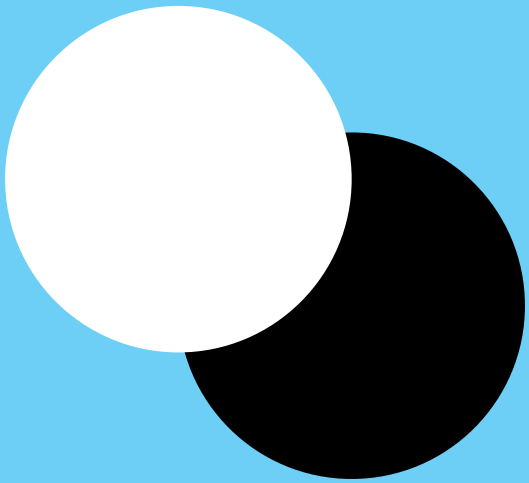
WENSUM

Literary Magazine Issue 1 | Winter 2023



WELCOME

David Sexton | Editor

I am thrilled to be able to welcome you to the first issue of WENSUM, a literary magazine that aims to give a platform to shorter pieces of literary fiction that may not be deemed commercially viable by traditional publishers.

For the first issue, I wanted to highlight works that I felt were perfect for those quiet moments of contemplation and reflection that can be hard to find in modern life. Whether you take a look on a bus or train journey, or find yourself scrolling through on a lunch break, I hope you find something inside that you like.

Thank you for taking the time to read and I hope you enjoy what's ahead.

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The Gift

Lui Sit

Flinging my leg over my red bike, I shunt forward, trundling out of the backyard down the bitumen driveway. Our cul-de-sac is unusually still for late Sunday afternoon in Huntingdale. All the neighbourhood kids must've been called in already, either now watching Sunday sports with their parents or being scrubbed clean before dinner time.

Behind me sits the three-bed beige brick and red tile Australian house that has been home for seven years. Inside, stacked boxes full of our belongings await the removalists' arrival tomorrow when the convoy to our new house will begin. Thirty minutes drive away, a vast distance. My ten-year-old self realises the unlikelihood of me ever returning.

Pushing off, I cycle down the cul de sac, turning left onto Cardington Way, which I call Cardigan Way. It's the main road which sepa-

rates housing from bushland; the south side of the road is lined with the residential sprawl of seventies Australia, while the north side harbours dense remnant bushland which slopes downward towards the Southern River; a bold name for what for the most part of the year resembles a slip of creek.

Pedalling on, I cruise past the identikit houses, eventually casting my eyes towards the olives and yellows of the bushland, inhaling the crisp burning scent of Australian native foliage. I breathe in, snorting like a junkie, unsure of whether I will smell these smells again in the landlocked suburb we are moving to.

About two kilometers on, I steer the front wheel off the road, mounting the verge onto a wizened patch of buffalo grass. Dismounting, I wheel my bike across the dirt, weaving through a vertical patchwork of marri, jarrah, and eucalyptus trees. Nothing about this spot distinguishes it from the wall of bush and scrub populating the banks of the river. Yet it is an entryway as familiar to me as the front door of the house we are about to leave.

Once the trees behind are dense enough to provide cover from prying eyes, I drop my bike on the ground and continue on. As I head deeper into the bush, the sunlight breaking through the spangled network of tree foliage turns my gaze into a squint. The snap and crunch of dry twigs burst from underfoot, matched by the shuffle of parched leaves as I walk on, oblivious to any potentially poisonous companions present. The sun is warm on my arms and the air here smells even more of burning, but there is no fire in sight.

The only map I have is etched in memory. I make my way towards where the ground starts to slope down to the river, the slight angle pitching me forward and, just before the earth dips fully, it comes into view.

A eucalyptus gum, not as tall as some others here, but old and wide with a hollow trunk. Inside are deep indents and pitted spaces carved out by ants, spiders, wood grubs, and other denizens of this place. I scrape my palm down along the trunk, the bark's rough stringiness sending a shiver through me as dry husks

splinter off, threatening to embed into the flesh of my fingers. Still, I stroke the tree in the same way I stroke my cat.

Hello. I'm back.

I move closer to the trunk and push my cheek up against it, taking in the parched smell of ancient wood before stepping inside the hollow. The air here is damp, rich with the scent of fungi and soil. There is just enough room for me to stand and sit. I gaze at the pale interior, a creamy beige bark which peels off easily when touched. I think of the dolls, books, and dead insects I have decorated this space with. The mud feasts served in bark crockery, eaten with twig cutlery. Moments where I sat, eyes closed, hoping to find another world when I opened them, asking the tree to transport me somewhere. Anywhere.

I linger in the dim quiet of the hollow, breathing, listening. Here sunlight has a sound. I can hear the shrinking of the bark in the heat of the day, the swelling of the deep tap roots pulsing beneath the soil, sucking water from the river source. The whine of flies reminds me that I am

a minority here.

I stay still, as still as a ten-year-old can stay. If I stay long enough, maybe I can absorb enough of this place to last me forever.

Five minutes, five hours pass and I get up from the soil, dusting dirt off my legs. I emerge from the tree hollow and leave quickly.

I'm back on my bike, heading in the opposite direction of home, riding further down Cardigan Way, past the nature reserve containing the playground where my baby brother cut open his chin and the tennis courts where I practised until my arms ached. Late afternoon shifts to early evening, the sky fading from a harsh primary blue to muted pastels. My stomach grumbles with hunger but I ignore it, moving past the reserve towards a patch of dense bushland less than a kilometre away. Here is untrammelled territory, unexplored terrain that is so foreign to me that I might as well have trekked into the Nullabor desert from suburban Perth.

My breath is sharp with anticipation as I ditch my bike onto the ground, leaving it in full view of the road. If I don't return, my deserted bike

will act as a flag, alerting the rescue squad to the last actions of an errant child in her quest for adventure.

Further in I go, the familiar crack and snap of twigs underfoot signalling just how quiet the outer suburban surroundings are. I sniff the air like an overstimulated tracker dog, my senses heightened as the network of trees branching out overhead, encasing me like a horde of protective aunts.

I duck and weave past each one, marking out a new topography in my size five sneakers. The ground pitches familiarly, sloping downwards, leading me to an open clearing where trees have forgotten to grow. Instead, there are great swathes of tall pale reeds, a kind of bulrush, all swaying as one.

I stop. Delighted.

The rushes stand taller than me and form a dense boundary, a reed battalion allowing no further entry. The only passage through is for creatures with wings. Dragonflies, bees, houseflies, blowies, butterflies. Maybe a fairy or two.

I wedge one foot into the clump of reeds and

force the mass of stalks apart with both arms. Pushing through, I test my weight on the bent stalks, feeling the dense root mass support me so I continue on, the strands rebelliously springing back upright as I pass. The only thing I can see ahead is a wall of rushes that tickle my face as I move through them until, just as suddenly as they appeared, the bulrushes thin out and I am somewhere new.

