

boundless plains

by Cecily Niumeitolu

I.

An inner-western suburb street – the artery veers past the university, cleaving old Lebanese eateries and Thai joints – a major juncture forfeits to a metropolis that cusps the Pacific. The slow underwater-current burns, ferries murmur, the Quay and Contemporary Art Gallery have already saturated with tourists.

Turning back, the traffic-light is pulsing red, a motorbike bypasses an accident. Two veins of cars shudder to a standstill entrenched by the bracelet of those stationary to their right and left. Car-horns get trigger happy. Renovations – though more expensive than the council anticipated – will go forward at the train station.

Pedestrians have been diverted to a green turfed islet due to another mishap that on trend has amounted to an extra 3 days reinforcing the steel structure that arches above the railway line. Posturing distress, pedestrians navigate blindly forward as road workers in fluoro-yellow puppet them onwards.

There is a man. Let us call him **0**.

0 slips through a revolving door that pulses in clockwise motion. This syncopates with the orbit of the neck of his umbrella just above his wristwatch. If it were the only sound on earth and clicked into slow-motion one would recognise the constant piercing G-minor that bereaves into a C, just off. Rain was not forecast.

A bike-bell rings, **0** steps aside, for it to swing into a preoccupied schoolgirl.

Two minutes and he has avoided ten cracks in the pavement. With the elegance of the preordained, he dodges a man on his mobile who has swung into a lady lost in her belongings, **0** swoops up a plastic bag, and then, as if knowing its velocity given wind-speed and weight, floats the furtive jellyfish for the rubbish bin opposite.

This lady lost in her belongings, let us call her **人**.

It is 10:15 a.m. 15 minutes lost and counting. In another present where **人** woke up on time, she would have just finished welcoming T.J. Clark at the Conservatorium. **人**, avoiding the audience in a guffaw of applause, fixes herself on Clark. This interface lures his body from the

chair, up the stairs, her face is staged in a slot of teeth that glitches as he brushes past her. He is waiting for the cue to begin, but she is somehow trapped in a clap. Is it her vying the audience on, or she them? She cannot tell. Least to say, the clap does not end and she continues it down to her seat in the first row, to join them, wrenching her neck upwards where a knot of anxiety squats just above her jugular.

This aforementioned present is a present that does not exist.

Instead, 人 lives in a present of delays and forgetfulness. At 10.15 a.m. she is still fumbling through her bag on King Street.

The words do fall, with not a small dose of exasperation: “O God, the keys.” The synaptic flash textures her bag as she sees the keys winking in the sunlight on the sofa back at her apartment. Now that she has left, her mutt seizes the opportunity to plop himself on-top of this forgotten glinting metal. Let us call this black-tufted quadruped who is co-tenant with 人, Mutt. Mutt nestles in for the long haul, discretely basking in a ritual lather of his private parts.

人 reprimands her briefcase and hand, a hand that has taken on the air of a sad jester-hat as it clutches a dirty tissue, iPhone and wallet. 人 grimaces at it, the hand, as if it were culpable for this position of delays and forgetfulness. If a photograph was shot of this hand, with such a streetscape, and such a sun-shower that began at that very moment, one would call this digital photo ODE TO POSTMODERNITY (with the tiny subtitle) merry-go-round. This photo would sell for 1,200 AUD by an ‘emerging artist’ whose name would be Barry Leech.

Leech’s agent and gallery would take the cake of this lump sum. Barry drank a lot and mentioned his friend Kylie a lot too. Barry would say Kylie this and Kylie that, making sure to drop her last name as one drops a tequila shot. To a stranger, Barry seemed to see Kylie as much as he saw his own face, which was often, due to Facebook. This would cause Barry’s close friends to stare very hard at their toes because they knew Kylie was spreading her legs into a taut M on some stage in Tokyo, or Bristol, or Ho Chi Minh City.

A photo is not shot, no merry-go-round to be had, therefore, 人 goes through the motion of zipping and unzipping the same compartments. In the midst of this, a man on his mobile bumps into 人, and in turn she lets a “sorry” fizzle loosely into the air, glancing up at no-one in particular.

