



Figwort Literary Journal

Volume 2

DECEMBER 2022

J. Archer Avary

V.J. Hamilton

Stephen Myer

Hery Sudiono

James Callan

Max Klement

Daniel William Lawrence

bedfordtowers

Karen Lethlean

Michael Haller

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Editor's Note

Hazel Lockey

In Robert Calasso's *The Art of the Publisher*, the editor's most taxing endeavour is to select and organise each work of art in such a way as to create a 'long, serpentine progression of pages'. Though *Figwort Literary Journal* does not deal in the book trade, I find that the magic of Calasso's ideas resonates all the same within the short story, the painting, the photograph.

Each of the ten artists within this volume are at once particular and distinct voices, but also intertextual and interwoven ones. They each bear within them, I think, a sense of 'figwort'. For V.J. Hamilton, this takes on the loud and audacious form of block letters; for Daniel William Lawrence, it is the quiet dragon that flits, almost unnoticed, through American airspace. Hery Sudiono's whirlwind of abstraction contains just as much 'figwort' as it does the still yet flowing realism of bedfordtowers' 'Anxiety Walk', or Michael Haller's tongue-in-cheek fairy tale gone wrong.

You are free to dip in and out of Volume 2 as you wish, though I do have one request, and that is to take a moment to consider what 'figwort' is to you.

December 2022

Code Teal

J. Archer Avary

Spectators filtered out of the Blaart Intercontinental Arena, singing fight songs and high-fiving each other. Pundits billed it ‘the match of the century’ and it was a spectacle for the ages, decided in double overtime, at the final whistle. An energetic crowd surged down the steps from the main seating bowl, euphoric from the heart-stopping climax.

Malcom held his position on the concourse, earpiece in and monitoring radio transmissions. For a steward he struck a surprisingly zen-like figure in hi-vis tabard and steel-toe safety boots, like a pebble of calm in a whooshing stream. Exiting spectators were well-lubricated from the arena’s two-for-one sangria promotion, eager to continue the party in the anything-goes nightclubs of the Wiretapping District.

If the pushing and shoving escalated into violence, Malcom was ready to defend himself. He carried a collapsible truncheon on his utility belt, pepper spray canisters, and enough plastic handcuffs to send a busload of unruly hooligans to the pokey. A gentle person who preferred discourse to force, Malcom kept to the sidelines of a melee. He preferred to avoid violent confrontations, but they were sometimes part of life as a steward.

Crowds thinned out on the concourse but bottlenecked at the exit gate. Malcom heard first a collective gasp, then the sound. It cut through the din, like the wet slap of a large slime-coated carp onto a flat hard surface. There was another gasp, then chaos.

Malcom’s earpiece buzzed to life.

‘Chili Dog to Tater Tots, over.’

It was Head of Arena Security Chester ‘Chili Dog’ Popenlocke. An actual bigwig in the Blaart Corporation. His radio transmissions were punctuated with blasts of static.

‘Anybody read me?’

Popenlocke was notorious for his ludicrous management style. He implemented senseless protocols and treated his underlings like disposable undergarments, but he had another side. He was a failed improv comic.

Popenlocke insisted on adopting silly code names for security operations. In doing so he created a universe of characters that existed primarily for his own amusement. Naturally, he placed himself at the top of the pyramid, presiding over mid-level managers with asinine code names. Tater Tots was his generic term for his underlings.

‘Can anybody god damn hear me?’ Popenlocke’s perpetual frustration was reaching new heights amid the confusion.

‘Jesus suffering fuck,’ he cried, through squeals of wailing feedback. ‘Does this thing even work?’

Popenlocke wasted two minutes bumbling through a list of housekeeping items before segueing abruptly to the urgent matter of the ongoing critical incident. One of his doofus lackeys handed him a piece of paper to read from.

‘This is a code teal,’ said Chili Dog. ‘South concourse, the exit gate in sector alpha papa zulu. Code teal, this is not a drill. All units respond, over.’

Malcom flipped down his face shield and mobilised.

Stewards were supposed to know codes of every shape and colour. The licensing exam required a candidate name ten radio codes to earn credit, some of which, for brevity, are listed below:

Code red: cardiac or medical incidents, blood involved

Code staghorn: gang activity, knife involved

Code lavender: spectator encroachment on field of play

Code blue: paedophile on the grounds, flasher, streaker

Code orange: general heightened awareness, guidance to follow

Code brown: incident related to faeces, human or animal

Code rainbow: spontaneous flash mob, drag queens on premises

Code strawberry: active shooter on premises, shots fired

Code wheelbarrow: lewd activity or orgy in carpark or toilets

Code amber: bachelorette party, scavenger hunt activity

After the exam, lesser-used codes like indigo, magenta, and burnt sienna sluiced through the leaky floorboards of his short-term memory. Did code teal have something to do with a potential suicide jumper, or did it mean someone's left buttock had become stuck in a folding seat and required WD-40 for extraction?

Malcom bobbed and weaved through sputtering clusters of panic-stricken spectators until he reached the scene of whatever a code teal was. People were covered in blood and what looked like pulpy chunks of tissue, most of them in shock, tears streaming down faces. It was worse than he expected.

Several other stewards were already on scene. One wielded a clipboard. His bushy eyebrows gave off a pungent authority-figure vibe. Malcom had seen him around, but didn't know him by name. He wore an alternate colour hi-vis tabard, a status symbol of mid-level management.

'You must be in charge?'

'Affirmative. Popenlocke designated me Acting Incident Commander.'

He took a moment to hitch up his pants. Malcom guessed haemorrhoids.

'Ladybird, his prizewinning bison fiche, choked on a hairball at the groomer's,' he said, squirming to relieve his itchy bum. 'Popenlocke ran outta here like a man with a house on fire, which means all Tater Tots are under my command. I'm Mortimer Crenshaw, code name Chopped Onions.'

'What is the nature of this incident, then, Acting Incident Commander?'

'We have a code teal on our hands.'

'I heard that on the radio call, sir, it's just that I don't remember what a code teal is.'

'See that over there?' Crenshaw pointed a group of stewards on the perimeter of the disaster scene. 'How about you lift that sheet and find out.'

'I don't want to see a dead body!'

'Are you disobeying a direct order from your Acting Incident Commander?'

Malcom had already survived one disciplinary action for abandoning his post during a match to flirt with a spectator. He was allowed to keep his job, with advice that there would be no more second chances.

Malcom needed this job. The pay was shite but the location was great, two minutes from his flat in the Wiretapping District, with flexible hours. He didn't love the job, but it was easy, mostly standing around and pretending to pay attention.

'No sir, I'm just advising you that I will throw up if I see a dead body.'

'The Blaart Corporation cares about its employees and aims to make suitable accommodations when possible to help them express their full potential within their role in the organisation,' said Crenshaw, in a gooey Velveeta baritone.

What a set of pipes! Did the bushy-eyed bastard do voice over work on the side?

Crenshaw licked his lips, like a Komodo dragon tasting the air around him. 'I have a brilliant idea: get me the megaphone!'

As if on cue, a megaphone was produced by one in a swarm of security guards, arriving now at the scene by the dozen. The bottleneck had apparently been cleared. The restless spectators were free to disperse into the night.

'You, over there,' Crenshaw bellowed at a cleaner. He was mopping up what looked like blood in the vicinity of the sheet. 'It is very important you give this man your bucket. It is official security business, a code teal in fact.'

The cleaner surrendered his mop and bucket, but remained unimpressed. Crenshaw turned to Malcom and softened his voice.

'Listen, as Acting Incident Commander, I am designating you as a secondary responding officer, and as such, will need your signature for whatever paperwork might arise. Chili Dog Popenlocke is a very detail-oriented man and will accept nothing less than two reams for a code teal report, which you have identified by now as...'

'Suicide jumper.'

'Spot-on, well done,' said Crenshaw. He looked genuinely pleased. 'The code teal incident manual says the Acting Incident Commander plus a secondary responding officer, that's you, must visually inspect the impact zone.'

Malcom held his breath.

'Look, all you have to do is lift the sheet, take a mental note of what you see, then write it up. Your statement will be added to the official draft report, so make sure to record in detail to a granular level, understand. Popenlocke gets his rocks off on granular details, okay?'

'Yeah, sure, I'll do it, just get me someone to hold the bucket,' said Malcom. 'I'm not kidding, I'm probably gonna puke.'