My breath catches as I stare into a vast room created by living reeds. It has four walls like the rooms of a house and a perfect thatched floor created of horizontal, blonde stalks. I test its sturdiness and it does not give, although the springiness makes me wonder what is underneath. Water? Earth? Air? I take another step into the middle of this natural, perfect structure. It holds. The reeds are even higher here, stretching towards the sky. I circle around, arms outstretched.

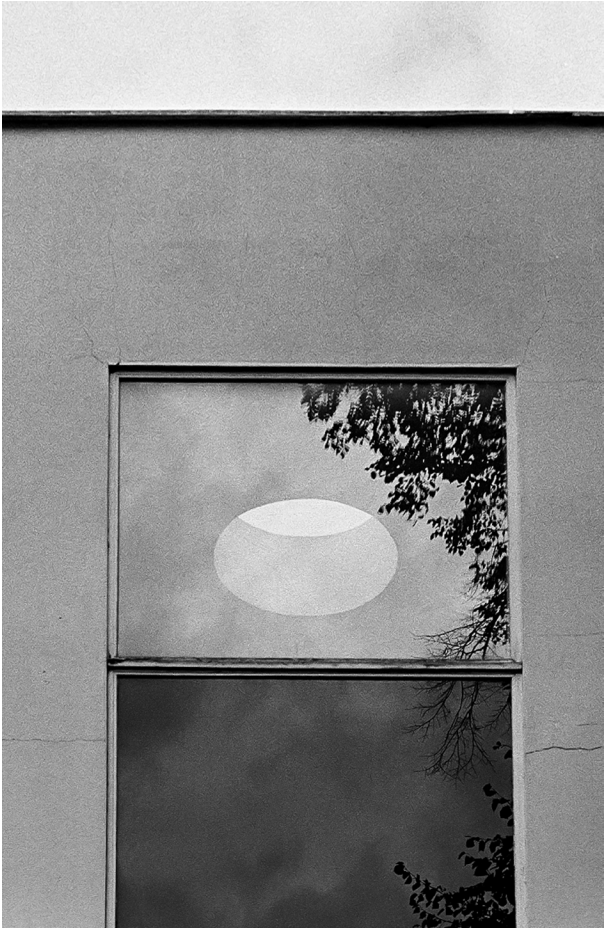
I exhale and the sound of the evening birds' chorus rushes into my ears, a fitting soundtrack for the moment.

"Wow."

Standing in my shorts and grubby t-shirt, my legs and arms toasted from the sun, my uneven fringe plastered with dirt and sweat to my forehead, I feel that I've been given a gift, bestowed upon me by forces I welcome but don't understand. I squat onto the reed floor, before lying down flat. Spread-eagling my arms and legs, I gaze up to find the first few evening stars looking back at me.

Tomorrow we are leaving but right now, I'm exactly where I want to be.

Home.



Sentinel

Christopher Linforth

They opened the Life Center a day early. Silver-haired women emerged from the rear of the building in plain grey tracksuits. They jogged over to the stand of jacaranda trees and stood in a line, eyes to the dawn sky. A computerised male voice erupted from the Life Center's loudspeakers: begin. The women started a calisthenic routine. Their limber bodies jerked up and around. They completed fantastical exercises: burpees and headstands and planches. I called out to them from my position on the stone pillar, near the entrance. The women rose, arms by their sides. Their grey faces looked my way. I wasn't meant to see. I begged the women to lie down and sleep. They remained static, so I tried again in a deeper voice: sleep. The women gathered in the shade of a single tree, a circle of eyes closing. I guarded them for as long as I could until the men came to take them back inside.

The Woman of Parts

Fiona Mossman

From this corner of the house, the corner furthest from the nursery, I can see the track that leads to the forest. The forest at the back of the house is impossible to ignore, especially when you live this close to it. The house seems to coorie away from that dark deepness like something small and frightened, tucking its nose into its tail. In here, I am protected, but it's not much of a comfort: the forest is right there, after all. All the time.

I can see the village folk coming and going along the track, though none of them seem to see me, in here, looking out. They are always furtive, they pass one at a time, looking around and over their shoulders. And if they do see someone else on the track, then everyone pretends that they were heading to the viewpoint, not the forest. No matter how late at night it is.

There goes Fir Henshil, for the third time this

week. Strong legs march up the track, no indecision here: to her, this is a regular ritual. I wonder if it is the same thing that she goes there for, each time. I know how the rumour goes, with her and her man, and his temper. But who knows—maybe she has many reasons to go, not just one. She passes old man Vetch, who ducks his head and scuttles to the side as she passes. He's one to be there for unsavoury reasons, I'll wager. I watch Fir's black hair flicking left to right as she walks, until she is swallowed by the edge of the treeline.

I went into the forest once. It's a place that you only go when you have cause to. It was just the one time I went, though I see some people in and out, every day. We leave things there, you see. It's the place for that. Well. It's the spirit for that. She's not got a name, but I call her the Woman of Parts. She must be made up of all of the things that we leave with her, you see. You leave the things that you don't want in the forest, you make your offering, and you go back to bed, and whatever you wanted to get rid of has been taken by the time the sun rises the

next day.

People leave the clutter of their houses there, especially at spring. They leave diaries that they don't want to be read, and old tools, and unwanted gifts from each other every winter. I don't doubt that murder weapons have been left in there, secrets buried in the dark mud of her domain. She can even take your unpleasant emotions. Melancholy. Jealousy. Anger. Give it out and give it out, she will be there to take it.

Not that anyone has ever seen her, you understand; there are only rumours of that, mostly from kids on dares. They swear she's a hideous vampire. I think that if she is made up of all of our rejected things, all our hidden and unspeakable things, then she's got to be at least partly familiar.

Here comes Fir Henshil, coming back down the track. Where before her stride was purposeful, she is now moving more gently. But I can just about make out the expression on her face, as she passes by the window in the gloaming. She looks peaceful.

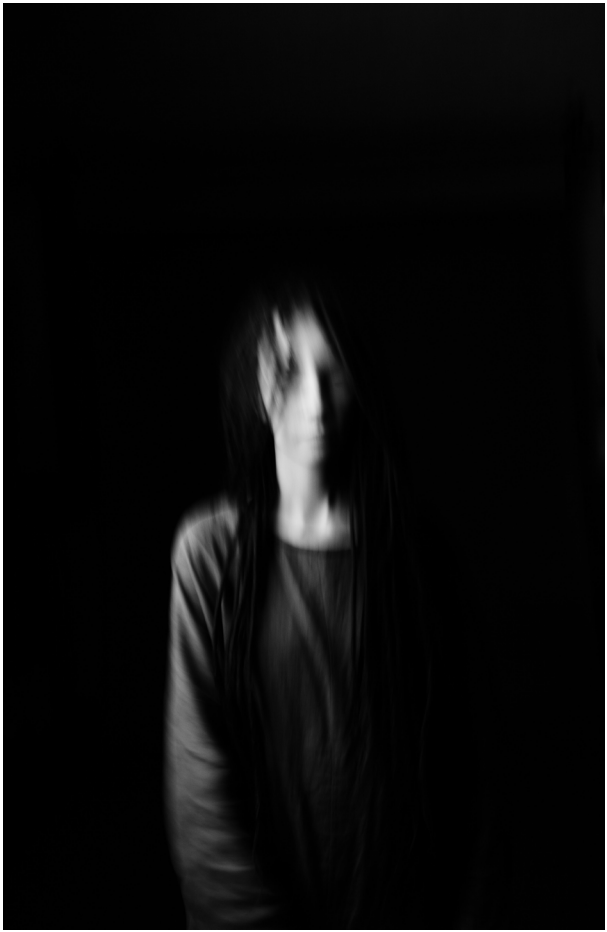
The Woman of Parts takes everything that we

have to give, but there is a price for dealing with her. They say that if you stop offering things to be taken once you have started, you will anger her. And if you scorn her, she will take her revenge. Sometimes she does it slowly, and sometimes all at once, but what she does to her victims is the one thing that they cannot withstand, or possibly the one thing that she has the power to do.

