paper, damp with words. Small hairs rise up on our necks. All their therapies cannot suppress such lust. On a metal bench we uncrease three notes propagated from the other side. Words we have renounced blot and bleed before our eyes. Truths stained with the juice of blackberries.

Misspoken

It had never occurred to me until this morning that objects could abandon their true names, relocate, and pick up where they left off. I've just picked a lovely bunch of dolphins, named and arranged them in a vase on the kitchen bench, where they exude mammalian saltiness. I stand, gazing out across the back garden—at least that grips onto its name—to see pink possums eluding their buds, clinging to the trunks of the Japanese cheerios and, in the frog pond, tampons soaking up brackish water.

I decide best not to tell the children as I kiss them goodbye for fear it is contagious and they will be ostrichised if at school they ask the teacher's help to tie their shoplifters. I do not want them wearing criminal shoes.

I hold no hope that my husband will understand my diploma. He's the sort for whom labels stick fast, which has made him prone to shopping online because of an insistent slogan, or voting thoughtlessly at elections. When did my words become so wanton?

Even my children, in their absence, have been reclaimed. The boy has become Simian, which is close to the real thing in multiple ways, but the girl is something else altogether. I struggle to remember what it was before the name Chairlift became stuck in my brain. I am afraid that when they get home I will call them these names, certain that the naming of things out-loud triggers changes in the TNT. It's an epiphenetic thing. Names have power; it's in all the old stories.

I feel the TNT simmering in my own cells; it may only take a carelessly uttered word to set off an explosion.

To be on the safe side I will abdicate speech altogether. I will keep my lips sealed. They won't notice.

Before anyone gets home, I throw the bunch of dolphins into the middle of the composition because they've started to smell. I wish my hands... I shh. Shh.

A Complicated Birth

On the way to the hospital, Dad ran over the cat. I lurched in my mother's belly as he slammed on the brakes. She screamed and he—now this is typical of Dad—he was more concerned about the cat.

He lifted the weight of its bloodied fur and snapped bones and laid it on the back seat where it hissed as if the air was leaking from its lungs in wisps of spliff smoke. I coiled the umbilical cord around my neck.

Mum asked him what he thought he was doing. This is typical of her. She always doubts that we know what we're doing.

“I'll drop it off at the vet on the way.”

The muscles of her abdomen tightened in another contraction so her words were measured in Lamaze breaths.

“For fuck's sake chuck it out.”

The cat in the back seat was a shrill tin whistle. Mum moaned and swayed while I sucked rhythmically on my thumb. Dad drove past the turnoff to the vets, his eyes staring straight ahead, his lips closed tight.

That cat died in the hospital car park while I combatted the urgent pulses of my mother's uterus. When I was finally dragged into this world of air and weight, the midwife unwrapped the cord from around my neck and offered the scissors to Dad. He declined the invitation and, after he'd held me for the expected time, drove back to that street where he'd hit the cat. He placed it gently on the grass verge.

Its blood had soaked into the back seat where my baby capsule went. Its hissing angry soul hung around. I am half girl / half pissed-off cat. My father says this as if it is a joke.

Two milligrams and all is silence

After a lifetime of swallowing words, her oesophagus is lined with arguments that blister the walls.

Things unsaid stick in her craw so that a doctor must push down a tube and lens to see what it is that obstructs her gullet.

The camera reveals a coral channel eroded into corrugations by a habit of ingested clauses, and pearly nodules of secreted nacre, a protection against irritants that have been glossed over.

In the maw, he says, he sees cells inflamed with rage.

When he tells her, *The cure, it comes with adverse side effects*, she has nothing to say.

When my father asks what I learned in school today I will tell him I learned to keep my thoughts to myself

Outside B block, Nathan tells me of a story Hemingway told, the old six-word one about baby shoes. Just because the shoes are for sale doesn't mean the baby died. Maybe they had too many pairs. Maybe the baby learned to walk in summer with bare feet on soft grass.

“No one knows for certain it was Hemingway,” I say

“And the sky isn't blue.”

He walks away. I must've told him that already. Our eyes only pick up the scattered dancing blue rather than the rest of the spectrum. The ancients had no word for blue. It's a modern concept. Except for the Egyptians. There's often an exception to the rule. In this case they had calcium copper silicate.

The bell rings for class but I don't go in. I've got a laminated card in my pocket that lets me be the exception. I shouldn't have said that to Nathan. I should've let him believe what he wants to believe. I keep forgetting that. I pull a clean hanky from my blazer pocket and shove it in my mouth. It soaks up my saliva and I nearly gag. It's my father's hanky. I've never understood why females have smaller ones. Are our noses smaller? Do we have less snot? I figure it's about pockets and even then it makes no sense why males have plenty and females must carry their paraphernalia in a handbag, on the outside, in some reversal of genitalia placement. Maybe handbags rebalance the world.

I'm gagging now so I shove the hanky back in my pocket. I look at the sky but my eyes can't detect red. I look at the sun, which is yellow but only because the blue has been cancelled out. It takes a bright light to break through blue's dominance.

Blind Tasting

Like sinking into a hot bath, she says, trying to explain the sunset to a man who has already closed his eyes.

The man says nothing until the morning sun creeps warmth across his hands.

Then he asks, what's the colour of the sky today?

It's the blue of oranges, sharp and fresh and washing your mouth free of sleep.

The man turns with his lips ready for hers, and what is the colour of a kiss?

Strawberry, she says.

More like oysters and sex, he laughs.

She slaps him away. They aren't colours.

They ought to be, he says.

She Asked to be Swathed in Purple and Orange

When it comes to Auntie Pam, Gran says, “She always was a handful.”

My favourite picture in the album is of Pam straddling a motorbike pressed against a broad leather back. A bowling-ball helmet dangles from her hand. Pam said she couldn’t remember his name, but he had a ‘gorgeous big bike’.

Uncle Hoani peels out the photo. “It’s all yours. I don’t need reminding she knew men with bigger bikes than me.” His hand trembles with the wiri of shimmering water.

“I get the joke,” I say.

He grins, even on a day like this.

Pam told me to get myself a Hoani, a man with a belly full of laughs and an eye that delights in details. Gran still insists on calling him John.

On her 80th birthday Gran asked if I was working hard to get NCEA. We all saw the direction her head tilted. Pam rolled her eyes and swigged from her wine glass. Gran’s tiny doll hands twitched.

When Pam produced one of her famed chocolate gâteau, Nana said she’d have preferred Madeira, which no one makes these days.

I followed Pam outside and watched her draw smoke into her lungs.

“You should’ve told Gran how long it took you to make.”

“Nah, hun, never fret about swallowing an apple pip or two.”

We wear crowns of kawakawa and, as Pam stipulated, we each carry a sprig of rosemary for remembrance and a marigold for passion—she always did love bright colours. I’m careful not to crease the photo of her and the man with the big bike. I have to hold everything in one hand because Gran needs my other one.

Slip Sliding Away

There are ways that befit a girl; hands on knees, knees together, white socks pulled up to those tight knees, hair banded, tugged back, knees clean. Knees kneel on rough hassock, quiet prayers to the gaunt figure on a cross. Quiet. You have two ears and only one mouth to be used in proportion. You have a back bottom and a front bottom but it is not seemly to say these words out loud. You have a future. That future is kept clean and clear. Each morning you scrub at it with a scouring cloth. Everyone you meet rubs it into your head with their hands. You are God's daughter. He has plans for you. Your mother has plans for you. There are men in thin suits with plans for you.