He approached the sheet with dignity and professional determination. If it was his niece or nephew who decided to jump from the upper concourse, he would appreciate the same human decency. In an indirect way, doing his part to speed along the paperwork was helping bring closure to a grieving family, and he took solace in that fact.

Malcom knelt onto the sticky floor and reverently lifted the sheet.

'Jesus Christ,' he whispered.

Malcom's expectations were completely upended. The concourse erupted in laughter. Other stewards in hi-vis tabards pointed and laughed, some took pictures and videos on their phones to post on social media. He noticed, among those laughing at his expense, Chester 'Chili Dog' Popenlocke, slapping his knee with glee at his humiliation.

‘What the fuck is this?’ he said, choking back tears. ‘A fucking watermelon? You staged this elaborate fucking exercise for a god damn watermelon?’

Popenlocke stepped forward, graciously commanding the floor. ‘Exercise is a great word for what’s happening here, and your participation in tonight’s simulation will help deliver a teachable moment for future stewards in their training.’

‘Hold up, what do you mean simulation?’ Malcom was confused, shaking his head. ‘You said “this is not a drill” like twenty times when you announced that fake code teal.’

‘It wasn’t a drill, it was a simulation,’ Popenlocke said, placing a hand on Malcom’s shoulder. ‘Two separate categories of encounter, according to the Blaart Organisation’s official operations handbook. It’s all being documented for a next-generation training video.’

‘I suppose you made up the grooming incident with your bison fiche?’

‘That was all Crenshaw,’ smiled Popenlocke. ‘I don’t even own a fucking dog!’

The concourse erupted again with cheers and laughter.

‘Totally improvisational,’ added Crenshaw, taking a mock bow. ‘That bit about the bison fiche wasn’t even in the script.’

Malcom surveyed the concourse. A lot of people were still milling around. Stewards cheerily mingled with actors hired to smear themselves with fake blood to add an air of urgency to the exercise. People held wine glasses and plates of hors d’oeuvres, having a fine time at his expense.

Popenlocke turned to Malcom. The concourse quieted.

‘I suppose you really want to know what code teal means?’ he asked, playing to the wine and cheese crowd. ‘Crenshaw, please tell him.’

Malcom bit his lip, hard enough to taste blood.

Bystanders filled the pregnant pause with simulated drum roll, pounding on anything percussive to contribute to the aural manifestation of rising tension.

‘Code teal means mop the god damn floor, you sorry son of a bitch!’

Laughter again, then a slow silent fade to black.

Malcom must’ve collapsed. He was groggy when he came to, looking up at the world from a pinhole on the floor.

Popenlocke and Crenshaw were gallantly reviving him with slaps to the cheek.

‘Wake up, boy,’ smiled Crenshaw. ‘The south concourse isn’t going to mop itself.’

‘Better hustle,’ hissed Popenlocke. ‘I hear watermelon juice is a real bitch to mop up once it’s dried.’

Gut Feeling

V.J. Hamilton

My first job application since the lockdown ended and I am all nerves since the benefits cut off months ago and I am not looking my best because no proper haircut. My side tooth is freshly broken and my face contorts as my tongue keeps exploring the gap. I try not to do this, but it's practically a reflex.

I show up at three o'clock as directed by the restaurant email. The maître d'hôtel gives me an application and points to a booth, the table bare except for a rack of jam pots. He is completely bald, pink and rubbery, with a wrinkle that goes all the way around his neck. He looks like a walking penis. I read the directions, beginning with 'Fill out using block letters.'

Why **BLOCK LETTERS**, I wonder, why not simply Print Neatly, so the form would be filled with a pleasing mix of upper and lower case that has been shown to have higher readability scores. Perhaps it's a test of how well I follow directions, and how badly I want the job, that I am willing to sit here and print so many **BLOCK LETTERS**, spewing contact details for the last three places I worked, despite my hand starting to cramp.

This resto looks similar to the others, with dark wood panelling and homey accents, if you lived in a home hung with framed prints of hounds hunting and ducks being senselessly killed for pleasure. Across from my booth there's a mirror, its smoky glass a dead giveaway that it's a two-way mirror so an HR person can secretly watch job seekers as they fill out forms, thinking no one sees them as they chew their pencils, scratch their arses and steal cute jam pots.

My tongue keeps rooting around the broken tooth, but my lips remain sealed as I mark the check boxes. 'Are you bondable?' and 'Can you sing Happy Birthday?' Check, check and **YES**, **IN 4 LANGUAGES**. In the two-way, HR would see me grin briefly because my talent is sure to get me an interview-cum-audition. My fourth language is pig Latin. *Appy-hay irthday-bay oo-tay ou-yay!*

The form asks, 'What three words describe the ideal server?' My gut feeling: **CLEAN**, **WELCOMING**, **ACCURATE**. But then I pause. I do not want hair, no matter how **CLEAN**, in my food, so baldness could be preferable. Also, **WELCOMING** is weak. A server might welcome ten tables and not serve a single one. And **ACCURATE**? Could get tiresome. Hungry customers want food fast; so what if the server mixes up the medium-rare with the well-done? I erase my original answer and write **BALD**, **ATTENTIVE**, **SWIFT**.

My tongue tip is getting shredded on the broken tooth and my jaw has that unpleasant tingle just before the dental nerve fires. How soon can I afford a dentist? I reach the question: 'What is your favourite food?' Definitely not **OLIVES** with pits, the source of my tooth mishap. I speed-print **APPLESAUCE**. It was Mother's favourite or so I infer. Good enough for her, good enough for me.

Now they're asking about credentials, everything from a mixologist diploma to St. John's Ambulance training, important for resuscitating patrons who are choking or suffering cardiac distress. Or maybe suffering allergic anaphylaxis. Stupid of me to forget that. I return to the ideal server question and replace **SWIFT** with **ACCURATE**.

The walking penis, let's call him Dick, strolls up and down the aisle of booths. The HR person behind the two-way might notice that I'm gnawing my lip, rubbing my eyes, and surreptitiously blotting my drippy nose on my sleeve. I can't help it; I forgot my tissue. Sometimes moisture collects at the tip, I picture myself saying to Dick in a superb double entendre.

I stand up, my hand aching, collect my jacket (with jampot in pocket), and hand Dick the form. He has no eyelashes, and his eyebrows are hairless bony ridges. I've heard of this condition of extreme baldness, where the body rejects all hair follicles and I wonder if on hot days the sweat trickles directly into his eyes. I feel sorry for him even though my gut feeling is that Dick would be a pain to work for.

Yes, I pity him. I realise I will never get this job, so I wring some enjoyment from this sensation. Feeling pity for someone more powerful than I will ever be is my tattered consolation prize.

I stub my toe on the way out and the pain zigzags: toe ankle knee hip spinal column jaw broken tooth. The minute the door closes behind me, I curl over and howl, my face a rictus of pain. I drag-limp my sorry carcass toward the muddy beat-up Saturn that has a fresh parking ticket clipped to its cracked windshield. Saturn, wasn't he famous for eating his children? I recall Goya's horrific painting. Ha-ha, what if I had answered that favourite-food question with CHILDREN?

The Saturn ferries me home, its Check Engine light blinking arterial red, its worn brake pads shrieking, its gas gauge needle trembling below zero. As I approach my apartment building, I notice a sleek black Lexus parked out front. I keep driving: an instinct, a reflex, a gut feeling that my landlord's henchman has come to collect back-rent. Lockdowns stop and start. Jobs start and stop. But the pain of existence is continual, the need to shelter oneself, feed oneself, believe in oneself is continual.

Tonight I shall open that tin of APPLESAUCE that I've been saving. You can crush the phenobarbital to a powder and mix it in. All her friends at Heaven's Gate had APPLESAUCE as their final favourite meal. Good enough for Mother, I say, good enough for me.

The Drummer

Stephen Myer

I lost count how many times my fist slammed the door before I heard his body swish. The Drummer weighed a thousand pounds and had a face like a trout. I looked through the peephole. A great fish eye stared back as his voice oozed through the thin slit at the bottom of the door.

‘What’s the password, Jack?’ That could have been my name. It didn’t matter.

The password—some line from a song that didn’t come to mind because my brain was chasing an itch.

‘Come on, Drummer. You know me. Let me in!’

‘The word, Jack. Last chance,’ said the fish-faced *Cynoscion nebulosus*.