She gives it all back.

I have not been back to the forest since that night three weeks ago. I wonder how long it will take, before she has her revenge and returns to me what I left.

Moving through the too-silent rooms of this house to the doorway of the nursery, I cannot decide which I fear more: that she will give my baby back to me, or that she will keep him with her forever in the forest at the back of the house.



Dedication

Jared Povanda

Bird paints flowers on the walls of what would have been his daughter's bedroom. Red roses with buttercream centers. Blue tulips with silver leaves. Hundreds, a whole field.

He paints a cerulean sky and curlicue bees.

He paints the sun, and his therapist calls it progress.

Night after night, a small brush trembles between fatigued feathers.

When the lightbulb in his lamp dies, it makes the same futile snicking sound his daughter's beak made against the side of her shell. Tonight, he paints in the dark.

Hundreds, a whole field. One petal at a time.

The Dogs

Stephen Orr

"You're going to have to try harder, sir."

The old man pushed down on the unmade bed, the yellowing sheets, the stale rugs, the scent of Bill and semen and the true, sea-smelling salt of life. He pushed down and Mary pulled him up and soon he was standing and she, Mary, his keeper, his maid, moved him across the room, one step at a time, lowered in him into his chair beside the window, the curtain blowing in the warm, doughy breeze, the trees and grass and leaves and horse shit and everything true, real. He said, "Same spot!" (indicating his rib) and held his side and winced and took a deep breath, but then deflated. And this young man, this Davison said, "Are you up to talking about it?"

"Course I'm up to it," he said. "But there's nothing to discuss."

"It's important."

Mary didn't think so. She told Davison he should leave, can't you see, he's not well enough, but the young man with long sideburns was determined. "You should take a stand on this now, or else everyone will be using your words."

"They're welcome to them."

Davison didn't understand the old man at all. How could this be alright? How could he agree to it? How could he not be bothered by what was going on, and by this Smith, most of all? Either way, Mary moved him aside, said, "If you're staying… (is he staying, sir?)… then sit over here… and keep out of the way."

Davison obliged. Stood beside the door to the old man's room on the second floor of the building on Mickle Street, Camden, New Jersey. Mary started stripping the bed, removing the old sheets, piling them on the floor, unfurling clean sheets and allowing them to billow and settle on the pissy mattress, smoothing them, tucking them in, as Davison took a step forward and continued: "I can't understand why you're not angrier."

The old poet with his grey beard and rheumat-

ic eyes smiled and shrugged and looked out of the window. "Look, Mary, it's the vacuum." But Mary didn't care – she just continued making his bed. "Have you seen this latest thing… Davison, Davison, was it?" He held back the curtain to show him and they watched as the vacuum on the cart sucked air (it was said) through a hose leading up to a second floor parlour across the road, where (it was said) it cleaned dirt from rugs. But the old man didn't see the point of vacuums, or anything. "Too much going on for no reason."

"How's that?" Davison said.

He didn't reply.

Mary covered the bed with a rug, picked up the sheets and left the room. As she went, the old man said, "You heard from Bill?"

"No." The full-proof voice, from halfway down the stairs. "He's busy, I suppose. He doesn't want to spend every minute in here with you, sitting and… whatever it is you do."

Davison took the opportunity. "He hasn't attempted to vary the lines…" Presenting the old man with the book, the poem, but he pushed it

away. He didn't care. After a moment of watching the vacuum, he said, "I should be flattered, I suppose."

"You should be angry."

"What for?" Turning to him calmly.

"He's making money from your work. Money. And lots of it. This is the second edition, he's sold thousands." Holding the slim volume in front of the old man's face.

"Why do I need money?" Calling: "Mary… could you ask Lydia? See if he's partial to a visit. He said he would. He promised me…"

Still, the old man was happy enough. There was always something or someone to watch on Mickle Street. A couple of stray bull terriers cornering someone's lost pup; the hum of the vacuum motor; the horse's feet, unsure on the cobblestones; Mary's canary singing in the corner of his room. He indicated and said to Davison, "If you really want to help, let that thing out of its cage… get rid of it."

"You want me to?"

"No… she'd go insane, she is insane, I don't know why I keep her around. But there's no one

else. I give her free board, get my bed made, rugs cleaned, a few sausages of a night."

Davison wasn't sure of the nature of the old man's relationship with Mary. Were they lovers? Friends? Or was it just business? But maybe it didn't matter. All that mattered was Smith's book. "It's been published in Europe, without any mention of your name." Sitting on the bed beside the poet's chair. "See here… *He called on his friend, and explained the meanings that all men know…* You recognise that, surely? *From the memories of the bird that chanted to me…*"

The old man didn't answer, but knew every word of his book of poems, its seven editions, verse and prose and bits of driftwood in words and barnacles growing on the pier he and fifteen year old Bill stood beneath to escape the sun, the rain, the eyes. But he said, "It shouldn't…" Heard the dogs, looked down to see the terriers mauling the pup, called, "Someone stop those dogs!" He couldn't watch, gave up, let the curtain drop and said, "If I could get out of this chair… if it wasn't for my rib." For the first time, looking Davison in the eyes: "*He'd call'd on his*

mate, He pour'd forth the meanings which I of all men know."

This time, Davison waited. If the old man remembered what he'd written, then it was clear: other men or women, poets, lesser poets, shouldn't be able to pretend these were their words. Or at least, if they were set upon such a thing, should give some acknowledgement. "I mean, this is not some sort of tribute, it's theft. It's no different to me going into a shoe shop and walking out with a pair of boots I haven't paid for."

"It's not theft."

"What then?"

"Two men wear the same suit to a party…"

"It's nothing like that."

"It's something like that… and anyway, the gods of leaves and canaries only grant us so many words, and it's not beyond our… means, to share them, is it, Mr Davison?"

Davison wondered why he'd come. He'd thought he was doing the old man a favour, telling him, but no, he seemed lost in his memories and worlds of his own making, his naked

boys and nature walks and ocean swims and all the things he'd heard about (rumours, perhaps, but so much so many times must add up to something).

"I miss Bill… he said he'd come."

"Bill?"

"Bill Duckett. He's a good boy, and he reads to me, Mr Davison. That's important now, with my misty eyes…" Staring out of the window.