In this present – a present of delays and forgetfulness – T.J. Clark is already harking in Picasso’s *Guernica*; the cataclysm of war that spills from windows bombs that squeeze through orifices fractured interiors and drunk horses that pirouette the bleeding lines of the Basque street.

Clark is redirecting the audience's attention to slides of boudoirs. *Guernica*, he holds, follows the same design. As Picasso grappled with the scope of a landscape his style distended a bourgeois preoccupation with domesticity.

Clark argues that *Guernica* is an evolution of this middle-class logic –

the projected image on the auditorium wall penetrates the pinholes of pupils that dilate in wonder or contract in suspicion. The what-was stasis of a Basque inner-western suburb street is rearranging itself in the private enterprise of grey matter - the interior highways of each skull's neuron-metropolis. The audience interiorise a vision that was encrypted in the painting's dancing surface, always there, but un-registered. And now, before them, the canvas revealed carnage as diabolic room – a room claustrophobically suspended in ruins.

The Con swells into an organ of hush. This current of hush is the intimacy of resonance that shrinks distance. The audience have transformed into a hall of huge ears, huge ears that teeter on the brink of maroon pneumatic-seats in perfect sixty-five degree angle synchronicity, if only to strain forward their taut rackets to eviscerate the words - that roll and drum the membrane, balls volleyed in the circuitries of cerebrum, fingers twitch, a tongue lolls forward, a brow creases in dispute, another, to prevent bowel movement.

There is a blue gash of budgerigar feather in O's fedora. This is an indiscretion of an exaggerated nonchalance that at times exhibits the other side of silence. Between years of sombre black, there are those white-whales of loud colour, flags of delusion, or in today's case, delusion the size of an infant's thumb. Consider a family man of times past, who, always fastidious, responsible, is found dangling in his garage on a Sunday before Mass. Today was O's Sunday.

There was the orchestration of a sun-shower on that 14th of November. Clouds fugue sun, sun percusses cloud and as though settling for a stalemate they soften and stream in equal measure. King Street is a furnace. The rain even rebels, evaporating all over again as it hits the pavement. The sugary fumes of petrol and jasmine, the undertone melt of tyres. O's nostrils flare and inflate the quietness.

Traffic is seizing up. A codger with a comb-over notices a packet of Champion Ruby tobacco left at the bus-stop outside the Bank Hotel. He

does a fast right and left before stuffing the tobacco into his track-pants. It would not be called rare to find any old, run-of-the-mill cigarettes occasionally found in front of Centrelink offices and pubs after eleven p.m. It is sufficiently rare to discover tobacco of the brand and strength that one smokes. This is called luck. The codger feels something akin to luck. Riding on this luck, the codger trots the gentle slope Saint Peters way to bet on the horses. This is called misconstruing the scope of luck.

0 has exactly 3 dollars and 50 cents of shrapnel in his right pocket. Wheedling the coins, he meditates their sizes with the side of his thumb. He orders his regular coffee. Nearby a man crumples his bus-ticket and thinks, *twenty minutes late, trust the State government.* 0 looks at his freshly polished shoes until the waitress yells out his coffee order, he nods, drops the coins in her hand before squeezing past the lass with the bovine derriere.

The wall of 0's tongue relaxes as the bitter after-taste flows from its root. The delivery guy is heaving boxes of watermelons to the grocer, a toddler licks the bank handrail, 0 rocks from side to side.

At the edge of the curb 人's iPhone falls from her hand, damned – hand. It ricochets onto the road. Her eyes dart to it faster than her legs can carry her, like a bowling pin she topples face-forward. Before you can say Geronimo! a truck is ten metres and coming. At the gape of her collar she is hauled sidelong. The drill of excess air trolls her further backward, whorls her back into reality, along with the beeping horn and hand out the right window that she cannot see but is giving her the bird. 人 chirrup, gets wide-eyed and blinks it slowly in, turning her head up to see a man staring down.