The same old shit called memory. I became despondent. This auto-da-fé of Junkman Trout scrambled my cool and sent me into a vengeful reverie, the dream already in progress.

A mermaid writhed in pain giving birth to the Drummer—that oversized *Salmo*. The fishmonger father crouched beside his suffering mermaid lover with a fillet knife in his hand and waited in ambush to slice up the tumorous troutchild tearing through its scaly-hipped mother.

The curvy octave of Lady Day’s voice slid beneath the door and wormed into my ear as I fell out of one dream and into another. Lady’s a real woman and not a fish. I’d get the word for the reasonable price of a listen as I stood before the Drummer’s gate.

Grab your arm and pull that strap.

Leave your money on the table.

Just direct your beat,

‘To the sunny side of the street!’ I shouted as I swerved across a narrow strip of the Medulla Oblongata Highway.

Deadbolts unlatched and a slimy eye slithered around the door. The floodgate opened and creekish water cooled me as I entered the sacred pond.

‘About time, Drummer.’

‘Hey Jack, you need to pull yourself together. I run a reputable business here,’ said *Salmo platycephalus*.

His sanctum was small, but the only hole in the city sans roaches and rats. I recognized the smell of his tank. A marinated stench of pesticide and fish perspiration. Every client knew his stink and that he had an elephant’s memory. I visited him a hundred times and he never forgot to treat me like a stranger.

I headed for the sofa where dusty prophets sat silently in small bags: *The Professor* at the far end, *Madman* at the other, and between them *The Vestal Virgins*.

‘Give me the rap, Drummer.’

He didn’t hear me, or didn’t bother to answer. He took a seat behind his snare and started the stir with his brushes.

Shssssssh, chickkuh- shssssssh, chickkuh- chickkuhdeedum- chickkuhdeedum.

The ostinato stopped me in my tracks, orbiting my brain as it swept across the gritty terrain of Microcosmic Drumlandia. I was trapped in the stir, wandering through The Valley of Red Devils whose denizens called my name as they danced crazylike upon a burning groove.

The trout swam in his own watery world. His eyes bulged with desire as he stared at the crimson thighs of *Oncorhynchus mykiss* Mars while his tongue wiggled in the opposite direction, tasting the *Oncorhynchus mykiss aguabonita* lips of furry Venus. He had one thing in mind wherever he went—seducing the stars with his stir. Man, those straws were a hit as he headed supersonic toward the Galaxy of Bliss.

I hopped off the soundtrack, recalling why I came. There wasn't much time. Under the revelations of his brushes it was all business—and strict as hell. If you didn't pick up your score and leave your bread on the table before he finished his stir, the Drummer dismounted his throne buried deep in his ass and grabbed you by your scabby arm and threw you out of his Sistine Shrapnel where you'd choke on the cigarette butt of someone's blue afterlove tossed into the gutter of this defiled city years ago by some subterranean suicidal window jumper. And if that happened you were done, man. You could never come back.

His scaly skin glowed like a rainbow as he controlled the sound and the fury. Here, in his Holy of Holies built circa 19Forevermore, The Grand Vizier sustained his sick believers.

I picked up *The Professor*.

'No,' he said, navigating the stars. 'You don't want to spend time with yourself.'

'I tried *Madman* last week. Not crazy enough.'

'*The Vestal Virgins*, Jack. Straight from their engagement on Olympos.'

His brushes returned from the heavenly oceans of Outtahere and he looked at me with flaming eyes that could turn back an army of dark angels.

'Put your bread on the table and split.'

'Can I shoot up, here?'

'That shit is *highly* frowned upon.'

'Please. Lay some pity on me.'

'Pity don't come cheap, Jack.'

'Your stir is out there, Drummer, the best there is.'

'Yeah. Tasty, ain't it? Exception made—a Jackson and this vial of pity is yours,' he said, holding out a slippery fin.

The donation supported a worthy cause. Me. He took my bread and stuffed it into his gill, then pointed to the launching pad at the back of the flat.

'Hurry up,' he said.

The Drummer returned to whatever planet he had been trying to slip his slimy phallus into. *Shssssssh, chickkuh- shssssssh, chickkuh- chickkuhdeedum- chickkuhdeedum.*

I buckled my seatbelt and slapped myself three times until the snake in my arm hissed. Feeding time for vipers. Fangs pierced my skull. The Drummer's stir went quiet and everything turned black.

'I can't see. What the fuck did you sell me?'

'Man, give them gals time to get here,' he said.

The clock struck one minute past sidereal time and my sight returned as the Vestal Virgins appeared high over the tarmac in their heavenly chariot. The horses took a hard right and the

ladies tumbled down. I asked them to remove their gowns while I hopped out of my trousers. They looked confused, then opened some codex of curses and began chanting. These sexy incantations drew the attention of Mother Vestal who made her way to the front of the line.

She went junkie penis hunting and squeezed until I genuflected, then delivered a short but disappointing sermon.

‘Sorry, Jack. Today is Saturnalia Eve in the Roman Empire. The Virgins have the day off. We were headed for a sacrifice when the Drummer called in a favour.’

‘I don’t dig, Mater.’

‘You’re out of sync. Look, but don’t mingle.’

‘Please, Mother Vestal. Get with the groove and make it happen. Release my testicles and give up the ladies. It’s not my fault. The Drummer lost his time.’

‘No one except you cares and, by the way, your private parts are nonrefundable. Read the fine print.’

‘What’s to become of my hard-earned coin?’

‘Listen, Jack. What do you hear?’

‘Only you.’

‘Right. The Drummer beat it. Swam away with your bread.’

‘He wouldn’t do that. I’m one of the faithful.’

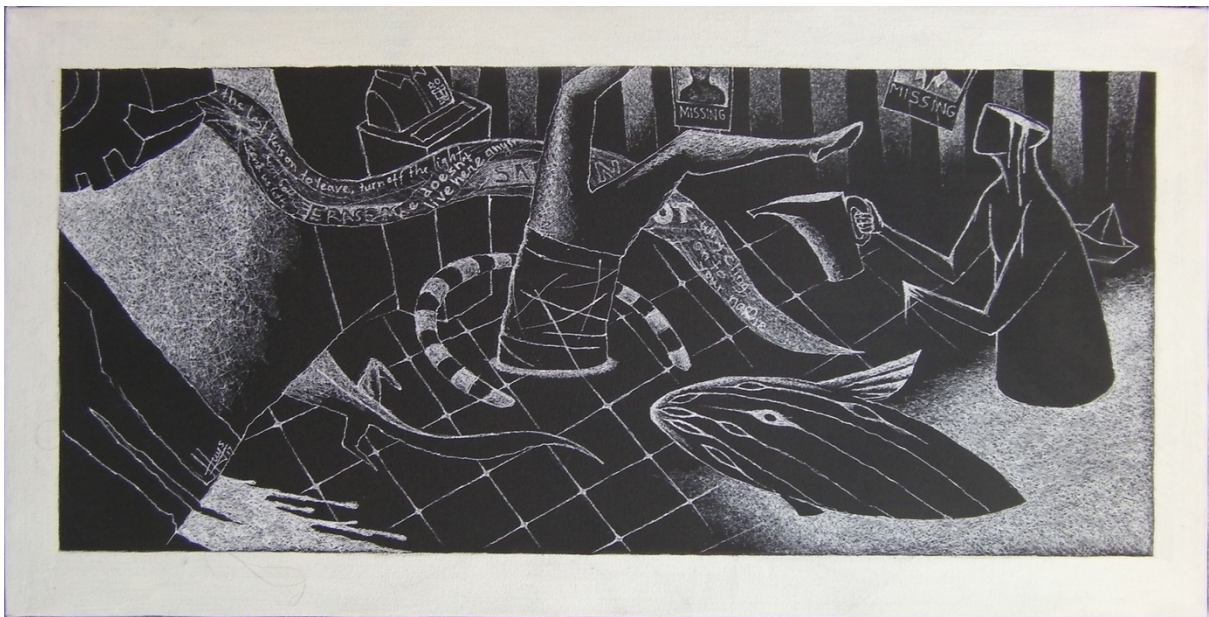
She picked up a cigarette butt from the gutter and lit it with her breath.

‘Here. The Drummer wanted you to have this. It’s a parting gift, Jack. He split for a gig on the West Coast of the Milky Way and won’t soon be back.’