Outside the church is gravel, and when you act inappropriately, if you run or skip, you fall. Hard. The gravel takes chunks of flesh from your knees. Skin holes. Blood that is too red runs into white socks. White socks slide down to your ankles. When the man carries you inside he presses his fingers into your front bottom. You cannot mention it. The ointment your mother puts on your raw knees stings and so you cry at that instead. You are not acting like a brave girl. The plans your mother has for you involve suffering.

You run and skip and fall so that your knees are covered in scabs. Blood stains your socks. Blood stains your knickers. You climb through a window when the owl calls. When you rub rose-scented cream over your shaved knees you caress the white scars. They are your salvation. They are thorns and whips and nail marks. You have suffered. You have an arse and a cunt and you use these words often but not just for body parts. Your tongue and lips shape those words and there is a tattoo of an owl on your shoulder.

A Fish Dinner and A Fable

She started it by asking.

How's your fish?

He was delighted by its moistness. Grilled to perfection.

She tasted a morsel from her own fork. Pan-fried?

No. Grilled.

I'm pretty certain the menu said pan-fried. Then she added in such a way as to pretend a safer uncertainty, but maybe I read that wrong.

The fish caught in her husband's throat. Why do you always have to contradict?

But she could only remember all the times she'd held her tongue.

We could ask for the menu back and check. Why do they always take the menu away so then you can't check what you've ordered? She said this in a light way but it was too late, he put down his fork and gulped wine.

In that moment she remembered a fable of a peasant woman and her peasant husband arguing over how a meadow had been mown—by scythe or by shears. The peasant husband, angered at his wife repeating an opinion contrary to his own had thrown her to the ground and sliced out her tongue. Thinking that would settle the argument, the peasant husband once again asserted his claim that it was a scythe that had been used on the meadow. The peasant wife made a snipping motion with her fingers.

The wife in the restaurant mused that this fable had been about misogyny and the silencing of the opinions of women. So, when the waitress came to fill their glasses the wife, not looking at her husband, said, can you tell us how the fish was cooked? Snip snip went the husband's teeth on the tines of his fork.

There's Always Tomorrow

Elegance was not her forte. Her fingers thudded the piano keys, challenging her young giddy-throated singers to keep up with her. Then Miss Simmon's heart gave out. It wasn't a sudden thing to her. It took an age for the tingle, the tiny spot of heat to flow and spread, to bud off into petals of explosion, the heat and then the cooling as breath seeped through teeth, sweat through pores and urine through pantyhose.

Ralph Kidman sat in the recess beneath the piano, his knees touching the wooden leg. Vibrations coursed through timber to make his skin cells dance. When the others stopped he carried on in solo for the final words... *we're gonna stay all day*. His hopeful coda—particularly hopeful as Ralph Kidman had no Daddy to take him to the zoo tomorrow or any other day—was a momentary distraction from the body that slumped from the piano stool onto the mat of Junior Room 1.

Ellie Clarke spoke the question they'd all been forming. "Is she asleep?" Though this wasn't the actual question. They wanted to know if she was dead. When this was realised, one by one, except for one, the children reached the distance of the corridor. A tentative tap on her door drew Mrs Jenkins from Room 2 and she sent them to the library before hastening to Room 1 to straighten Miss Simmon's legs and rearrange the damp skirt. Ralph Kidman, his knees now hugged to his chest, heard Mrs Jenkins whisper *I hope you've found a better place*, before she dragged the piano stool across to shield any passers-by from the view then walked briskly to the office without a backward glance.

No one reported Ralph Kidman missing so he sat with his spine pressed against the now inert piano's upright casing, singing in his rawboned voice all the songs he could remember. His lament fell silent at the arrival of the undertakers.

If any good came from Miss Simmon's sudden death it was that a few of the children found solace in books, while Ralph Kidman carried through to his own death the lingering hope of a better place.

Compulsion

While my mother watched daytime TV in a darkened room, I learned a craving for cake in other people's houses. Layered ones are best—Louise Cake, Marshmallow Slice, Tan Square. The baking of base and filling and topping was labour my mother hadn't the stamina for. If we were lucky—my father and I, and we were not often—there would be date scones from a morning's flush, the flour set like shellac on the bench. After school, at the home of a friend, I nodded, my mouth crammed with meringue-jam or caramel-shortcake, when their mother said, *Is she feeling better? Do tell her I asked after her.*

I prayed for a different sort of mother; one who walked straight and kept the tins full. Her curtains would still be drawn when I got home, the fire down to a smoulder until my father arrived with a paper packet, greasy/bloody, under his arm. If it were chips, we'd spread warm newspaper across Formica and squeeze blobs of Watties sauce on the liner to save on dishes. If it were chops, I'd peel the pink paper, set them in the skillet until the potatoes were boiled. When the skillet heated, the fatty edges would lift, curl, smoke blue. My father vowed he never had a sweet tooth but in his jacket pocket he would have a Buzz Bar or a Peanut Slab for me. I'd eat them quickly.

She'd lean at the kitchen door in her dressing gown of watered satin, the coils of her hair separated into strands, lean in to the fridge, jostle the ice cubes. My father would stare at her bone white ankles, the elegant curve of her bare feet with their perfect red nails. *Are you feeling better?*

We all wanted her to feel better.

Class I Hemorrhage

Annalise does not look at faces, only feet. She has a pale-faced way of slipping between rows of chairs to select her place, towards the back, to the far right, the shadow-side of the room. She settles her bag on the chair beside her. As the seats fill, she stares at the space between her knees. "Is this seat taken?" Repeated louder. Reluctantly she squashes her bag of faded denim beneath her chair. The lecturer directs his PowerPoint at two screens. They bleed black words whose meanings bleach from her mind.

They held such high hopes for her, her parents. They paid the psychologist's fee for that label of brilliance, which they'd stitched with precision into the fabric of her school uniform. But it had clawed at her skin. Annalise was sensitive to seams and bright light. She had not lived up to expectation. Her promised gifts were fool's gold. Here she is repeating a failed class, her memory of the facts hazy, her essays fanciful.

She spends the summer in bed, curtained against the spotlight of the sun. Her father snaps at her to get a spine. Her mother plies her with lean steaks. Annalise uses pointed scissors on the label and bleeds into wads of toilet paper, leaching iron and wit and will.

Rolling in Muck

I tailed my father round the farm auction. His gumboots made deep impressions in the mud. I was stretched to match them.

It was, as far as I understood, a good day. The sun was out and there was the smell of burning stubble in the air. And I *had* noticed them, the other boys, scrambling over rusted machinery, threatening to shove each other into a bloated ewe down in the macrocarpas, having a pissing contest up the shed wall. I'd noticed them. Then I hadn't.

A brindle collie, scruffy and greying around its chops followed me following my father. While the men were bidding for bargains, I sat on an upturned feed-block bucket and scratched the dog's left ear, which flopped over as if the stiffening had come out of it. I sang a song to it, something about smoke and sheep and rolling in muck. The dog liked it. I looked up to see Dad turn away. The other boys had moved on to something else so I went and pissed higher than any of them up the back of the shed wall.

My father didn't speak to me until we were back in the Ute. "What's wrong with you."

It wasn't so much a question as a declaration. I pressed my nose to the cab's side-window. The brindle collie was sniffing around the dead ewe. I didn't say how it had felt to lean back like that and watch my piss glinting golden in the air before it spattered against the dry timbers.

Iridescence

Florian arranged the peacock feather in the can of Smirnoff Ice, just so, then leaned back to see me better, his hands forming a headrest. “Home does your head in, mate!”