"Could I read to you?"

"No." Short, sharp, like that, like only Bill could do it.

"And I would like it known, Mr Davison," the old man continued, "if you or anyone else writes something about me, the old man sitting at his window in Camden, New Jersey, if you're planning on any of that…"

"No, I'm not a reporter, I'm not a lawyer, that's not why I came."

Ignoring all of this: "…if that's what you're intending, tell people I didn't stop writing because I was too old or had this abscess. It was because of the noise, this damn city getting louder with its vacuums and people forever making my

bed and… there's only so much noise a man can tolerate. Tell them it's about the noise, Mr Davison." He opened his curtain again, shouted down, "Will someone please…?" Thought about it, said, "And those turtledoves. Hers, too. I told her I didn't want them in the house, but she doesn't listen to me. If you want to do something useful you can release them, too."

Mr Davison couldn't see what turtledoves had to do with him, anyway. Where were they? "The turtledoves?"

"In the parlour."

"They stop you from writing?"

"Yes … don't worry about this Smith stealing a few lines, he's welcome to the lot, the lot! Worry about those turtledoves, Mr Davison."

"Would you like me to have a word to Mrs Davis?"

"No, then there'd be more dramas. What would come from it? It's just me and that canary now, I'm afraid. No poems can be written in a menagerie of insanity and fresh sheets and old sausages (she rewarms them, days later)."

Davison wasn't finished: 'I could speak to

him… it's not an oversight, not with lines so close to the original. I can tell him we're aware of what he's done and no, you're not angry, but you insist on an apology, or perhaps, a share of the royalties."

"Of which you would take…?"

"Something for my time, perhaps."

The old man studied Davison's shirt and cellulose collar and silk tie. "Nothing raises its head far above the parapet, Mr Davison."

"I've travelled all this way from Kansas, so all I'm suggesting is something to cover my expenses."

By now, the vacuum had finished and a man had dropped the tube from the second floor window and another man had wound it onto a hose, and the old man said, "At least that's stopped."

"And what about after you're gone?"

"I don't care what happens after I'm gone. Why would I?" Staring at him.

"Surely you'd like to think your poems have some sort of… life?"

"Why do I care? A few poems won't make any

difference. And anyway, we all borrow and lend some time, whether we know it or not. What we remember, choose to, or choose to forget, maybe that's not so important. Maybe it's just the songs that keep playing… can you hear them, Mr Davison?"

He listened, but couldn't hear a thing. The old man sang: "*Listen'd to keep, to sing, now translating the notes…* is that how it went, Mr Davison?" Then seriously. "We'd be rather proud, wouldn't we, if we thought our words would last forever and people would… worship us. Who'd be worshipping me? They'll be burying me. Cleaning all of this shit and…" Calling: "Mary, can you see where he is? He said he'd read to me…" And softly: "If he does come, Mr Davison, I might have to ask you to leave, as he's not good around strangers, just me, we get along marvellously, especially considering the difference in our ages. Forty years. But it doesn't matter to him." Returning to the window, the vacuum on the cart setting off along Mickle Street.

Mary returned with a small pug, placed him on a rug beside the old man. "He likes to sit

with you."

"I don't want him here."

"It's company." Retreating from the room.

"I'll throw him out the window."

But she'd learnt to ignore him. She left. The old man managed to kick the dog, but it didn't care. "Get out." But nothing.

Mr Davison thought, maybe if I have wasted a trip… maybe? If I could write something about this … circus? This menagerie?

"Where did you meet Bill?"

"His grandmother, Lydia, I had her down the hall… cheap rent, and she did what Mary does, but better… quieter, faster, without all the bother and the dog" – kicking it – "and the turtledoves and the canary… she was fine, but she had to look after her sister, where was it, Oklahoma, perhaps… but Bill stayed… are you going to put that in your report, Mr Davison?"

"I didn't come here to write a report."

"No, you didn't, did you? Because, may I say, I've done the same."

"The same?"

"There was a poet, I won't name him, I was so

taken with the way he described … and a few lines of story, I took them and used them and no one ever found out and I got away with it because his book, well, no one knew it, no one had read it, it was forgotten, so it was easy, so I took… I used a few of his characters, too, and everyone does it, Mr Davison, so I'm not sure what you're worried about or why you came all the way from Texas."

"Kansas."

"Fine country. Because what I write we all write. We share the same thoughts and so what if… see, Mr Davison, I think, I hope you're coming to understand there's no such thing as stealing. We all steal. We must steal. Only… if you think I wrote poems to make money or become famous, do I look famous to you, Mr Davison?"

"Perhaps."

"I had Mr Wilde here the other day. He's famous. But lost in his own dream. A man sits in his own shit, he's not famous." Waving his hands in telegraphed confusion. "And what you are, I am, always was and will be, and I sing, can you

sing, Mr Davison? *Soothe, soothe, soothe, Close on its wave soothes the wave behind…* I will come and go a thousand times a day, Mr Davison. Not just me but you and Mrs Davis and Bill Duckett. Any man who spends his life trying to work out how any wave is different from the next is a lunatic." Returning to the street. "*And again another behind embracing and lapping, every on close, But my love soothes not me, not me.* Not any of us, Mr Davison and… what did you say his name was?"

"Smith."

Smiling. "Smith, the Everyman. Everyman lapping at the shore… I can't be sure what I've written, can I, but whatever it is, your friend, your Smith, he's welcome to what he can carry home."

Davison knew he was climbing the wrong tree. But the whole trip needn't be a waste. "And Bill sits with you?"

"He does."

"Keeps you company?"

"Yes."

"He's your friend?"

"Yes, my friend. Unless the bag of bones…" Kicking the dog again, but this time it stood, moved across the room. "Do you understand what I mean, Mr Davison?"

"No."

"He's happy to sit here and read to me and never offer an opinion or ask a question or think … what are you thinking now, Mr Davison?"

A cat came into the room, and the old man called, "Mary, it's here… I told you about the cat."

"You don't want it?" Mr Davison asked.

"No, please, if you could…"

Mr Davison picked up the fat cat, threw it out of the room, and the old man asked if he could get the dog while he was at it, so he picked up the growling dog, threw it from the room, closed the door, returned to the bed, sat down and said, "If that's the case… we'll let it stand, shall we?"

"It's important we think the best of people, Mr Davison."

But Davison didn't agree. "Not when they aim to profit from your work. Years of work, wasn't

it? Thirty years? I don't understand how you couldn't be so… protective?"

The old man looked out of the window, seemed to be remembering something. "But what does any of it matter?"

Mr Davison waited.

"If me and Bill are standing on the beach, the hard part of the beach, and there's water on our feet, and it's clear and warm and… what does any of it matter? And there are shells, and I can feel them between my toes, and I stop and pick one up and show Bill and he throws it as far as he can… *oh madly the sea pushes upon the land*… what could anything matter?"

Mr Davison suspected the old man was trying to see the waves from his room on Mickle Street, knew they were too far away, too difficult to reach with an abscess and old lungs. "Tell him, tell Mr Smith… I'm sure he forgot, I'm certain, Mr Davison, he'd read my poem somewhere and forgot, and that's fine, because I'm sure he was only trying to say the same thing I was."