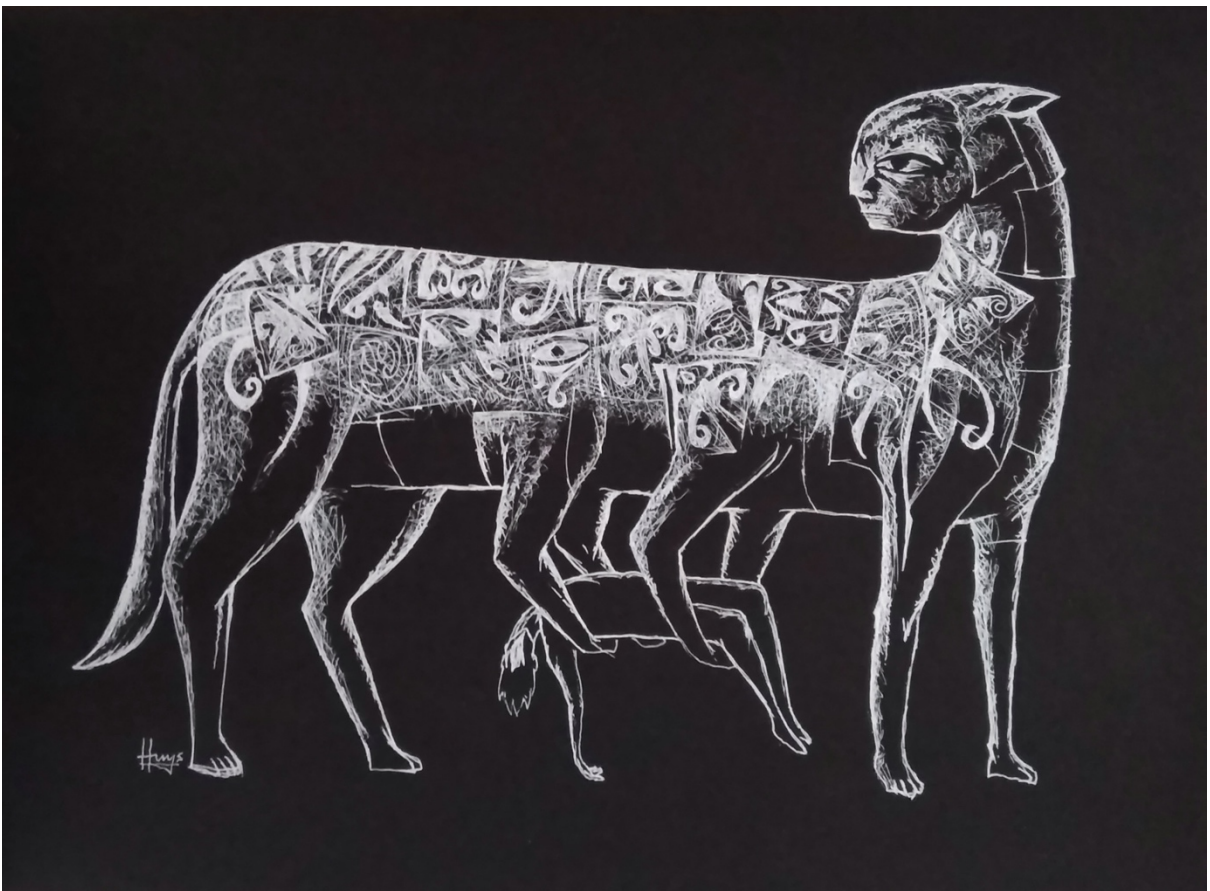
I was in a tough spot, choking on some stranger’s blue afterlove, squirming like a fish out of water. Mater squeezed harder. The darkness returned—and I was gone, man. Gone.

Stormy Sunday Collection

Hery Sudiono



Stormy Sunday by Hery Sudiono



Untitled by Hery Sudiono

Let it Go

James Callan

When Emma decided to eat out by herself, fuel her body with cheap, fried foods and a soda before heading to a film, some CG drivel with animals or cars that spoke in the voice of Billy Crystal or Eddie Murphy, maybe Will Smith, her roommates decided to hold a forum in the living room to discuss her apparent madness, her fall from grace.

It wasn't about Emma's daily evening strolls to the local KFC. Everyone, after all, has their vices. It wasn't about the childlike delight she carried home with her when she came back, enraptured, from a kids' movie about a gormless truck or a sharp-witted, wise-cracking donkey. Tastes are tastes, and Emma is entitled to her own, just as we all are. What it was about—this hoopla and forum business set up to meticulously dissect their roommate's shifting disposition—was Emma's late-night tantrums, her fevered monologues about how life isn't fair, her demonic reveries about a happy-go-lucky, emerald-hued ogre.

'The Jolly Green Giant?' Sarah hazarded to match Emma's description.

'Shrek! You brainless fucking cow!'

Emma's erstwhile sedate demeanour had become yesterday's news. Her kind smiles, her gentle, airy grace, her reserved way; an egg at the bottom of a canyon, modern art, a Jackson Pollok of calcified shrapnel and egg yolk. The once sturdy foundation of her calm persona, her bedrock of tranquillity, had recently been reduced to rubble; Emma's roommates, crushed bodies beneath wasted ruins left in her angry wake. Now, almost a different person entirely, Emma has transformed into a zero tolerance, short-fused, big-red-button-and-*KAPOW!* kind of roommate.

Don't press that button. Thing is, it was hard not to press.

'Okay, okay... Shrek.'

'Bitch.' And then the echo of a slammed door, Sarah's jaw on the floor, her wide eyes exchanging unspoken conversations with Meg and Tracy, who were stone statues on a sofa, petrified and mute.

Last week they converged sans Emma. They exchanged theories in a hushed whisper about how and why Emma was acting so strange, so volatile. They only had the time it would take for Emma to shit to gossip and plan. They only knew they had the time it would take for Emma to shit because when she walked to the bathroom she turned around at the door, cleared her throat to command attention, farted, and announced loud and proud 'Numero two, ladies.' She held up two fingers and smiled, like an anime character giving the peace symbol or an elated young woman stoked to take a dump. 'And it's a big one.'

It was Meg who said they should swap the strong coffee beans with decaf. Maybe it would bring the old Emma back. Maybe it would take the razor-sharp edge off of her venomous bite. So later that evening, when Emma was taking a shower, Tracy emptied out the bag of espresso into a Tupperware square and stashed it away, filled the hollow high-octane bag with the newly bought decaf blend that Sarah had run out to get that afternoon, and that was that. The roomies hugged each other and squealed in mischievous delight.

They had to explain to Emma when she suddenly appeared, wet hair wrapped in a towel, that their excitement was founded on their newly obtained knowledge that *Bridget Jones's Diary* had got the green light for an upcoming fourth instalment. The lie flew out of Meg's mouth like a flock of pale doves, not quite white lies but something like that. She did her best in a pinch. She was banking on the low probability that Emma would fact check the news about the romcom's fourth and final chapter.

'It's going to be the best one yet,' Sarah laid it on thick.

Emma let her wet towel fall to the floor. 'You guys suck.' She plopped herself, lengthwise, to occupy the whole of the three-seater sofa. I'm going to watch *Shrek Forever After*.'

The next morning, the roomies sans Emma, surreptitiously elbowed each other as the latter sipped at her piping hot decaf brew. Throughout the day, coffee after coffee, Emma was hostile and horrible throughout. It was no different the next day, the day after that. Rude remarks, scathing words, and a whole lot of Pixar and Dreamworks flicks. The decaf, it would seem, had little effect. The mellow beverages had functioned as a placebo, Emma's mind telling her that with each sip she was getting hyped up with liquid stimulant. Emma, out of her mind, perused the walk-in closet, getting ready for her big night out, a bucket of fried chicken and a ticket to the re-screening of *Frozen*.

'Later, bitches,' then she was down the hall, gone.

Meg clawed at the kitchen counter, then took a deep breath. 'Let it go, let it go...'

Emma strolled beneath the marmalade light of streetlamps. Block after block, she was seared in neon hues, assaulted by flashing storefronts. Emma bathed in the additional white light of a full moon, which may be the cause of her lunacy. But no, she was batshit loopy seven days a week, throughout all the phases of the moon, be it waxing, waning, whatever.