It hurt when I grinned, but Florian’s laugh was like no other. It started as a tinkle of piss onto hot corrugated iron and built to a crescendo of smoky-lung cackling. It was the best laugh in the world and the best thing was that even if the others never seen the joke, they laughed too, just because it were him.

The next morning I stashed the feather in my backpack. It was a dumb thing to do, the stem snapped and the edges frayed, but each morning, wherever I woke, I twirled it to let the sun catch each frond of the shimmering green-blue eye.

Florian wore clothes he nicked out The Sallies bins. He’d put things together you’d never think would work and model them for us. He was so beautiful it made your eyes water. I fell in love with him but I weren’t his type. He’d set his sights way too high on some guy who promised him the earth. We’re all just looking for love.

His name wasn’t really Florian. I’d guessed that. It were too perfect. When soup-kitchen-lady Janine, all soft floury hands and heart of milky kindness, asked if we’d heard the terrible news about Hayden we just stared at our filthy sneakers. Then she said, “He was the one with pink tips on his hair and, you know, that gorgeous walk, I saw him with you lot—and that laugh!”

Then we knew.

The peacock feather, he got that from outside The Sallies too. I downed a can of Smirnoff in his honour and stuck the tattered feather in it, just so. My eye was healed up by then. The bruising had faded to yellow.

In the Middle of a Ball of Wool

She has no plans for what to do once she has knitted her way to the centre of the last-chance skein, once the final purl or stitch swallows the fraying end of wool the same pink-white as chubby toes. She is skittish about making other schemes, as if the pattern she is working will disintegrate into random fads and fascinations just for the sake of filling time. While hag magpies cackle in the macrocarpa her needles clack.

A door behind slams shut on the room stocked with stacks of origami cloths, the scent of daphne and raindrops-on-hot-asphalt, lost between their crisp thumbbed folds.

Her needles clack like prayer beads in time with the pattern's verbs, and the knots she makes entomb a vintage lullaby crooned down the generations from mother to daughter. These words stutter to their closing verse.

Uncurled from its foetal tangle, the lamb's wool flails, a fine tendril vine in quest of an anchor place. It finds nothing to grip so is hauled up beside her elbow to dangle sullen in the salty air, then slip between the stitches mid row of purl.

She lifts the unfinished layette to mock the moon with her blood sacrifice and buries the pattern deeper than treasure, deeper than the wild pink yams that multiply in the mud of her southern garden. In the middle of a ball of wool there is a vacancy.

Beach Feet

Up until the moment I stepped outside, I hadn't realized the thickened heat of the day, stuck inside like I'd been, my head bent in scrutiny of artful text. Along my drive the trees are jam-packed with cicadas each one loudly denouncing its colleagues.

I stride the length of the beach with purpose, head bent now against the nor-west wind, to the local SuperValue seeking daily bread and eavesdrop-gusts of ocean air. Beyond the spindrift swells, a pod of surfers lurk with a frugal kind of patience. Whatever they write upon the waves becomes invisible before the letters can dry.

"Is that it?" The checkout woman speaks a clipped tone, a gesture to the EFTPOS keys. I slice iron-based particles to send a communication from the EDC at POS via modem to an acquirer who confirms my PIN. I, however, maintain my right to silence.

Above the nor-west archway, solemn clouds have formed dragons and dashes and dots. They leak a rivulet of sun, allowing my earnest shadow to dog me home. My lips are dry. My throat is parched. My shoes hold 'story' secure in rubberised tread. The cicadas along the drive stay silent now. The shoes on my doorstep only spill sand.

Sisters

Elspeth's fingers touch air above the piano. "Can you hear this? I'm playing the notes between the keys."

Our mother swoops in, swipes my sister off the stool, smacks down the lid. Elspeth staggers to stand, clutching at her head where thin skin has split. Blood seeps between her fingers. She smiles.

I put down my book and hand her a tea towel folded into a pad.

Our mother has gone outside to weep and Elspeth has returned to playing nothing. I hear her discordant music at each turn of the page.

Points of Origin

- i. The beach is wide and I'm wearing a bikini, the blue one with bows tied at my hipbones. It's been ages since I've cartwheeled. Sand shifts beneath the heels of my hands, but my arms are strong and filled with sunshine. I hold in my stomach. Sky and sea switch places and maybe my legs are a bit bent because when I turn back the right way up, hair wild across my cheeks, Lorna says, "Not quite right." Her stomach is flatter than mine.
- ii. After the Chinese restaurant, my feet swell from the MSG so I carry my shoes. Rain-oiled tarmac squeaks beneath my bare feet. Our meal was served in dishes to share, placed on a circular wooden disc that turned so we didn't have to pass or stretch. Lorna makes great fun of the fact it is called a Lazy Susan. For weeks afterwards she says it as she spins me around.
- iii. I try, but my stomach does not flatten and my hair cannot be tamed. At the boarding house I sit on a fringed cushion, leaning against the thin wall of her room while she tells stories of people we both know. I don't recognise them in her stories. Next year, she says, we will flat together but when the time comes there is only one place available in the flat. Lorna has a series of boyfriends, some of whom I never meet. They're all "arseholes" by the end, even the ones I met and kind of liked. Her mascara runs each time.
- iv. I doodle in the margins of my lecture book. Boulders mound up one on top of the other. Koru frame notes about educational theorists. Piaget has such a lovely curly g. Lorna borrows my notes. I'm just the sort that gets A's, she says, as if it's thoughtless of me.
- v. I practice eye contact when I make toasted sandwiches at the coffee bar. The pay is shit, the conditions are shit, but I get to eat the cut-off crusts, scoop the last kernels of creamed corn from the can. The guy who makes the coffees slips me one as we clean up. I am awake all night, my head spinning, my fingers tracing onion-juice rings in the space above my duvet. Later, I have

sex with the coffee guy and it turns out he's an arsehole. I only cry because of the onions.

- vi. Lorna has a tattoo of a mermaid scratched into the skin below her collarbone. She enjoys pulling down the front of her blouse to show people. You can see the lavender lace on her bra. Or pink. She tells me I should get one too, but all my bras are skin tone.
- vii. When I drive back home after our first term of teaching we talk about the kids in our classes. We call them 'our children'. When I ask to catch up at Christmas, she is busy, but we fit in a drink in a bar that has bubbles of light on the ceiling. We have bubbles in our stomachs. Our words are bubbles. I meet her man-about-town, whose noise fills her ears so my bubble words float away. I say I have to go. She has already turned before I reach the door. I hadn't planned to stay for long, anyhow. Lorna is blonde now and her freckles are covered with foundation.
- viii. I hold her hand after the procedure but she says, "get me a drink" so I sit on a cushion while she tells stories about the dreadful people at the private school where she works. "Thanks," she whispers when the man arrives. "I can always count on you."
- ix. When I ask Lorna to be my bridesmaid she squeals and carries on about shoes. Later I get a parcel in the mail. It's a hair iron.
- x. I've been practicing my signature. We are hyphenating. Now I get a gorgeous curly g to my name. It comes with an n in front and I have to teach my parents how to say it right. The children from my school gift me a pounamu. I message Lorna that I will wear it over my wedding dress. She phones me this time. "You going all Māori on us?" she says. She pronounces Māori as if it is only full of 'a's. She says we need to talk and then tells me the man is the father of one of her pupils. He said her mermaid tattoo was tacky-hip but he's an arsehole who was only maximising his investment in his daughter's

education. She's heading to London. He's already paid for her tickets, so she won't be around for the wedding.