A pneumatic drill started out on the street, coming up through the foundations, the walls,

the floor, their feet, and the old man said, "If I could write another poem, I would. But everything is working against me, us, all of us… the idea that we've got something worth saying."

Louder and louder, right beneath the window, so that there was no canary or turtledove or poetry or any of this. Mr Davison got up to close the window, but the old man stopped him, told him to sit on the bed, listen, and try to make sense of the street noises.

Life Hacks – 12 Fragile Things Not to Use as a Doorstop

Judy Darley

1. A bee-hive.

2. A bear-trap.

3. Your great-grandmother's tea set (cracks mended with golden joinery).

4. The very expensive glass vase given to you as a wedding present.

5. Your ex's very fragile (and, your daughter might add, expensive) ego.

6. The breathless morning when he went to work and you and your daughter packed and left.

7. All the times he wept and apologised and vowed it would never happen again.

8. The first time you saw fear on your daughter's face.

9. The first time you thought of leaving, while holding a bag of frozen mango to your jaw.

10. The first time you saw the look in his eyes harden to flint and alarm bells rang in your heart.

11. The first time you saw the softness of love in his eyes and agreed that you loved him too.

12. All the promises he made that this would last forever.

Haram

Amy L Clark

At least Haram is still there, hawking out-of-date boxed mac n' cheese and cleaning fluid that looks like sports drinks. He brings his daughter to work some days, airing her out in front of the store, strapped into her stroller with the sunshade down just outside the door, where he can keep an eye on her while still serving the occasional customer.

We call him "Haram" because that's mostly what he sells –cigarettes and lotto tickets, lukewarm beer and pork rinds. He's been talking about having to pack up and leave soon, but the landlord still hasn't gotten around to raising the rent. It's coming; the place next door charges by the hour for sensory deprivation tanks in which rich folks with too much in their lives pay for a couple cubic feet where they don't have to hear or see anything they don't feel like acknowledging. My friend Heather says they

never change the water between customers. My friend Heather says she's going to pull the security bars off her windows and sell for half a million dollars.

No one turns tricks in the community garden anymore.

When I go pick up some half and half, I look for Haram's baby. She's not here today, but I think of her, getting taller in whatever triple-decker her father rents or owns. I wonder if she'll play in the park; I wonder if her father will always bring home the almost-rotten mangoes when they're slightly too soft to sell. Those are the best mangoes.

Whale Fall

Douglas Jern

The bottom of the sea is cold and dark. It is a place that will never know sunlight, a land of night buried under billions of tons of water. If a human were to come here—were a human able to come here without drowning or being crushed by the unfathomable pressure, that is—she would see nothing but absolute darkness and would soon succumb to the biting cold. It is no place for us. Yet, even here in the abyssal depths, there is life. Soon, at this location at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, two thousand miles from dry land, there will be more.

***

The sperm whale thrashed one last time, sending up a red spout from its tortured blowhole, and died. The last thing it heard was the cheering of the whalers in their little boats as they celebrat-

ed their success. They towed the carcass back to the Daphne, a whaling ship from Nantucket, to butcher it. The try-pots were already heating up, hungry for fresh blubber.

But all did not go according to plan; shortly after the whale perished, mighty thunderheads amassed on the horizon, and before long, a storm was raging. The Daphne, eighty feet long and weighing over two hundred tons, was tossed about like a ball of yarn in the paws of a playful kitten, shedding men and rigging every which way. One by one the masts snapped in half, and the ship began to take in water. The ropes that held the dead whale were severed, and the whale dropped into the churning waters. The dead whale sank, leaving the chaos of the storm behind, into the silence of the sea.

***

When a whale dies, its corpse becomes food for a myriad of scavengers. In warmer, shallower waters, a whale carcass will not last long, often being completely picked clean before it can sink

to the bottom. But in certain circumstances, such as in deep waters during a violent storm for instance, the carcass of a whale might sink too deep for the usual shallow-dwelling scavengers to get at it. As the whale sinks deeper and deeper, the rising pressure and dropping temperature preserve it, forestalling decomposition. The carcass thus retains its form even as it reaches the pitch-black depths of the bathypelagic, over three thousand feet below the surface.

***

The sleeper shark glided through the water, inches above the craggy shelf she would have called home if she had the words. The shark had not eaten in days, and her life was fading.

The arrival of the huge body descending from above caused the shark to stir. She recognized the patterns in the water as the thing approached. The intruder was a sperm whale, that odious leviathan who would come down to gorge itself on the giant squid that lurked

down here, to the sleeper shark's chagrin. For she too preyed on the tentacled devils and did not welcome the competition. Now one of the greedy beasts had made its way to this shelf, where pickings were already slim. The sleeper shark would have cursed the sperm whale, had she been familiar with the concept of curses.

Then she noticed something else. The whale, which was descending at a slow and steady rate, was bleeding. The blood tickled the shark's senses, and her stomach cried out in hunger. If the whale was dead, its body would feed the sleeper shark for weeks, maybe even months. But, even as her stomach tormented her, the shark hesitated to approach, heeding an instinct honed by a long life in the deep. Sperm whales were crafty, and even the intoxicating scent of blood in the water could be a ruse. That was not all; dead or not, the whale kept descending, and its path would take it beyond the edge of the shelf where the sleeper shark dwelled. Before long, it would sink beneath the shelf, into the unknown depths below. The shark had never ventured deeper than the shelf and was loath to

leave it behind, despite the recent food shortage.

But hunger soon trumped caution, and the sleeper shark swam out beyond the edge, her senses registering the lack of solid ground underneath. There was nothing but water as far down as the shark could perceive. Nevertheless, spurred on by hunger, the shark descended in pursuit of the falling feast.

***

When the whale carcass strikes the seafloor, it stirs up a massive cloud of sand and debris which takes hours to settle again. Once it does, however, the deep-sea looters rear their heads, drawn by the presence of nutritious meat, much like our adventurous sleeper shark. All manner of bottom-dwelling scavengers swarm the carcass and devour the whale's soft tissue bite by bite. Though the mouths to feed are legion, a sperm whale is a huge creature, and it can take years, even decades, until all its flesh has been consumed.

***

A porcelain crab was resting halfway up the Great Rib. He had begun his long journey three days ago, and progress was slow. Not that there was any need to hurry, for there was plenty of food around. A colony of boneworms had rooted themselves in the Rib and were feverishly digesting the lipids contained therein, breaking them down into nutrients that engulfed the bones like a fine, nourishing mist. Whenever he got hungry, the little crab had only to take a sip and filter the nutrition from the seawater.

Thus, the crab's journey continued; climb, stop, eat, and climb again. After another two days, he finally reached the summit of the Great Rib, the tallest point for miles around. As far as the crab was concerned, the Rib had always been there, another feature of the benthic landscape. That this enormous mountain had once been part of a single living organism, one that had travelled back and forth between the midnight depths and the sun-warmed waters of the surface, was beyond the crab's comprehension. He scurried

around a cluster of clams and stopped to feed again.