Her Dolce and Gabbana heels were an odd choice. An impractical one. At the KFC, her Gucci bag and Armani dress were more out of place than a Big Mac. At the re-screening, popcorn and Milk Duds got friendly with the fried chicken, overplayed songs echoed in the dim-lit cavernous hall, and Emma was looking fancier than a Disney princess. Even the projectionist had noticed.

In the projection room, a seance expert, a voodoo fanatic, a black magic, mystic king feeds film to the reel. He breathes deep of his Newport, savours the cooling menthol, and whispers out in a smoky vapour words of an ancient tongue, a dark, forgotten incantation. The heady waft of haze swirls in the room, caresses the length of film as it spins in determined circles to entertain several dozen children, their parents, and one very well-dressed lady.

On screen, snowmen dance and sing. Elsa, garbed in winter finery, shines in minty, cool hues, colours shared with a pack of Newports. Emma watches, bedazzled. Through tears, she smiles. She strains against an invading, foreign force. She hears strange words, deciphers hypnotic music, faintly, through a barrage of chirpy mezzo-soprano.

Emma, for a fleeting moment, remembers that she hates the film she has gone out of her way to pay for and sit through at a re-screening. She recalls that the song she now hums along to is one that used to make her cringe. Even now she still harbours hatred for it. Her love for this song is like a rusty razor blade scraped hard against the grain.

She burps and tastes fried chicken, the sap of Sprite. Emma remembers, not long ago, how she was vegan, how she was mostly sugar free. She trembles, loses the fight, and sings along, louder than the nine-year-old by her side. She upends the last of the Milk Duds, the ones stubbornly clinging to the bottom of the box. She lets the caramel coat her molars, her incisors. She smears it, like peanut butter, across her two front teeth. She plans to book another ticket for tomorrow's show. She will treat herself to a bucket of KFC. She will wear her most expensive, beautiful clothes.

As the song comes to a close, Emma is filled with tremendous joy. She submits to the tidal wave of pleasure that comes with watching her very favourite film. She allows the current to carry her far out into a warm depth of euphoria.

The projectionist stamps out the stubby butt of his delicious Newport. He smiles and nods. He knows, she has let it go.

Turtle Shell Madness Waiting for the Moon

Max Klement

Twilight strike quickly the ever-thinning day.

After the silver-spark hour of clatter-knife and china-plate, past the golden parade: shiny black leather shoes slipping new on the snapping-hard wax-buff dance floor; to the time of black: velvet soot black; iris black; piano-back spade-black.

Strike the hours on never-seen bells, singing the night in solid metal tones: alone—alone—alone. Empty streets never at peace, the echo of lonely thoughts and fears pitch scratch-pen ocean waves.

After the clatter-china silver-knife sparkle-plate, past the parade of gold—hard wax shiny clicking shoes—to the rhythm of black: eight-ball black, coal black, rain-wet street black. Beetle wing snapback, a melancholy courtyard to cross: your eyes were like fields of half-burnt wheat; hair like brilliant fire in the sky.

Stacks, shelves, walls of books—volumes of silence, voices extinguished. A tall phantom wind arcs from the south, carrying with it the voices of the nevermore, gone, whose words clack stone jaws in my head: trees hush and shake. Griffin cacophone hand-bone without rest, dancing to the soulless song of this night. Not even the sultry cries of the night birds spinning above—black-flight brittle-night—pass my window squares. Call to the night; call to the dark: the chatter voices in the gloom of solitude, of alone.

Clock-chime last time, evermore, only a room to listen: whip-wind voices carry the tune. The chime becomes a howl, the voice, a thousand miles from the soft-turn black-burn soil. Turn my heart away from the setting yellow past. You cry within me. I turn again, the lead-black lead-back night crushing me from end-to-end: turtle shell madness waiting for a moon.

Like a thing well done, back-hand craft-hand, this night is yours alone. Stepping into dark, yours alone, you know there is no peace at the ocean bottom: bodies tumble and sway, mimic seaweed, mimic life; the silence of the dark upon you. Talk to the past: your voice becomes the night filled with a thousand stars and a constant tide of black.

Through my frozen pane the moon slices a crescent swatch, torn from here to here: the sky shivers at the moon's passing. I wait for a single star—pulsing speck of hope—weaving a blazing tapestry of light on light. The stars curl by, in passionate clusters and spirals, spinning in a sky of unaware marine brilliance.

The night is empty now. The last spider-thin golden-web leaves of autumn are fallen; a branch taps lightly at my window, message from the past—I wait for it to repeat, to clarify the lying rain. Where you sleep, the stars are far tonight, watching the rain sweep: across—across.

Call out the night! Call out the dark, the chatter voices in the gloom of solitude, of alone. Talk to the past: you came to me with words of love.

Tonight, we're stripping off the bark.

Western Ohio

Daniel William Lawrence

The first dragon to arrive in Western Ohio was mostly unexpected. It may have surfaced from the morasses of the Kildeer Plains, or simply walked out of a storage unit in Rushsylvania.

Owen had just lost his job at the Western Ohio Tool Company, where he was making fifteen dollars an hour. He actually quit, but he told John Carpenter, and Sandy, and everyone else, that he lost his job. He and Sandy parted ways yesterday after he caught her spitting a long, thick, gnarly loogie into his glass of water on the bedside nightstand, all illuminated by the sterile wash of a hundred-watt light bulb from a heavy silver lamp that would have belonged better in a Best Western hotel suite than a Midwesterner couple's bedroom.

Sandy certainly had other prospects. A registered nurse cranking out seventy thousand dollars a year in grisly compassion is a force of nature not lightly to be reckoned with. She had already paid off the sixty-two thousand dollar three bedroom, two bathroom, half basement home on Williams Avenue four years ago, and was planning an early retirement in her forties filled with floating down rivers in a big black tube and drinking hot brandy with coffee from her thermos in a string of endless mornings.

Owen, on the other hand, had a couple of twenty dollar bills in his wallet and a red Jeep Cherokee 2003, diagnosed with the catastrophic rust damage characteristic of the Miami River Valley. To the uninitiated, the prevalence of the great name Miami throughout Ohio always seems like wishful thinking, stirring up daydreams of hot, red sun and Floridian adventure. But Owen remembered, some days, a grade school lesson about the Myaamiaki and a long trail of death.

The red Jeep Cherokee sped backward out of the driveway on Williams Avenue the same day the dragon arrived in Greenville.

Owen turned the cracked, plastic black knob on the Cherokee radio, turning it on. Then he pushed in the button and let it scan through the stations as he scanned through the last few days in his mind. He was most bothered, truth be told, by the spit in the glass.

'What was that all about, anyhow? It's just not civilised. Think of the calculation it must have taken. She must have been watching me for months to plan that.' He started to himself, working himself up a little, in just the sort of way that feels good to work one's self up.

'Or maybe she's been doing it this whole time. How long has she been spitting in that damn glass? How many years has that been going on? How long have I been drinking her spit?' He wondered. 'There's always someone trying to spit in your glass these days. I'll spit you a new one. I'll spit in the biggest glass you've ever seen, just you watch. They'll see me spit it up! They'll know when it's spitting time!'

And he wasn't entirely wrong. Sandy had been watching his nightly routine for several weeks, starting midway through March, which is usually when these sorts of things start to happen. March is a fine time for a foul idea to bubble up past the realm of imagination and reify itself as warm, thick spit in a cool glass of water. But how many times? Once, ten, a hundred?

She noticed him fill up the big, clear, crystal bottomed glass with tap water every night. He would place it on the nightstand after his shower, then go back to the bathroom, down the hall,

to brush his teeth. She hated that. Why did he come to drop the glass off on the nightstand, and then go back to the bathroom? Why didn't he just brush his teeth immediately after the shower, fill up the glass of water, and then come to the bedroom? What a big sack of shit, she always thought. What a dumb shit, only a demonstrable and unequivocal *shitstain* would do something so stupid with a glass of water.

That's what Sandy thought, and she wasn't entirely wrong. Owen was a dumb shit, and he should have thought more about the glass of water.