- xi. My feet are bare with raffia flowers between my toes. The wind blows the spinifex seed heads across the sand and they run up against our guests' legs. He runs his fingers through my straight hair, says it feels like water. I shouldn't have bothered; it gets tousled in the night, during which he kisses the koru etched into the skin of my hip.
- xii. When I join Facebook the first person I search for is Lorna. She has a family profile picture – a pigeon pair – and a long narrow back garden with a fishpond. I don't send a friend request. After all this time, I leave that to her.
- xiii. The beach is covered in sharp shells so we wear shoes and when we twirl with our arms out straight the centrifugal force sends blood to our fingertips. We are dervishes. We clamber over rocks and my daughter sits, says she is a mermaid and combs wild hair with her fingertips. I say, "I knew a mermaid once and they are fickle creatures." She tugs at the top of my shorts to trace a koru surrounded in silver streaks. When she leans down to pull off a cats-eye I cannot forestall my words. "Careful darling!" She falters. Later, on the cool grass, I will teach her to cartwheel with her legs straight.

In the weekend we went to the beach

The beach isn't that great without the sun. Dad said as much, but Mum insisted we stick to the plan. We all must suffer for his misdeeds. A fish-skin sky draped over the sea.

I dutifully arranged shells and thin bones around her while he, with false cheer, incited the building of a sandcastle. He called her his queen but she was merciless. I dodged beneath the contracted moments where they looked past each other.

Seawater surged into unguarded moats. She sighed. It sounded like pain. The waves placed scales of salt on my shins.

We walked to the car, weighed down with damp towels, and bags, and a hefty silence we knew wouldn't stay clammed up forever. A thick line was drawn where the ocean and sky could find no compromise.

He dropped a towel, almost on purpose. The accusations spat out of her. He snapped back. I saw my chance to dash through the space between them, back to the edge to kick at tractor waves churning dark sand. I lifted my eyes. The cloud-scales had tugged loose and the sky was cluttered with apostrophes.

Propelled by sudden fear, I shouted out to them, lest, so intent on arguing, they drove off, forgetting they ever had a child.

They sat on the seawall by the car park, overlapping each other, edges smoothed over, and masks on tight. Through the eyeholes they pleaded with me, as if their lives depended on my collusion.

Then we went home.

Click ... Clack

It's not entirely true that he's never given Kiwi girls a chance. He flats with two of them who are not outside his range of possibility, by which he means they are plain, awkward, nice-enough girls. But they combined forces early on, finding their friendship in a shared repugnance. They accuse him of eating the biscuits they store in click-clack containers in the pantry. In their passive-aggressive way, they stick post-it notes on the lids saying, hey mister, MINE! Buy your own! He does, and so he knows that they are each stealing biscuits from the other and he is the convenient scapegoat. He despises their assumptions, spurns them and stays in his room where he has the whole Internet for company.

At weekends he dons a wide-brimmed hat to protect his 'maggot' skin from the sun and takes rambling walks around the city but his belly does not harden. On the way home he lumbers into the dairy for a bottle of Coke from the fridge, the condensation on the outside making it slippery. As he fumbles for his wallet, his freckled fingers having all become thumbs, the woman behind the counter waits with a graceful patience. He appreciates her soft voice, her soft eyes. The word 'thank you' clogs his throat so he is silent.

On the Internet he finds women just like her who post photos in search of a husband. He just looks. He has not built up the courage to send his own photo in return. Sometimes, when his flatmates are out, he unclicks the clack and steals a biscuit.

Dem Bones

When a blackbird slammed into our lounge window and Dad prepared it for burial, we thought him soft. When he wrapped the body in wire mesh before burying it, we suspected something else. Later, he sorted the scrubbed-clean bones on a red tablecloth on our kitchen table, so we ate in front of the TV, a habit we've maintained.

After that, there was no beach trip or wandering along riverbanks that didn't involve a hunt in all directions for carcasses, the returning hero holding aloft the corpse for our father to rearticulate. Dad was a truckie by trade. Who knew there was an Ezekiel inside of him beating to get out? Our house became a natural history museum, our spare room an ossuary.

He'd drill pinholes in each bone and connect them with fine wire. The toes were tricky, and the pneumatised bones full of hollow spaces the most fragile, but he'd soon have ivory wings—humerus-radius-ulna-metacarpus-carpus-phalanges—linked in full flight. Dad squeezed my arms. *Just like yours, only some of theirs are fused.*

There are 206 separate bones in a human body. I can name them all.

We couldn't have roast chicken or chops anymore. Mum despised the way he sucked meat from the bones, poked at the marrow with his knife. She made him sign a form stating that, if we died before him, he would let our bones moulder. She gave us each a copy. We wouldn't have put it past him. When he rubbed sunblock into my back I felt him press and count each of my vertebrae.

Your father carries time in his pocket

He keeps it in a tobacco tin, takes pinches of it between fingers stubby and stained, calloused from years spent gripping tools. You'd always thought his smokes grew on kauri trees.

Your father sniffs at time, drawing in through nostrils a long while. He closes his eyes against the decreasing seconds. He gifts you these moments. He doesn't ask for thanks. Just for you to hear his lungs breathing in and out. Knowing him, for that time.

My father was improvident. He ran out of time in an ocean rip. His final breath, when I was only eleven, was salt.

Given Away

You have to look at him because he stands at the front next to the best man who is the groom's brother, who is next to the groom, who is your husband's work colleague. The brothers look familiar, familial. They have faces that follow your expectations of a face, the usual placement of eyes and nose and hair. This other boy has a forehead that prods into the empty space. The rest of him appears to be leaning forward in expectation.

Music starts and his eyebrows lift with such expression of delight that it catches in your own throat. His wide-set eyes tell you the bride is walking across the grass so you turn to see her too, because that is what is expected of you, though you wish you could keep watching the boy watching her. She, like all brides, is not herself in that one-day-only dress, the sort you get given away in. You have been to weddings before. A couple of them were your own.

You watch the boy again. The rented suit hides his body but you are certain there is a tummy of dimpled bread dough beneath. He touches the sleeve of the Best Man and speaks, but only the low pitch of it reaches your ears, not the words. The Best Man's eyes crinkle. He nods but keeps looking straight ahead. The boy grins. You wish you were privy to the joke.

You wonder, as they turn to face the celebrant, just where this boy fits into the scheme of things. Is he a friend? A relative of the groom from the distaff side, or is he from the bride's family, given an important role to play at his sister's special day. He turns back to look at the congregation and grins again. There is a smattering of laughter, he gives an energetic thumbs up and arranges a faux solemn face before turning his back on you all.

You think of Sunday visits when you walked beside your brother on gravel paths to a park bench, or on rainy days to sit on hard chairs in the long corridor. His dough belly was hidden under oversized shirts and his face held no expectations. Your mother passed on gossip about people he didn't know. They didn't know him either. He wasn't at your weddings.

A Mother Dreams

He waddles on plated shoes across the tiles to kiss her goodbye. She wishes him a lovely day, and as she watches him cycle down the drive—his lycra-clad body still firm and fit—she dreams of a speeding truck and him not seeing in the glare of the sun and his own eagerness to better a personal record. She hears the thump, his body flung and landing, a softer thump. Gravel pierces her feet as she runs to him, him dying in her arms. She sees admiration in the faces of the friends and workmates who come to comfort. She hears the lawyer telling her how much she is worth. Now she is independent.

Oh please, she whispers. This is the easier way.

Their daughter looks up from where she has been skulking on a beanbag with a book.

What did you just wish for?

She has not calculated the daughter into her dream.