***

After all the whale's flesh is gone and larger scavengers have set off for richer pastures, various bacteria and colonizers—like the enigmatic boneworms—take up residence on the naked bones, breaking down the lipids within for sustenance. The bacteria are prolific, and quickly multiply to form thick films that cover the bones and surrounding seafloor. These bacterial mats are a veritable smorgasbord for various bottom-dwellers, and the bones are soon dotted with mussels, clams, and limpets.

Here they remain, the smallest creatures in the world feeding on what was once one of the biggest, until they have syphoned every trace of nutrition from the bones of the dead giant.

***

And time marches ever forward…

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For the first time ever, there was light. A white beam sliced through the darkness, illuminating the whale fall, which by now was all but deserted. The whale had been big even for its species, and the ample flesh and fat-rich bones had sustained a teeming colony of bottom feeders for more than a century.

But all things come to an end, and now there were only a few scattered groups of limpets and bacteria clinging to the last wells of nutrition left in the whale bones. The sleeper shark, who had once dared the journey into the unknown to find a paradise of blubber and blood, had long since departed in search of new prey, and no one knows what became of her. The porcelain crab, having completed his valiant climb up the third rib of the whale skeleton, was soon snapped up and devoured by a passing hagfish.

The bright light swept across the whale fall as the bathyscaphe approached. The two explorers inside the prototype submersible wondered at the scene the light revealed. Deciding that a

sample of the whale skeleton may have scientific value, and that collecting it would serve as a suitable test of the bathyscaphe's capabilities, the crew prepared to salvage a vertebra for study. They attached a cable to the bone, and up it went.

***

The squat lobster, the last of its kind residing in the whale fall and on the verge of starvation, felt movement. It was rising. There was a sense of lightness as the water pressure decreased. There was light as well. Not the harsh, sudden light that had torn through the dark like a claw and blinded the few lifeforms at the whale fall who had eyes with which to perceive it. No, this was a soft, soothing light that seemed to come from everywhere at once. It was warm.

Had the lobster had a concept of heaven, it may well have believed that that was where it was headed. It held on to the bone with the last of its strength, clinging to life the way all living things do. The sea grew brighter and brighter,

warmer and warmer, until finally there came a great splash and there was sound and light beyond anything the lobster had ever experienced.

There, having left the sea where it had lived its whole life, moments before it died, the lobster saw the sun.

The Dollhouse

Keith Hoerner

The Dollhouse is custom-made to look like my house, our house. My new wife's idea—for Sarah. Same front elevation. Duplicate floor plan. But my stepdaughter's attempt to match our furniture placement is off. I nudge the miniature hutch to its true location. She frowns, pushes my hand away, and makes me move to the front yard. I look at her through the windows. She appears as if a Goliath child, my sling long empty. I lean low and peer inside the front door.

"Knock, knock," I say.

She never answers.

Until My Dying Day

Lesley Bungay

She wanders on the clifftop, lingering near the crumbling schoolhouse. Deserted now for fear of the advancing ocean. Their place. Safe. Far from prying eyes and prejudice.

She senses movement, turns to speak his name. But no answer returns, no figure emerges. Only ethereal shadows of children play, their muffled tones echo amongst the ruins. A muted bell tolls. Their voices fall silent. Memories haunt. A life so different then. Simple. Innocent. A life before he came.

She pictures his hand rise from the shore, hears his promise resound in the air – I will return for you.

She approaches the cliff edge. The winter wind, so often relentless and raw, is now restrained. Standing alone in the bleakness, at one with the withering gorse. With no breeze to help resist the gathering frost, they cling together and bow,

like glistening angels, in reverence towards the hushed sea.

The cold pierces her skin and sears her cracked lips. The vowed words freeze on her breath – I will wait for you…

Her eyes scan the horizon, glimpsing the mainland across the bay. Charcoal peaks rise above the mist, silhouetted against the grey. No movement on the calm water. No boat returns him to her. The sea swells steadily onward, like a pool of spilled ink, it floods the shore in its ebony flow.

She seeks a sign in the fading light, longing for his familiar frame amongst the jagged edges of rocks below, blurring before her weary eyes as daylight withdraws its relief once more. The sea and sky weave together in a seamless, silvery haze that draws a veil across the scene.

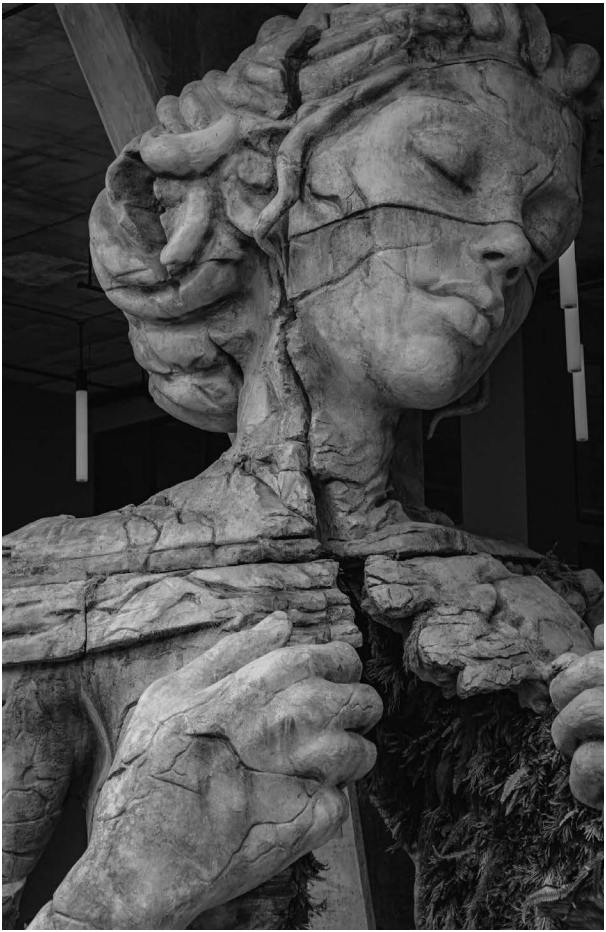
Still she remains, listening for the splash of an oar drawing through the water, for his voice repeating her name. But only the lapping waves murmur their apology to the silence. Her hope fades. The moon fails her, hiding behind lifeless clouds as the vision vanishes and blackness

claims her world.

The cold penetrates her soul, mocking the woollen shawl grasped tight to her chest as the deepening draw of the ebbing current rouses her. The tide has turned.

His words rise in her mind with the dawning light – Only death will keep me from you.

A golden orb breaks the surface of the sea, splitting the earth and sky apart. A shimmer of morning light touches the jagged rocks, strives to awaken her hollow eyes, to warm her marble cheek, but she no longer feels the cold.



Goodbye to Raine

Harlow Raven

I am laughing so hard. Aidan thinks he knows where I am but I'm hiding. I'm not in that tin, Aidan, you have to find me. I see my old friends, Gilly and Travis, arriving together in a car. They are so tiny, like little mice. Once Gilly ran away from Travis, she came to my house, she said there was a dent in the wall. I've had these dreams before where I know I am dreaming but I'm also awake and I have so much power. If I wanted, I could uncurl my fingers and touch them, pick them up, kiss them, drop them on their heads. In this dream, I am not the frightened one.