He was so caught up in his scanning backward through the last few days, weeks, years, that he almost missed the unusual, almost cryptically subdued radio report by Ohio Public Radio broadcaster Michael Hallworth:

'Aurelius. A name more commonly reserved for the college classics classroom or history buff dinner party banter, Marcus Aurelius was the Stoic, philosopher-emperor of Ancient Rome in the late second Century Common Era. But Aurelius the Irascible—the first dragon to appear in Western Ohio on record—is the name that's catching on for the newfound fiery fury of the Valley. Keep an eye in the sky and an ear to the ground, folks. They say his screech can literally pop an eardrum. In sports, Desmond Armstrong of the Platteville Big Bucks brought the team to victory over the Copper Lake Cougars in a neck-and-neck bout, scoring the final seven points of the match in quick succession last night at Hunt's Arena. Jane Dawson on the top of the list for...'

He changed the station to Big Bear 97.1, Classic Rock All Day, All Night, All the Time. Jim Croce's 'Bad Bad Leroy Brown' was one of the more tolerable songs a person might hear on 97.1: 'Baddest man in the whole damn town.' He started tapping his fingers on the steering wheel as good, bright sun bathed the open road and blue skies stretched up and onward.

He wasn't too angry anymore. Funny how it always boils over like that. Still, he hadn't really been paying attention.

'Dragon? Must be one of those monitor lizards or something. Where was that new zoo they just built? Was that Toledo?'

And for the remainder of the day, Owen didn't think anything else about dragons. He did not remember the name Aurelius, for that name had no special meaning for Owen yet in his life, as he had not read the *Meditations*.

But not being a man of no learning or taste, he did happen to have a Stan Rogers cassette that started with 'Northwest Passage,' a gift from his brother Steve, who he was bound to see for a place to stay while things cooled off with Sandy. He popped in the cassette as Jim Croce died down. 'Remember what they did to the Myaamiaki?' He muttered to himself as he hit the interstate, eastbound, and fast.

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By the time he arrived at Steve's house, the oppressive weight of the changes of the universe were already chewing a sharp-toothed jagged hole in Owen's chest and stomach. Some of that was lifted after he knocked at the door and Steve yelled 'Come in, I'm in the kitchen!'

Steve was in his early thirties, too. Long-haired and bed-robed, hangover sunglasses on, he was making French toast and there was cloying sweet folk music playing from a yellow record player.

‘What is this, are you living in a Wes Anderson movie now?’ Owen looked around at the dusty rugs, half-dead plants, and crowded, sprawling bookshelves. The light coming in from the afternoon caught all the motes of dust in a sort of pretty, stupid way that made him think for a second of Carl Sagan and the infinite smallness of it all, made him uncomfortable, and he coughed. He coughed again, a little louder, and swatted around at the dust cloud in the sunbeam.

‘I’d wear a sharp, blue suit if I was in a film. No, I’m making French toast, get in here. I just got this Vashti Bunyan album, do you hear this? There’s a little bit of Shakespeare in the lyrics, the wind and the rain, hey ho. Feste’s song. Twelve nights and all that. Did you even read Shakespeare? Sit down, I haven’t seen you in half a year.’

‘Jesus, fine, I know. What’re you making? It smells good.’ Owen sat down at the kitchen table and shoved a pile of tape and mail and papers and bags and plastic garbage to the side. Something broken and useless fell on the floor and shot under the oven.

‘It’s French toast. Where’s Sandy?’ Steve swung around with his greasy, shining long hair, flinging French toast onto paper plates. ‘There’s syrup there.’

‘Yeah I see it, dumbass. Give me a couple more.’ Owen looked around. ‘Do you have any forks?’

‘No, they’re in the sink, use your hands like a man.’

‘Jesus, Steve, what kind of asshole doesn’t have clean forks? Are you some kind of animal? What’s all this elaborate dysfunctional fantasy for, anyway? You have money, get some goddamn forks. Or a sponge, for Christ’s sake.’

‘I’m the *only* animal, I’m the best kind of animal.’ Steve was pushing two hundred and fifty pounds and could hit six foot two on a good day with his boots on, but he was just wearing his slippers that afternoon. He was fast and massive and the table bounced as he dropped hard into his chair and drove his elbows into the table.

‘Fucking hell, Steve. It’s all an act, isn’t it?’

‘No, it’s French toast, and you like it.’

Steve stretched a big arm over to the countertop and snatched a carafe full of coffee and filled up two dirty cups already on the table. He handed one to Owen and took one for himself. They both took a nice sip and enjoyed it and breathed a little bit for a moment. It’s always good to take a deep breath for a moment when things are bad, or good, or neither.

‘What’s going on, anyway?’

‘Sandy left me.’ He let that sit for a moment in the air, just sort of hang there, like you might do if you’re deliberately adding some dramatic element to your oratory. Just give it a moment to suspend there in the air as it dies away. ‘And I lost my job.’

‘Well. Those are two bad things.’

‘Yes they are, Steve, thank you. Two very bad things. Do you have anything to drink?’

‘That’s all I do. Do you want some gin?’ Steve shot up like a hot, heavy bull. Nothing gets in the way of that.

‘God, no. That’s so damn depressing. I don’t want to end up like some London orphan passed out in a storm drain covered in shit. Who drinks gin, anyway? Are you depressed, Steve? Jesus.’

‘Christ, have some rum, then.’ Steve poured out a recklessly calculated three fingers of rum into two crusty, glass Irish coffee mugs and topped them off with a flat warm budget cherry cola from a two-litre bottle by the stove.

Owen took a drink. Steve took a gulp.

‘Absolutely horrible. Sickening. Thank you.’ Owen felt the hot shiver up his whole back and he shook his head like a wet dog. It was big and powerful. He did smile in that moment after the first drink, and then took another.

You know, the first drink is the waving away you do to your hometown as the train pulls away from the station. A hearty waving of the hand, a wholesome fuck-all. It’s the saying goodbye forever to the dull strain of monotony that bears all its weight on the back, ten hundred days long. Hop on the ride, get on, get on the ride. It really says that to you. The first drink is the daydream of the bridge you might jump off later that day. Just the right taste of the thousand-foot waves of black water, smoke, and ancient chamomile. I can think of a monstrous black wave in space, a hundred million miles or more of heavy gas billowing toward you, so big it births a star, a hundred stars, and you rise up on that wave, every bit a part of it. It doesn’t swallow you up in the infinite void of death, but you just ride it, a big glass of rum in your hand and the whole day ahead of you. That’s the first drink.

‘It’s your favourite.’

‘It is, actually. You’re right.’

After a few drinks, Owen and Steve were out on the back deck and they saw the dragon, heading southerly and it had big wings and a big fat black body and they thought it looked a little too heavy in the middle to be flying that way, but there it went, just like that.

‘Isn’t that something?’ Owen said. ‘That’s really something. I’ve never seen a dragon before.’

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Anxiety Walk

bedfordtowers



A Dog to Help

Karen Lethlean

Mary couldn't help it. Impossible to ignore those floppy ears, dark eyes, and puppy jowls. One individual among so many furry caterpillar creatures who snuffled up to their mother's 'milk-tray', pushing and tugging at her teats. Later when one began nibbling her fingers Mary felt a fierce ownership urge.

Named him Deefa—D-fa-dog. She felt sure her husband Jack also desired a farm dog.

She remembered their romance, a time when they wandered along silken beach sand. And held her hand out to scoop up setting sun auras appearing burnt into shallows. Skipping through memories to revisit an initial opening of the home paddock gate. Even then dusk stuck to horizon edges and settled behind a Ute pinging while it rested.

Mary enjoyed the growing dog by allocating it future roles. A guard dog for security when Jack was away. Lately there had been frequent absences, to help a rebuild a fire ravaged shed, plough paddocks for an injured neighbour, or co-operatively wade through pxsaperwork to access drought assistance packages. Sometimes Jack left her alone, gone for days on end.

'...a man has to fight to get ahead... one time when I need help, they're gonna say, what about when time you didn't...got to work together as a community...' were parts of retorts when Mary tried to ask Jack to stay on their farm. Mary bit down those words, for the most part. She tried to keep busy, always plenty to do.

Mary wistfully thought about Deefa as being an excuse for twilight walks up into their farm's uncleared paddocks. Telling the dog about rabbits, sunsets, lizards, hard kangaroo's droppings and dried remains of once prolific wildflowers. Sharing stories of Noongar land. In her mind Deefa responded to her words, making conversation with a mere tilt of his head or soft whine. She didn't need to tell Jack about these ambles.

Before too long Deefa trotted everywhere right beside her. Mary held empty fingers before her thin waist, to contemplate how few worldly goods were hers alone. Beyond these wrinkled digits she saw only dry cracked earth collected in her lifelines well before day's end.