As Seen Live on Fox News

When Thor tested both his hypothesis and his thunder hammer, the people deposited their money into the accounts of the televangelists. No one stepped forward to explain the rapid expansion of air within the lightning strike so the deities knew for certain Science was dead and they came strutting back to the world.

Tāwhirimātea mobilised his armies of cloud children to throw icy thorns from the heavens. In response they built pyres of books and tractor tyres. In an attempt at appeasement the people flung a thin-boned calf onto the flames. Its leather creaked.

Neptune's jubilant belly-flop displaced the waters, which rose to meet the land that mankind had claimed, and reclaimed, and he set his barnacles to attach to the municipal buildings, and to the beachfront houses of the 1%, and to the sea shanty towns of the dispossessed. He was a trickle down sort of god.

The meek inherited both the groaning earth and the seabirds that washed ashore with bellies full of plastic. Gaia heaved deep sighs.

And still the bogus seers called on the people to see the wonders of their own prophecies they had made absolute. *Behold the end times*. They reached their childish arms to the Christ, calling him father and lord and friend.

“Depart from me, I never knew you.”

They should have read the books.

It was Eris who claimed them, plucked them from their television studios back to her milky nipples. When they screamed in horror at her myriad arms, she devoured them.

Where Can the Children Laugh?

“We giggle because of the balloons in our bellies,” said the children and they giggled all the more as the air escaped their bodies and they propelled, in jagged arcs, across the room and out the open door.

He grasped too late for the strings. Red welts scored across the palms of his hands as their sandaled feet, snake-striped by a long summer, skimmed across the roof of the house-next-door. Their laughter pealed out as they saw their childhood home from a new perspective and him so small in their world.

He last saw them lifting away into a bank of clouds filled with thunder as black as tea, the primary colours of their jumpers stark in contrast, and it made him think of geraniums and buttercups and the sort of hyacinths that his mother would call sailor boys.

Today, he thinks he sees a glimpse of yellow in the sky but it is gone. Just a card every now and then, a belated birthday or Christmas greeting when they remember.

Happy, Tansy, Happy Now?

“The most important thing is that Tansy’s happy.”

Penguin earrings jiggle from the office lady’s lobes as she speaks. Mummy sniffs portions of air into her nostrils, and takes the forms. My shoe grinds a fly carcass into the carpet and *I* grind my teeth. Mummy backhand slaps my knee. I glare at the kids through the window. They don’t pause to look at the girl who is not in uniform and is sitting outside the principal’s office. Mummy said there’s no point in forking out for a uniform until it’s certain they’ll take me. She’s not sure if records are shared before, or after, enrolment.

This principal has juicy lips and smells of hair gel. I pull behind Mum and that makes him laugh which sounds like plastic is crinkling.

“We’re all a big happy family here, Tansy,” he says.

The lady with penguin earrings shifts and then covers her shifting by moving some papers. So I’m not the only one who recognizes a big fat liar.

Mummy talks about her *very* important job and Daddy’s *very* important job and how they have moved here for a better lifestyle. Which is also *very* important. The shirt buttons across the principal’s middle strain even though he’s sucking in.

“I’m sure Tansy will fit right in,” he says.

Then Mummy says, “Tansy, can you wait outside for a bit, I won’t be much longer.”

The office lady is shredding piles of paper. I stand so close that she lets me have a go.

“It’s good therapy.” She hands me another document to feed to the whirring mouth. Thin worms of paper cascade into a blue plastic bin.

“I’ll help you in the office anytime you like,” I say.

“That’s a lovely offer, sweetie, but your job is to be in class and learning with all the other children.”

I reach up and tug the penguin dangling from her ear.

“They live in Antarctica,” I say to cover the edge of her squeal.

The Weekend Shift

It's what I could do to help Fleur out. Family is family. The last Friday each month, we'd drive into the city from opposite directions, and in the motel car park she'd hand over Josh and his bag of things then drive off for her break. It was a good arrangement.

I'd hold my nephew close, kiss the top of his head. His hair smelled of whichever shampoo was on special that month so I don't have a scent-memory, just the consciousness of lip-touch to hair.

He'd squirm. "Molesterer!"

"That's Auntie Dearest to you!"

We had the museum for wet days, taking turns to choose which exhibit to visit next.

"The Dinosaurs!"

"Antarctica!"

"The drawers of bugs!"

Racing from one to the other in haphazard fashion, back and forth, tugging to have our own way.

"The Victorian Street!"

"Hey, that's one of mine!"

"Mine now!"

Those weekends sorted themselves into rituals. We ate out for lunch and cooked dinners together on the tiny motel stovetop. We bought doughnuts for breakfast, and later, as sophistication gained traction, pain au chocolat. We wrapped candlewick bedspreads around our knees to watch Sunday morning cartoons or play Xbox. Mid-morning, the crunch of wheels on gravel signalled Fleur's restoration to motherhood.

"Lifesaver," Fleur would mouth over his head. As if it were a chore.

She found a new man on one of those weekends off. They settled down. Stayed home. At his 18th birthday I hugged Josh tight, his hair too high up for me to smell.

"Molesterer," he whispered in my ear, and he lifted me off my feet.

Pests and Pestilence

Mum named the apple tree on the riverbank ‘Auntie’. She prefers the tartness of Auntie’s apples, though they’re riddled with codling moth, tells me I’m like the larvae that burrow to the core, an insatiable eating machine. Mum’s too tired now to climb fences or trek across paddocks so it’s my job to gather windfalls and pick the ones within arms’ reach. I’m never to climb Auntie. From where she clings to the bank, the fall will be too far. Rabbits undermine Auntie’s roots. The river encroaches on our land. Fence wires dangle.

Long ago, Auntie swallowed an apple pip. It germinated. Sap threaded her veins, her cells changed, and she became a tree. These things happen in my family. Mum’s hair fell out all over the pillow.

I shimmy up Auntie’s curved spine. One branch-arm reaches to the ground, the other points to sky. There’s a niche where I crouch, knees hunched, unseen from the sheds. I eat apples scored with boreholes. The river’s voice dulls out the shouts and constant sheep. Wary of swallowing a pip, I eat around deep-burrowed larvae tracks. I chuck fleshy cores into the current. Before I walk home, I cram my backpack with apples. My jeans soak up the wet grass. My belly aches.

Mum can peel an apple all the way around so the skin becomes one long curling snake. I cut away the black rot and the cores and the pips. We make apple crumble. She touches my hand and tells me, *Remember this*.

Blood & Bone and Barbwire Fencing

Dad told me, *no son of mine*, which ruled out playing soccer, voting on the left, and wearing pink. I was his—Blood & Bone—like the sacks of fertiliser stacked in the garden shed, nitrogen and phosphate, two out three of the essential nutrients.

When it came to picking school subjects, woodwork was okay—electronics even—but never food technology. On such things there was no further discussion. “This” was never up for debate. We had meat at every meal.

I followed him around the farm, untangling barbwire snares with my chatter until he said, “Enough, Son.”

My mother died which was not in his plan. On the morning after her funeral, Dad slammed his fist into the kitchen wall. I’d made him his favourite banana pancakes but he didn’t like that I wore my mother’s apron. I moved to stand at the window beside him to count the fences that needed fixing.

The Damaged Ones

I grew up thinking caterpillars were super smart because Nan said they were. She showed me the kawakawa leaves nibbled into lacework hearts, told me the damaged ones were the most potent. I picked the leaves for Nan's coughing tea and while it stewed I scrubbed the bench with Jiff. Nan said, "Quit it, Baby-girl, you need some germs to build immunity." She said crazy shit sometimes.