***

Aidan strips off his mac, his shoes and his socks quickly and dumps them onto the wet grass.

He is wearing a wetsuit and beside him is a body board and beside the body board is a

Quality Street tin. We have come before dawn when the bay is deserted, so we will not be challenged for polluting the ocean. The plan had been to scatter Raine's ashes over the sea as the sun rose above the horizon. But in the gloomy hour before sunrise, there is a heavy grey mist and the world between sea and sky is opaque and dark.

Aidan picks up the tin. Quality Street were Raine's favourites, but I feel sure she would not want her ashes associated with them. In the last year of her life, the lithium caused her to gain stones in weight, so that even as her moods flattened, her despair of herself increased.

Aidan is impatient. He wants to get this over and grabs the body board, but I plead with him.

"Wait a bit longer for Franny, please."

"Don't make excuses for her, Gilly - you know she'll only be here if she wants to be." He holds the flat of his hand towards my face to signal the matter is closed, but nonetheless he stands with us to wait a little longer.

In the grey mist, everything is soaked. The gorse bushes are weighed down with thick

drops of dew and the tops of the wet ferns are bent over, as if a tidal wave had swept over the bay in the night and then retreated. Although it is June, we shiver a little in the pre-dawn damp.

There are four of us on the wet springy grass above the cove. Firstly, there is Raine's husband, Aidan, in the wetsuit. Then there is my old boyfriend, Travis, who is also Aidan's closest friend. Travis and I have not spoken for fifteen years but it made sense for us to travel overnight to Cornwall together and we have arrived, slightly awkward over the circumstances of our parting, but amicable enough. Then there is Raine's younger brother, Paulie, who is jovial and stubbly and smells strongly of whisky. Finally, there is me.

Aidan is standing stock still, but I can feel his impatience. In his wetsuit, he is lean and strong, tufts of black hair escaping at the wrists and on his pale toes. Raine always felt he was too good-looking for her. Once he said to her "Please for my sake, don't get any fatter."

Raine found this hidden cove as a child while wandering the cliffs by herself and used it as her

refuge. I heard her story many times. When she was eight, her father landed a job as a caretaker in a nearby holiday park, with a four-berth caravan thrown in as accommodation. She, her parents and Paulie moved over from Ireland and lived in the tiny caravan on the park for years. Her father, quiet and taciturn by day, was a crazy drunk by night. With the caravan door locked and the key in his pocket, he fawned over them and mauled them and battered them in equal measure. Once she said he trapped her on his knee and tried to kiss her, so she weed all over his legs.

***

Gilly, there are raindrops on your hair. I may have sprayed them on you, I am not sure of these things. You slept on the sofa in our kitchen. You said there was a dent in your wall. You had a little dog. Where is he now? We had a little dog and Dad threw him out of the window. Paulie, do you remember? I put some of the broken glass in his shoes, but he found it. I am dreaming that I

can put my hands through the clouds now. I can make rays of light shoot from my fingers onto the sea just like Jesus.

***

I didn't know Raine had died until four days later, when Aidan's notification of her funeral popped up on my computer. I remember I went into my meeting as planned. She was my closest friend but in her final year of life, I didn't visit her. My excuse was the two hundred miles between us, but really I was afraid of her recriminations and of her strangeness, a tiny voice on the phone so dry and crackly: "I understand now that I am the devil."

We shared a tormented Catholic childhood and I was afraid this could all be catching. And then there was stagnant water between us, clotted dead stuff.

Raine: "You know that black jumper you thought you'd left at my house and I said I couldn't find it?"

Me: "Vaguely – you mean in London years ago?"

Raine: "I did find it. I used it to line the cat's basket. All the times you came round after that, it was there in the basket in front of you and you never noticed."

Me: "What? But why?"

Raine: "I felt abandoned."

Me: "What? Why? I never meant you to feel like that."

Raine: "Well you did."

Gradually the mist is brightening. We look across the sea into a world that is hazy still but shimmering now with promise.

"The sun is coming up now." Aidan sounds grim. "I'm not waiting any longer."

"Just a couple more minutes?" I ask. But he is implacable with righteousness. "Up to her to get here." He mutters, as if his daughter is not just eighteen, as if nothing matters less to him than his Franny's presence when he scatters her mother's ashes into the sea.

I first met Raine in 1990 at Wandsworth

Community Centre for a workshop on women and anger. We had to put an angry adjective to our name starting with the same letter. I was 'Grumbling Gilly' because I couldn't think of anything better. She was 'Raging Raine' but she was laughing when she said it. Her long black hair flicked up on her shoulders and was tied up in a chiffon scarf. She wore a long velvet skirt, torn lace shirt and an embroidered jacket with multi-coloured braiding and twinkling buttons, the colour of rubies. With her soft round shape, my first impression was of a juicy Christmas pudding, exotic, spicy, full of promise. We were asked by the workshop leader to set our limits in terms of what we were prepared to discuss. I remember her resolute face.

"I am not prepared to discuss leaving my husband." She said.

Below the cliff, there is a rocky scramble down to the beach. Aidan climbs down onto the rocks in his bare feet and clambers across them to the sand left by the retreating tide. But just as he is walking towards the water, Franny comes running out of the misty valley towards

us, yellow hair matted together, the ends plaited with little piece of cloth. Broad lovely face, pale beneath her sunburnt skin. She is smiling. "I'm here, I made it" She smells of wood smoke and musty unwashed body, faded hareem pants, woven boots, her green jacket laden with tassels. Aidan does not turn around but keeps on pushing towards the sea.

I remember eighteen years back and Aidan ringing me in the early hours of the morning. "Gilly, Raine is in a bad way, can you come?" Their miracle baby, after five years of IVF, was leaking out in a pool of blood. That winter there had been a long spell of snow. I remember parking beneath a raft of stars in the hospital car park, slipping forwards on the ice, grit burning into the palms of my hands, grey slush on my coat and knees of my jeans. I remember searching up and down the dark deserted corridors of the hospital to find the ward, Raine stiff and still in a side room with a drip in her arm, Aidan sitting silently apart. But there was a miracle at the end and Franny was born five months later. From the outset she was strong-

willed and prone to tantrums. Raine worried about her constantly and towards the end, she told me that it was a sin for her to have had a child, as she wasn't a fit mother, so God was punishing them both.

***

Gilly said it was my fault that Franny stopped eating because when she was little, I made her a tiny embroidered pouch for a second biscuit so she wouldn't have to feel the pain of finishing a biscuit and not having another. Gilly said that was the maddest thing, that she needed to be normal around food – well, she didn't say it out loud, but I heard her anyway.

***

Now that Franny is with us, we are galvanised. We scramble after Aidan over the rocks until we reach the boggy sand. We run across the beach, water seeping into the crevasses of our footprints. We jump the wide rivulets left by the

retreating tide. I slip on a wet rock so my whole foot and the hem of my trouser leg are soaked. There is a film of droplets on my coat, my hair is flattened by the damp air.