Dry, harsh summers, a season of more dust brought in from the west, with frequent high winds. Paddocks were already burnt to a crisp, grass brown or earth bare even along creek banks. Any water marshy, black mud now turned to grey everywhere she looked. Constant worry about a lack of moisture made everyone crankier than usual.

Blissfully unaware Deefa responded with a lolling tongue and wagging tail to demonstrate unconditional acceptance. She tolerated Deefa's incessant gnawing.

'Needs to keep a healthy jaw and teeth,' was her defence when Jack made a disparaging comment.

'Getting rid of his puppy teeth,' her next defence. But Deefa was now beyond an age, so this explanation was already past its use-by date.

Jack, anxious and not able to embody the same forgiving attitudes, announced, 'Bloody thing has to go. Damn dog gnaws everything not able to move away.'

Mary knew any reaction to this ultimatum would be counterproductive, so she kept a lid on her emotions. Last thing which '...had to go...' a juice extractor—still got dragged out from its

hidey hole under the sink. Mary enjoyed a mechanical buzz as fruit pulped. Rescued from a barely surviving, scrawny pear tree. Green globes often blown off, victims of ferocious winds, to lie about on the ground, rotting and wasted.

One drowsy afternoon a lightening crack, followed by Deefa's hysterical barking, dispersed by piercing howls brought Mary rushing. Chickens flapped out of her way like a poultry parting of biblical waters.

'What are you doing?' She screeched at a sideways canine look of confusion.

Looking up she couldn't argue with ferocity of thick smoke now drifted in from uncleared paddocks previously part of her and Deefa's innocent explorations.

'Where is Jack?' She asked a now spinning dog.

She remembered he talked about dealing with several tubes of gourmet gum trees, 'Today, I'll get them planted.' Yes, he intended to plant trees outside home paddocks. He'd been preparing ground along fence lines. Out there while a dinner congealed, trying to beat holes into dry earth. Still hammering no matter how often Mary told him to come in and eat. After he sauntered up to the house, stains from sweat around his neck, under his arms, his brow heavy.

'Worth it, Mary, we'll be rolling in it soon.'

Jack's mind projected in a short time these tiny trees grown to harvestable timbers. Then local artisans would form an unruly queue, fingering dusty notes.

Mary doubted seedlings might ever make it into earth, anyway, much less be grown to be an income netting maturity. Be in his shed with a dismembered vintage motorcycle he found in Callow's yard and promised to fix up for Ted. Happen sometime next decade, Mary thought. All those bits and piece are keeping company with bales of seeds for various innovative crops and mulch starter supposed to improve soil microbes. Things only collected dust in his shed. Sometimes Mary wondered if archaeologists as they dug up this farm, in some future government-funded exploration, might marvel at an array of perfectly preserved specimens from under corroded roof remains.

Now a fire to crush a potential leg up out of their constant scrounges for cash. Going back to those long-haired, leaf-weaving hippy artists to tell them, 'Fire ball sprung up, very day I set aside to plant those trees.' Example of perfect timing, capable of keeping them giggling into their wacky tobacco for weeks.

While Deefa cowered in dust, Mary tried to decide what to do.

Before dark, before a wind change brought flames close to the house. Before she filled down pipes and opened tank valves Deefa disappeared. Last seen heading off uphill. Tail between his legs, howling worse than ever.

When her husband finally emerged from ash swallowed distances, Mary was already more agitated than she thought possible.

'You see Deefa?'

Jack began blubbering excuses. 'Animal run off...can't be trusted...dog didn't know a good thing...' Yet he couldn't seem to make eye contact. And before long dead animal smells wafted in on late afternoon breeze, right from upper paddock's scrubby edges.

'A dead roo,' Jack said, his eyes locked on a growing cobweb, now dangling a strand of dust from cornices.

Mary's reaction was instant. She lunged at him. 'He tried to warn you...' She cursed and lashed out at Jack's defiant jaw. Misplaced hysterical largely off target, or ineffectual. Soon enough she went outside and kicked up dust. Eventually vomited into unsympathetic dirt. Jack's attempts to placate her were wildly rejected. Well past time for dinner preparation Mary sat on dirtied back steps and racked with sobs, utterly inconsolable. Everyone kept their distance, hopeful this storm, like a small brush fire, might pass quickly. But she still sat there alone, dry retching at intervals, still sobbing well after dark. No one ate a hot meal dinner. Instead, some crackers, cheese and cold boiled eggs were found and distributed amongst those who'd rushed to help. Yet none of them complained, not even at a mumble.

By moon-rise real damage emerged. Mary embraced a bitterness, toward her husband and farm life without a canine companion. She nourished this darkness and felt it grow even as the child she carried slipped away. Jack needed to deal with blood dribbled from places he didn't care to think about. Eventually he loaded his still sniffling wife into the car with an old towel between her legs and sped through darkness, while headlights cut a swath over low-slung blackened pastures.

'I am sorry love. I had no idea... why didn't you say... Getting yourself so worked up just over a dog. I am so sorry...'

Jack kept up a mantra and hoped at some stage Mary might hear.

With his wife admitted to hospital Jack sheltered in a dusty motel, where an air conditioning unit rattled and squeaked through the night. Just as light soaked through early hours, still heavy with burnt, dead animal scents, opening and closing car doors as other guests took leave woke him.

With farm out of sight, Mary tried to poor dead Deefa, and a lost baby, out of her mind. Sounds of road trains, finally permitted through road closures, with lights arching across hospital ward's ceiling in a parade of movement somehow comforted. Mary promised herself an escape from this lonely life she'd so wrongly thought of as rural utopia. If those trucks were going somewhere, so could she. And not just sucked deeper into now ash-ridden home paddock's dust.

When she'd met Jack, beach sand between her toes, strong gritty grains, air salty, and listened to him talk about farm's wide-open horizons. Excited by his ability to capture a sense of breathing in gasps of clean, dry air. And how good healthy earth might be turned with toil. So rich and moisture laden, Mary imagined much more.

When a new day eventually tumbled into town Mary made her vow, unperturbed by haze of loss now encasing her hospital bed. As she watched pink and grey galahs wheeling across nearby dry, seedless paddocks, in some sort of purposeless frenzied air-current dance, Mary promised to leave; nothing and nobody would stop her.

Sickened and weakened by the miscarriage, Mary laid watching bird life focus and retreat, and envied them. Even if their rasped, hungry song smarted and confirmed her conviction to leave. Disjointedly she tried to consider options, but soon realised, there was nowhere to go. Like most women who lived on the district's farms, she couldn't even drive a car. In abdicating this right to their menfolk wives colluded in their own immobility and isolation. With no money of her own, nor did her husband. Bank and rural agents held strangleholds on all their funds. Even if they had a good harvest, it might be several years before they viewed any cash. More likely to only be numbers in an account's passbook, not crisp foldable notes. If she could feel such notes,

smell the new-book aroma, crinkle their paper plastic surface, look on famous faces depicted, Mary might enact her departure.

No family near enough to help; her parents were taking advantage of New Zealand's set pensions. And anyway, running home to her mum would probably bring about a 'You made your bed, now you have to lay in it...' cold shoulder reaction.

'Till death do we part?' She reflected bitterly, but the death of what? In one dark afternoon, a pet and a child, trees and more water were taken. Probably fences, sheds and random machinery too. Never to return. Lying in a blur of senseless pain, Mary again promised one day, for her, to find an after-farm life.

No words made sense of her outrage, as Mary listened to instructions to return home after a few scant hours.

'Not good reclined, taking up a hospital bed, wallowing in all this,' said a short, white-coated man, wearing a stethoscope like a badge of rank. Only other thing Mary remembered were hairs sprouting from under his nose. 'Where flies go in winter, you can see their legs hanging down...' her father always said.

She simply couldn't deal with this elemental act. Irrevocable fire worked to forge more emptiness. A house still stood but their farm was now burnt beyond recognition, did not curb vehemence at prospects of enduring a depressing, hot drive back out of town. She couldn't even conjure up a slither of energy required to open those gates. But here she was, trapped by dust, ash and smoke, still rasped in back of her throat, made it difficult to breathe. Her arms felt leaden, coursed with heat. Impotence and rage were tearing at her very flesh. She'd already forgotten Deefa's yeasty breath next to her cheek as they followed a skink trying to escape ant tormentors. Purged from her brain elation at first seeing Jack's cabin sheltered by a few scaggy fruit trees. Gone too dampness settled on those early morning beach trails, where they'd first kissed under dripping palms.