There was this yellow stain on Nan's mattress from when her bladder went west. "No school today. I need your help," she said.

"You'll have to ring school," I told her.

Nan left a message, said I had diarrhoea, which was a lie. "If you want a day off tell them you've got the runs. They're not going to ask for proof!"

"But it's still a lie!"

Nan slammed the phone on the bench so I knew not to be a cheeky bugger and say it a third time. We lurched that mattress along the hall to the porch. "Dreamed I was having a nice warm bath!" said Nan, smooching her lips to make everything okay again. There wasn't room in the porch, what with the mattress, so Nan had her smokes in the kitchen. "Just this once. And you'd better bloody well not say anything because I've had a shitty enough day."

I said I was the one supposed to be having the shitty day, which made Nan laugh and cough. She said I'd better quit being a cheeky bugger or she'd piss her pants and make more washing. Nan said bugger isn't a rude word anymore. She reckoned you should hear all the bad words when you're little because that way they lose their shock value. My teacher, she mustn't of learned any rude words when she was a kid because she flapped like a hen if you said "bum" or "shit" and they're just everyday words. Nan smoked with her eyes closed as if there was a dream in the nicotine that she wanted to grasp on to. She used a pāua shell for an ashtray. When I tipped the butts and ash out and held it under the outside tap, the shell came back shiny except for a few burn marks where Nan had pressed down, grinding out the butts. On my thigh I have three tiny round scars, like craters, that appeared after the blisters burst. Mum gave me the first burn because I answered back, and the next because I cried. I'm a fast learner and swallowed up my tears but she still gave me the third burn anyhow, to make sure I had the lesson. "Don't tell your Dad."

You never touched Dad's stuff. That was the golden rule. His mug. His stash. Don't touch it. His girl. He told her, "If you hurt her again I'll fuckin' kill you." Mum's smudged eyes looked at me like I was her biggest mistake ever. But Mum was blasé about doing things she shouldn't. Me too. Next time she smacked me, I told Dad. You know that word blasé? It's French for you don't give a fuck. Sometimes, when Nan was watching telly, I'd sit in her chair on the porch and pretend I was smoking. I'd blow empty smoke out and whisper, "Who gives a fuck!"

I was sorry Nan's cigarettes had scarred the pāua's colours. I told her that she should use something else for an ashtray, like a cracked saucer, but she told me the shell's got sentimental value and she'll leave it to me in her will. I told her I'm never going to smoke and she shouldn't smoke either. She flashed her yellow fingernails at me. "Been at it far too long, Baby-girl."

Before they closed the lid on Nan's casket, I put her pāua shell in so she can smoke in heaven and dream. Someone had painted over her nails and made them pearly. Nan didn't know everything. I looked on the Internet and it's the leaves that are the smart ones. When the caterpillars come munching, the leaves react by producing chemicals. It's the leaves make themselves potent. Now that's some crazy shit right there.

10 in a Packet

Crayon voices call from the driveway but before I can locate their whereabouts they scoot off, leaving only a waxy residue on the asphalt. When it rains you can see the outlines of children who have grown out of their skins.

Dancers are a hazard on city streets

I turn the corner and walk smack-bang into the swaying looping swathe of bodies. It's got so it's hard to avoid them these days. Instinct impels me to slip-slide-side-step out of their reach and into the path of traffic. A car swerves. A driver crudely gestures her disgust. *But woman, I am not one of them.*

On the far side a crowd forms. Who can resist the urge to stand at the bars of Bedlam and stare? I turn on my heel to distance myself from the dancers but they have formed a conga line at my back.

The rubberneckers shake their hydra heads in unison. My hands flap in desperation as I sign, *I'm not with them, God help me!*

One after the other the gawpers turn and walk away; their steps deliberately unmeasured, their gait awkward. I stumble my feet too. *I tell you, I've never seen them before!*

But I am clasped into silence by a dancer on each side whose eyes are closed in bliss and sway. Fingers grip mine tight. I struggle to escape. With crystalline movements a hand reaches to tug the buds from my ears.

I catch a strain on the breeze, a beat in the earth. My heart corresponds. A shoulder dips. A hip sways. I too, hear the music.

Fixation: *an alchemical term denoting the process of reducing volatile spirit to a permanent bodily form*

The first time he sees the arched stone bridge, Michael is transfixed, as she knew he would be. He counts the stones, each hand-hewn from quarry lumps and wedged tight. It's mid-morning so the foot traffic on the bridge is intermittent. He lifts a hand and shapes an arc. If he were a dancer it would be a graceful movement but he is a not-quite man. A not-quite-all-there, almost man.

Alice waits half an hour, maybe more, then tugs gently at the sleeve beside his elbow; the only place he tolerates her touch. This bridge was her idea. "Do you like the arch?" He hears her question but it's not the right one. It's not the arch that matters. Without the stones clinging together there would be no arch. If just one stone shifted...

With the changes of light it seems that one stone is always on the verge of breathing itself some space. No stone shifts. But is that because he watches? What if he looked away? Michael's legs shudder and shake so he spins in circles, each time with a swift turn of the head like a ballerina spotting centre. He tries to catch a stone in the process of shifting but they stay firm so he walks onto the bridge, light on his toes because this is what joy feels like.

He ricochets from side to side, touches the wrought iron rail, volte-face and back again. This is okay when foot traffic is light but at lunchtime Alice has to conduct the flow around him. Some smile and nod but others seem dislodged, unsafe even. She's not ready when Michael stops solid right in the centre, with the keystone of the arch beneath his feet. Their bodies collide. There, in the middle of the bridge, he crushes her close with one arm while his other arm describes an arc in the air. This is the first time they have touched in over nine years of Michael and Alice building bridges. A man with a briefcase stops, plays it light. "Hey, Son, be gentle with your Mum."

"I'm his care worker," Alice says.

The arm drops. Hands clench and unclench. Michael steps back as her words wedge into the spaces he has cleared. He spins, right there in the middle of the busy bridge, his head flicking to keep her in sight. In all those nine years he had thought she was a fellow bridge builder. The keystone beneath him slips. He will not allow her to touch the sleeve next to his elbow to haul him back.

An Instinct for Migration

She switches the dial to de-mist.

Over on Southshore, lights shift as if they have not settled yet on the sand and plan to take godwit-flight, driven by this sudden arrival of winter and an instinct for migration.

After months of calm, a storm shudders the traffic lights on the new Ferrymead Bridge and the water, pushed across the tarmac in waves, supersedes the road's camber. To her left, a darkness of estuary sighs, subsides. Her car sways on newly placed tyres.

The wipers flap their no-nonsense beat against the screen but she does not take heed. As she crosses the causeway, she takes her turn at the front of the flock. It only requires a veer to the left, and a V formation of Swifts wend their way out over buffeted waves where there are no numbered signs to check their pace, no cones to set their path, just the calling of some other home.

At the uneven corner, where a temporary speed limit sign has leaned for six years, she returns to her senses. People know her here.

Lento

At the scraping of the gate, sparrows lift. Delphi peers through spaces in the gauze. A man knocks, and waits with the patience of Job. He glances up, gestures that he'll leave something on the doorstep; backs away in obeisance. He gets into a car with signage, the sort driven by real estate agents. They'd come after Jack's death, with special offers, suggesting a nice unit close to amenities, no maintenance worries.

Delphi can still manage the stairs but she has to take her time. That is her deal with the children. When I can't do the stairs, *then* you get to shove me away.