At the shoreline, we watch Aidan pulling himself away from us through the water. Franny seems joyous and possibly high. 'I've got magic for us all.' She takes from her cloth bag a small box and a stamp. She is going to anoint us with the powder. I rear away, thinking surely these are not part of her mother's ashes. But no, she tells us they are the ashes from her fire the previous night, they are imbued with mystical healing properties. She stamps all our foreheads with the ash. For months now, she has lived a nomad life with a group of travellers. She says she has never felt such closeness, they are her brothers and sisters, they are bound together in harmony with the earth, the sky, all living things. But where are they, I am thinking, those brothers and sisters, why are they not here with you now?

We call to Aidan that Franny is here, but he makes out he does not hear us. He is furious

with her for deserting him to go off with the travellers but more than that, he is bewildered by her and fearful for her future.

As the sea reaches his waist, the gentle swell lifts him up. He stretches out onto the body board, the ashes safe beneath him, and begins to paddle towards the misty edge of the world.

Franny is chattering, she is far too animated. "What I don't understand is how she knew how to hang herself – I mean she was the least practical person in the world – how did she know how to make the knot even?"

I have wondered the same thing.

I think of Aidan leaving Raine in the morning to go for a run and coming back to find her hanging from a beam in their basement kitchen. How could she have done that to him, how could she, the most besotted of mothers, have done that to Franny?

I hold Franny to me. Under her clothes, I can feel how emaciated her body is. In the distance, Aidan has stopped paddling and is sitting astride the body board. He opens the biscuit tin.

Me: "Does anyone want to say anything?"

Franny: "I do – Mum, you are the most irritating woman I have ever known."

Paulie and I wince, but she is defiant. "You know it's true." She does not talk as if her mother is dead. I say something to Raine, but silently. I thank her for staying up all night with me when I left Travis, for taking time off work to be with me through all the panic attacks that followed our brief ferocious relationship. And a thousand other times. Many thousand times.

Raine was our zany friend. Her exploits were a source of amusement to us all. Police barriers were nothing to her, she just moved them out of the way. She often had an urge to shoplift.

Once she told me she found a bag of silk underwear in Harrods on the floor, left by a member of staff, and she picked it up to head for the exit. She said it was the most exciting moment of her life, the nearest she ever came to orgasm. Her biggest sexual fantasy, she said, was that a man, a stranger, would invite her into his fabulous kitchen and feed her with home cooked food. She joined Alcoholics Anonymous and religiously attended weekly meetings, and yet she

hardly ever drank.

Now I can't remember why I found any of this funny.

Now I am not sure why I couldn't see how this thing was creeping up on her, not funny but insidious, weird, scary.

Three or four years before she died, she phoned me, very light and breezy. We lived far apart by then and we hadn't spoken for months. She told me she had come through a very strange turn, which started with her and Aidan deciding to separate and then her worrying about how they would manage financially. She decided the house would have to be sold and she would need to live on the streets and Franny would have to become a prostitute. She had begun secretly selling off clothes and possessions until she could fit her world into two big plastic bags for the streets. Somewhere along the line, people started to take notice and then the community psychiatric team came round. They had given her wonderful drugs, she said, and she was fine now. They had assured her it was probably a one-off episode resulting from the stress

of the marriage break-up. Three months later, she tried to throw herself off Tower Bridge, but a passer-by grabbed her.

Way out at sea now, Aidan scatters her ashes the wrong way into the breeze and we see some of the grey dust blow back into him. We see him brushing his face wildly and shaking his head to get it out of his hair, the horror and the comedy of it. Franny starts to laugh loudly. "Trust her to keep coming back." She says. Aidan turns and throws the ashes into the wind this time. We can just see a little cloud hover above the water and then it is gone.

Travis grabs me in a big hug, and we hold each other a long time, during which all is said and forgiven without words, the broken pots, the mean stuff, the time he pushed me into the wall so hard it left a huge dent.

Paulie is crying, so he moves away, ashamed. He is not faring well.

***

I see you, Paulie, by the shower block. You must have got down the caravan steps all on your own without anyone seeing. You are too little to be out on your own. Why have you got his tie and why are you dipping it in the drain? Don't suck it. That's disgusting. Why do you always do that? You might die, Mum says, but you don't die – or did you die? I don't remember things so well now.

***

Franny stares at me, brown eyes with large black pupils.

Franny: "We will never be free of her, you know."

Me: "What do you mean?"

Franny: "Well, she's talking to us now."

Me: "Really talking or is that just a metaphor?"

Franny: "Really talking, you can hear her if you listen – she's not making any more sense now than she ever did though."

Me: "I can't hear her."

Franny: "She's told me we are all dead already and up there with her. This is just a flashback."

Me: "I haven't finished living yet and nor have you."

I try to sound casual, jokey, but I am afraid for her, she sounds too much like Raine.

Franny: "Listen and you'll hear her."

I'm thinking I'm not sure I want to hear her.

***

I never had an answer for you, Franny. When you got as thin as a communion wafer, I could see the sky through your skin and you curled round me on the bed and asked me why I decided to live when I was your age and I talked about Paulie's tie and Gilly's springy hair and the way Aidan sings 'She Moves Through The Fair' when he is very drunk and the boom of the waves hitting Pentire Point but I didn't have an answer really. I don't think I will have an answer for you. Try someone else.

***

Aidan has turned the bodyboard around and

is now pouring the ashes onto the undulating waters away from the breeze and suddenly, the sun pierces the mist and there are pools of light on the grey sea. For a while we watch in silence.

Franny: "I'm going into hospital on Monday."

Me: "What for?"

She shrugs.

Franny: "The doctor's been saying I should for a while. It's not that wanky place I was in before, this seems nicer."

Me: "What made you decide to do it now?"

Franny: "I just decided I don't want to die like her – if I can help it, that is."

When Aidan is back, we sit for a long time together on the rocks. The sun has cleared the mist away now and the sky is blue. I have brought towels, croissants and coffee. Paulie passes round a flask of whisky and we all take a few swigs. At first, Aidan won't look at Franny but after a while, he holds out his hand to her and she takes it. People start arriving with beach bags and beach chairs, wending their way down towards us, so we pack up and head back to the car park.

***

I am in Gilly's dream. She is so happy to see me. My hair is long and flicks up on my shoulders, like it did on the best days. We are sitting by a camp fire in the woods above the bay as the sun is setting. Franny is there with her funny friends and she is making lapsang souchong tea for everyone, which smells like smoky silage. Gilly holds my arm tightly - she says she is never going to let me go again. She is trying to tell me something else but there is loud roar from somewhere and I can't hear her. It doesn't matter. We are so happy just sitting there together on a log in the sunshine, waiting for our tea. But then the thing comes again like a black wave, like poison, it seeps into me and pools inside until there is nothing else. I am crying and crying and there is no way to stop, there is no end to this. Gilly is looking scared. You need to let go of my arm, I say. She hears me. She holds on for a little longer, then she lets go and I'm gone.

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