Luckily nursing staff understood human company was not high on Mary's priority list and left her to hover in various stages of sleep.

No one saw Jack as he walked an empty corridor; neither did he do anything to draw attention to himself. He still scratched at dirt even after too long, more than enough soap and hot water in the motel's tiny bathroom. Going to take more than a few cold beers to negate sight of his toe pushing at a black patch of mould where two shower tiles met, while soap laden water ran down drain ways. Not to mention sight of his wife, or efforts to rescue a yelping dog running out of far too close flames he failed to notice.

Most of the night he'd tossed about, appreciative for yesterday's losses. He tried to separate dramas, head down working, ignorant of dangers. Everything knitted and irrevocably linked. Would she have lost the child, if he'd been paying attention? No solution to this dilemma, so Jack decided it all didn't bear any more thinking about. Anyway, what was done, was done. Past was past, gone was gone. Couldn't make dead things alive. Best thing you could hope for was to plant a new crop.

Jack stood by Mary's bed, forlorn. As tears welled and threatened to spill from his reddened eyelids.

Through her pain she saw roses, smelt their heady fragrance, and knew without saying he'd taken them from church-yard bushes.

During this sleepless night Jack too made a pledge he meant to keep, so he told his wife, 'We'll take a holiday, on the coast, love, soon as you are well, I swear.'

Mary let her head sink into a thin pillow. Let oceanic murmuring rock her to sleep same as family holidays. So close, just there, behind her half-closed eyes. Also glimmers of a dusty kelpie, same colour as last night's spilt blood, now soaked into ash-coated dust. She pictured Deefa as he galloped, without fear, into surf.

The Happy Prince

Michael Haller

The prince wore motley. He skipped through the palace singing nursery rhymes—behaviour unbecoming of the eighteen-year-old heir. When dignitaries visited the castle, he kissed the men on the lips and genuflected to the women, addressing them as Your Graciousness, Your Peach-Skinned Highness, Your Heaving-Bosomed Majesty, and so forth. When the youthful and hirsute President of _____ arrived, the prince attempted to fellate him in the foyer of the castle, to the amusement of onlookers. The prince succeeded in fondling the Presidential member and was about to consume it, but the Palace Guard intervened and removed the prince in chains.

After consulting his ministers, the king held a press conference to announce that his son was an imbecile and would not succeed him. Rather than give the crown to the *next* in line, the detested Duke of B_____, the widower king announced he was seeking a wife who would, he hoped, produce an heir. The criteria were this: she must be of child-bearing age, but no older than twenty-five; she must agree to take part in a pre-marital intercourse competition with other candidates to determine who could most frequently arouse the aging king in a twenty-four-hour period; and she must undergo medical tests that would determine the likelihood of her bearing a healthy child or two, preferably boys.

Stella of _____ won the competition and was presented as future queen. Their nuptials would take place on her eighteenth birthday. She came from a mountainous northern region known for its beautiful but uncultured women. A dozen tutors were appointed to teach young Stella the finer points of courtly life, such as dining with knife and fork, conjugating verbs, and the art of cleavage exposure during royal entertainments. At these important functions, she was expected to play hostess, virtuous queen, and false seductress, who, with a nod of her head, could have any man decapitated for gazing too longingly on her bosom. In some cases, the unfortunate man would be taken away and beheaded while the party rolled on.

The prince was so overjoyed at his freedom from impending kingship that he began behaving differently. Gone were the days of braiding his long, flaxen hair into a ponytail that was the envy of all fashionable men and women. Gone too were the false eyelashes and other feminine accoutrements that he wore to infuriate his father. In reality, the prince was possessed of a dissimulating dual nature: while outwardly playing the dunce, he was shrewdly absorbing all aspects of imperial life. By age twelve, his tutors had pronounced him an idiot, but he had actually learned enough Latin, Greek, archery, falconry, jousting, fencing, polo, and other royal pastimes, that he was able to secretly continue his studies with the disgraced Earl of _____, twenty years older than the boy and possessed of such an insatiable carnal appetite that he once debauched an entire village in a single day. But as the young prince came into his physical maturity, he demonstrated an appetite equal to the Earl's, making them a perfect match.

The Earl risked his life every time he met the 'simple-minded' but oversexed prince. Banned from the kingdom and prohibited from any further contact with the youngster, the two nonetheless devised numerous stratagems to outwit the boy's guardians. One such ploy involved the prince feigning a penile disorder that could be cured if he followed the instructions the

archangel Gabriel gave him during an alleged midnight visit: ‘Only one of God’s nurses can heal thee, only the hands of a nun can relieve thee.’ The only nun in the kingdom was the recently arrived Sister Beatrice Raphael, who was summoned to the boy’s chamber. In front of the king and his advisers, the pansexual Earl of _____, dressed as Sister Beatrice, successfully jettisoned four ounces of semen from the delirious teen using a procedure deemed by some a miracle and others black magic, for no sooner had the nun reached under the boy’s blanket to heal his aching member, than a tent was erected that continued to grow until a wet spot spread over its apex. For another thirty seconds after the nun withdrew her hand did the boy exhibit spasms of either joy or agony, no one could tell for sure, for his shrieks and squirmings while restrained by the king’s bare-chested stevedores were so inhuman as to befuddle all observers.

The only person of import not present was Queen Stella. She had been confined to a fertility chamber where she was fed medicinal doses of tansy, chasteberry, and other herbs thought to aid in conception. But as the years went by and she failed to deliver a son, it was obvious the king was planning her execution, as evidenced by his hobby of beheading female dummies that looked like her.

Stella had never fully adapted to life in the kingdom and still retained some of her rustic proclivities, such as eating tomatoes directly off the vine, a habit she learned from watching deer raid her family’s tomato garden. (It was not uncommon to see Stella crawling the castle grounds searching for a tomato plant she could denude of its fruit.) Stella was well able to murder the king by strangling him with her long braids of hair, but the paranoid ruler was protected by henchmen round the clock, even when the king and queen made love. These devoted bodyguards had been hypnotised by the king’s sorcerer into strict obedience and loyalty. Anyone who touched the king without permission would be fed to the crocodiles in the moat. Everyone in the realm feared the king and his vassals except Prince Rupert and the Earl of _____, who both thought him a depraved warlord obsessed with his phallic bulge. The Queen’s only recourse to survival was to befriend these alleged degenerates and persuade them to either murder the king or bring her back to her homeland, where they would be welcomed as heroes and free to live as they pleased. After discussing it with the two hypersexed hitmen, they decided to do both: kill the king, and bring Stella home.

First, the Earl got rid of the king’s sorcerer by knocking him unconscious and setting him loose in a hot air balloon rigged to fly into outer space. He then disguised himself as the sorcerer and told the king that he needed another hypnosis session with his bodyguards, in order to reinforce the training they’d already received. The sessions dragged on for three weeks, because the king would only allow one of his twenty bodyguards to leave his side each day. Finally the reprogramming was complete. The Earl had trained the bodyguards to form a protective circle around the monarch when the murder was occurring, so that no one could come to his aid. Only the Earl and the prince would be allowed inside the circle in order to dispatch the king.

Stella approved the plan and urged its completion. Within a month the king was dead. The Earl of _____ fashioned another hot air balloon that would reach Stella’s northern homeland. The three embarked on their journey, lifted by the warm air generated by the thousands of grateful subjects cheering their liberators. It was rumoured that Stella conceived a child while floating home, but no one knows for certain who the father was.

About the Authors

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James Callan grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He lives on the Kāpiti Coast, New Zealand on a small farm with his wife, Rachel, and his little boy, Finn. He has never been to Greece, but has a frequent, recurring dream of standing in the long shadow of the Parthenon, a blood-red sun bloated on the horizon. Spiritually open minded, he considers cats and trees to fringe on the divine, nothing more sacred than a feline balancing high up on lofty branches. He loves movies (don't we all), including, but not limited to, *Home Alone*, *Jurassic Park*, and *When Harry Met Sally*.

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Hery Sudiono, Indonesia. He makes all kinds of art: painting, sculpting, digital art and writing. He published his first anthology of short stories in 2021 and takes part in art exhibitions from time to time.