She feels a sciatica twinge and the reluctance of knees to genuflect as she picks up the folded flyer. *With the compliments of the director.* Inside are two tickets, gold and blue with that bar-code squiggle that's stamped on everything these days.

Delphi leaves her fur coat in the wardrobe. Nobody wears fur these days. She decides on oyster silk, apple red and jungle flowers. Delphi fans herself with the programme, its edges curled with age. The overture plays. She kicks off her slippers, stands before her bedroom mirror and sings her songs again. Takes them lento.

Whiskers on Roses

There was electric shock therapy on the brink for Liesl, who, once she outgrew seventeen, could no longer tolerate do- re- me and dresses that were hung on her body to keep out the light. She posts helpful hints on her Pinterest page.

Bleach is required to keep a white dress clean. Copper kettles acquire a patina if you don't drink tea. A blue satin sash makes a soothing noose.

Regrets settle thick on Rolfe's moustache and eyelashes as he struggles to remember his favourite things. He wakes in the night with twinges of nuns and Nazis and of how a one-serving-sized strudel will burn if, by mistake, you set the oven to grill, instead of bake and his loins ache for sixteen-going-on-seventeen.

After weeks of rain the roses in Lisle's gazebo sprout whiskers of mould. Older, and wiser, she turns the off the lights and hangs her dress back in the window.

Caution to the Wind

Kathleen's ache could not be obliterated by sunshine, or by the children who sat on the beach wall and licked melted ice cream from their wrists, until she found Gerald.

"Dear Gerald," she said, touching fingers to the tarnished plaque on his back and sitting down.

They shared the view: the asphalt crumbling at their feet, the salt-bent trees, and a disordered ocean. Together they sat, curve to curve, and watched gulls and children on scooter bikes and couples holding hands. Kathleen wondered where the other Gerald had rested before his family had erected the seat in his memory. There would have only been rocks back then.

"Oh Gerald," she said, "you would have got a cold bum, dear."

In spring she found, stuck between his slats, a bunch of bright scentless flowers wrapped in cellophane, the sort you see in a bucket on the petrol station forecourt. To protect them from the easterly, Kathleen took them home and put them in a jam jar. The council came and painted Gerald, laid stain upon his timbers and tied yellow caution tape around him. She took that too and made a bow around the jam jar. The water may have evaporated and the flowers drooped, but the yellow caution tape made the jar look so jolly.

Loose Change

When they took my shoes, my soft-soled feet bled on the sidewalk. I remember someone who stumbled outside my office door, “Hey, man, you got change?” I never had change.

When they took away my credit card, told me the banks no longer had my cash, I knew someone would come through for me. Then the rest, like seams unravelling...

Still I was owed. Surely I was owed.

I lied. They did not take my shoes. I flung them in the estuary in a fit of pique. Watched them slop and sink beneath the murk.

It Depends Which Team You're In

The wine in her glass sloshes because someone mentioned Gareth Morgan.

"That man! He just says things for the attention. It's not cats that cause the slaughter, but stoats and rats. He doesn't tell people about that."

My glass has only a bead at the bottom. "You live in this valley?" She nods. "With cats?"

"Three."

Others move away. There is loud noise from the adjoining television room, maybe that is why, but I have no interest in the rugby game. Gooseberry-green compounds unlatch my tongue. "Do they stay indoors?"

"God no, that would be inhumane. They're born to roam free. But at *that* man's instigation people put out poison and traps." She leans in conspiratorially. "There are people in this very room who play God."

A stranger nearby gives a warning shake of the head but words flit and skitter from my mouth. "How do you know your cats don't give in to their innate, ingrained, inclination to kill? Aren't the bird populations dwindling?"

"See now, I don't reckon that's true. There are loads of fantails in my garden but they flutter so fast. It infuriates my boys. So cute to see."

"And lizards," I say. "Let's not ignore the speckled skinks that shimmer as they twist between the grasses, and the grey-flecked geckos with their wrinkled necks seeking the warmth." The wild white wine is talking now. I rub my left foot against the gecko tattoo on my right ankle.

She cranes her neck to the adjoining room. "Oh, they bring them in sometimes ... make gifts of them to me ... but not that many ... Oh..."

"That you see..."

"Oh, was that a try? Oh..."

We move to see the replay. An interception, then a run, a pass, a grin, a touchdown over the try line.

"We're winning!" she says.

whale, dancing hands, breath

It was by stroke of luck and light that Anahera saw the whale's flukes. The grey-blotched tail draped water for a short moment before being dragged back beneath the swell.

She glanced to see if any of her group had noticed, but none had eyes to spare for the sea. They were intent on cameras that were, in turn, intent upon the market stalls; chillies like crimson crayons lay next to turmeric-infused crêpes, silvered fish, windfall fruits, sunset-orange crabs, star-shaped spices. Anahera slowed her breath, willing the ancestors to slip aside the cloak-edges of the world once more.

It was the cessation of movement that next drew her eye. Beneath a sun-scoured canopy a woman sat amidst a mound of greenery. The woman slipped one hand over the other and her closed fingers pointed skyward to mimic the whale's tail fluke. She flexed her wrists to dance and dip the tail down to her lap. Anahera mirrored the movement and felt the curtain's swishing breeze. Again, the woman's hands twirled, a gesture towards a contrail curve, a trail of discarded lace in the sky, then returned to plucking leaves.

Anahera heard the voices of her brothers in the banter of brown-eyed, dusty-legged schoolboys thrusting bicycles through the throng. She breathed in the ha, the life breath that arrived buoyant on their laughter.

With her parasol high, Ana led her tour party to the ruined temple, pointing out the marker stones on the way. She made no mention of things not included in the guidebook: the whale, the dancing hands, her brothers' breath.

Master of the Flames

Why was there always the rush to build a fire the minute the tent was pitched?

Why the hurry when feet sought release from wet leather, when there were birds to clear the air with and words to Tāne required before we nested beneath his trees, when there was a stream nattering over loaves of grey stone?

Why was your axe manufacturing work, until the sun moved away, until the birds went shy, until the putaputawētā leaves retreated into shadow?

By then your fire would be blazing, and you would have found a perfect stick to poke it with.

Time to Go

His jandals have been removed and relocated. Their flatfish contours sprawled on the portico caused offence, as he knew they would. Rubber jandals possess a patience that waits outside of time, but Paul never spoke that thought out loud. As a youngster, he rebelled at the moments of patience that were forced upon him. Later he became accommodated to them, as befits an adult. He does not rail now at the elsewhere jandals but finds them in the first place he thinks to look, precisely positioned just inside the washhouse door. He squirms the rubber between his toes. His heels slide into homely hollows. When he runs upstairs the jandals slap like backhand clouts against the boards.

In his stripped-bare room he flickers his fingertips, magician-like, over a memory. He doesn't hold to any illusions that this house will retain the marks he's made, and as tit-for-tat, he resolves to take nothing of it with him. When Paul realizes that there is something he wants after all, his father is not there to give it. They said their goodbyes some time ago, they shook hands and then there was a swift clasp.

His mother is hovering with a tight-packed lunch. She's not a hugger.

"I'd better get going," he says.

Her voice clips around the edges. "You can't wear those to drive in! They're dangerous!"

The jandals, having oft sought the thrill of gravel slopes and slime-coated rocks, are delighted to find that danger has been within them all along. Paul flings them into the foot well.

Later, when sand seeps between the sandwiches, the jandals become impatient for Paul's return. When the waves come, they too, get up and leave.

This is How it Begins

This is not a swimming beach. Her father's leather belt licked the backs of Maddy's legs if she forgot and got too close. Once he'd grabbed a gutted eel, still slick from the river and slapped it across her bum. But the channels silted up and cut the eels from their breeding grounds, so now, while she lies on the edge, her father sits on a plastic chair and drinks beer in the morning sun because fishing is a game for losers — that, and the quotas. Her mother went fishing and found someone else, but he is her father and so this is how she spends her weekends.

A shelf drops down to where the sea rakes stones into its hungry mouth. Maddy sprawls at the edge, hot stones pressed to her spine between the waistband of her denim cut-offs and bikini top, their smooth smell in her nostrils. The fizz of yeasty beer deep in her empty belly takes off the rough edges. He won't miss the can. It's a Saturday and the weekend has just begun, snatches of an international cricket match from her father's transistor broadcast across the salt air.

Maddy has been gathering agates, scooping up handfuls of stones and sifting them through her fingers to find the clear and onyx-banded, the milky and the sunshine-hued. Only the surface stones are warm. Those beneath are salty damp, as if the ocean seeps upwards. Her short's pockets are filled with agates, so many of them to weigh her down.

Maddy rolls over the edge; dry stones skitter from her pockets into the chill of wet stones. She tumbles with the cylinder of surf and under. An eel swims into her throat to taste beer.

From the radio and her father come shouts, one after the other, "Howzat!"

Maddy stands on the edge; her head is dizzy in the sunlight, her pockets still filled with unpolished agates. She throws them in handfuls back into the foam where she must not swim. Her arms make freestyle strokes in the air.

Reclamation

The woman cannot recall the loss of it, perhaps there was a sound as it fell to the earth but she was too preoccupied to notice. Now, she requires a button of a singular type to close her gaping coat.

She tips the contents of her mother's button jar across the bedspread, ignoring the rotting cotton threads and eyes that wink; she wants only that one button.

What's wrong with this world with its seams asunder? They rattle on, those buttons, whispering of unfinished garments, of items excess to requirements.

This daughter of a dead, imperfect mother spreads buttons like seeds, traces mandala emptiness—her unhinged fingers grappling to shape radial balance. There are no molecules to vibrate in that universe at her fingertips, nothing to echo her bragging heart. In the cold of her bedroom, she leans into her coat, slips wrists into smooth-lined sleeves, her thumb traces blue-scarred veins.

And yet, a moment before she wants nothing, her own voice emerges soft and deep. *Hush hush*, she tells the mockingbird and she plucks that pulse from under her thumb and this is the moment—she decides—to be all right again. With one scoop she seals those damned-I-ammed buttons back behind the smeared cornea of glass. The jar goes back on the shelf. Her mother's buttons settle into distant constellations; *I promise, you would not want them any nearer.*

Blessings

I slipped from my Mum like a jellyfish. Membrane covered my mouth and nose and I was silent. The midwife split my cocoon and, when I cried that first breath, she praised the Lord for the miracle I was. Mum never believed in miracles or lucky charms but all the same she dried my caul on a sheet of paper above the coal range, then flattened it between the pages of the only bible in the house; a battered King James Dad's aunt had left behind when she shuffled off this mortal coil. When I was six, I called it my 'mortal caul' until Mum put me right on that.

Whenever I sneezed she refused to say 'Bless you'; said I'd more than my fair share already.

It had a hold on me, that waxen scab-like thing. I'd trace my finger across the bumps of flattened folds, and lift it, delicate, with one finger; eager for the blessings it obscured. That the bible had fallen open to Psalm 91 was a second miracle, the midwife said. I was safe from the snare of the fowler and noisome pestilence, as well as from drowning. Though we lived a good distance from the sea these things were a comfort.

Mum got fed up with me pestering her for words and shut the bible in the cupboard; said I wasn't to get ideas above myself. She told me about condoms though, said I'd be in her position one day, *you're not that special*, even though the midwife said she remembered my birth above all the others. The midwife came a lot, due to my Dad refusing protection, nothing that would come between him and his pleasure *and 'tis a sin against the Lord to boot*. Mum listed her babies' names, both the quick and the dead, inside the cover of the bible.

When I was eight, she answered the door to find a sailor on the doorstep. With Baby Katherine on her hip and the other three tugging at her skirt, she bartered away my caul while I sat at the kitchen table drawing mermaids on butcher's paper. When that special part of me was stowed safely in his oiled bag the sailor asked, "Which one?" She nodded in my direction and he bowed his head to me, palms together. Mum pushed him out the door, pocketed his money, and so it was her luck changed; no more babies came. Now, I must say my prayers like everyone else, and never go to sea.

An engineer, a historian, a gardener and a writer go for a walk in the bush

The long-legged writer strides ahead of the others. They are pronouncing facts as if this was some TV quiz show and they are getting only questions they know the answers to. Whilst he pauses, and before his voluble companions catch up, the writer hears the calls of korimako and warblers. At a bend he startles a kererū from a feed of miro berries so only glimpses its blurred flight. It is the gardener who, on rounding the bend, informs him that the berries are miro.

He stills himself, where the bush opens a view to the tops of a stand of nīkau palms, to note how they remind him of Mardi Gras dancers with smooth lithe bodies and feathered hair. Rare for this far south, the gardener says. She seems determined to match his pace.

He gets ahead again and presses his fingertips into cushions of moss, sniffs damp sweet rot. All this time that he is ahead of the chatter he is devising a story about an engineer, a historian, a gardener and a writer who go for a walk in the bush. He endows the writer with the nobility of awareness of his surroundings that will save them all from the crisis due to befall in chapter three.

At the end of the walk, the engineer commends the track's construction, the historian adds detail to what they read from a printed information board, and the gardener reveals, secreted in her coat pocket, a pilfered specimen for her fernery. They all agree that it is a lovely spot. Only, the writer has regrets. He has no details with which to flesh out his story. After all, who wants to read a story about birdsong or the lithe bodies of palm trees.

Lost Bearings

All had seemed normal until the godwits amassed on the open spit, faced north-north-west and failed, day by day, to fly. They hunkered down, shuddering as if they'd flown headfirst into a window, slender beaks tucked in grey-washed breasts. The mass of them shuddering echoed the shifting of sand.

The Council fenced them off with orange cones and plastic tape. We offered stale bread but the birds were well-conditioned for the long haul to Alaska via Yalu Jiang, their bellies full of our estuary's worms, fat-cells loaded, flight feathers trim and strong. Yet they stayed on the ground, stranded.

We considered our own culpability – you know the roll call, the proliferation of cellphone towers, fracking, heated air and melting ice. If so, what were we to do? Should we lift them, one by one, and toss them into the sky? Tell them they have a place but not here, not anymore? Perhaps they lacked the leader who would tell them, *now, this is the time*. Maybe they'd collectively decided it was no longer worth their effort. Some fault in their genes?

We heard that their shuddering ebbed away. The ones at the edges went first, the ones who bore the brunt of the easterly wind and driving rains. Workers in hazard suits grasped their bent wing bones and tossed the carcasses onto the back of a truck. If only, we said, if only they hadn't chosen here.

The Stairwell

Dad calls my name.

My coffee is too hot so I inhale it before answering, “ah-hah?” eyes rolling upwards.

“Have you seen the stairs?”

So far it’s been keys, glasses, shoes he accuses me of moving.

“Did you look where you left them?” I wipe crumbs and the ring of a teacup from the bench.

“You used them last.”

“No, you just went back up for something or other.”

“Did I?”

I step into the gap between downstairs and upstairs. Across the empty space I see him, his lips trembling, and me with no way to get to him.