The man staring down at 人 is 0.

He turns and walks on.

人 chirrup "wait!"

He walks on. Whether he heard or not is difficult to surmise.

Suffice to say, this would have made no difference.

People pass by. A grimace ripples over a man's lower lip, a kid jumps over 人's legs as though they were logs in a playground. She is left pawing at bits and bobs, shoving them willy-nilly into her briefcase. Wiping away the invisible dust, she gives into an inclination of being in a novel or movie, patting her face to check that it didn't fall off.

Wide but gaunt, 人's forehead is small in proportion. Smallness is too often associated with lack, when - all life - all space – dark matter –

intergalactic - imploded from a smallness smaller than a dried green pea. 人 is wearing a pea-green suit jacket and matching wool slacks. Sweating was more tolerable than a sensation of being smothered alive by options that did not tolerate the monthly fluctuations of rebellious bulge. Her grey eyes glint like soup spoons in their rim of forehead too small, her snub nose looks like the injury a peanut fist of a child makes - fed up with fun – smacking a cone of play-dough into the bitumen. And with scant facial hair to speak of, when her aspect is taken in, she is reminiscent of an anaemic cherub. Her lips float like the hull of a boat above her cleft chin. Indeed, when all these features are aligned, she emanates Picasso's *Weeping Woman* – transfixing – as people are compelled to grasp the somehow-harmony of all her asymmetry.

0 ought to have been a praying-mantis. His bulging tortoise-shell glasses consume his whittled face. His lips are thin and weak, a line so weak that it disintegrates into his jaw that deflates into a neck, more vertebrae than flesh. His flesh is transparent, and for a man so tall (six foot three) he is apt to be mistaken for a street-pole or part of a lack-lustre wall.

In fact, he is a wall, a wall of flaccid white, apart from his face: pitch eyes the size of full-stops with crows-feet inscribed as deep as hyphens, features that fold into ellipses, dashes and commas, held in a bracket of loose-fitting skin. When people read this face, they tend to pass over it as one passes over the Daily Telegraph. 0 has no parents. They died in a car-crash. When 0 would tell this to people as a young man, he would notice sly side glances and a clenching of the muscles, brows would affect worry-full-wings. People knew that they were being made patsies...because it was a weak line, the line “my parents died in a car-crash when I was six”. So now, as an older man, 0 says his mother and father are retired and are riding their caravan around the Sunshine State. And people are more given to move on, as they do, carrying a seed of being cheated but not knowing how, they nevertheless move on.

Brushing off her knees again as an act of composure, 人 brought herself into the present with three deep breaths. Counting in for three. Then out for three. She had her hand out for 7 minutes before a cab pulled up, he smirked as she gave directions and scuttled at a beetle-pace to the Con. She knew his face, the face of 0. Perhaps he also worked around Newtown, or her university. Perhaps she'd met him on one of those awful speed-dates on George Street that turned men into cans of baked beans. Or his face reminded her of someone else – all alternatives made her clench her

buttocks – each cheek in turn, her heart was already two-inches outside her rib-cage. Damn and confound, she knew the Vice Chancellor was going to be at the event, and she was irredeemably late, she tugged out a lozenge. The truck had missed her by a split second, counting in for three, out for three. 人 crunched down hard on the mint to placebo serenity.

She messaged her colleague, Kieran, to gauge how the lecture was going without her. Kie did not see the message, his phone was turned on silent. He was sitting next to two hipsters who were whispering very loudly. For the lecture's duration he had been weighing up whether to say something to these hipster babies, or throw them a dirty look. He did not enjoy this quandary that had colonised his ear space, and could not come to any satisfactory remedy. So, he sat back and looked at the person on his other side. The same quandary appeared on this stranger's face, both Kieran and stranger found solace in this mutual discomfort. This camaraderie was impetus for him to swivel sideways, and stare fixedly in silent protest at the two foetuses wearing matching mustard paisley blouses. The two foetuses nudged each other and cast dirty glances back, their chatter dwindled so slowly that there was no doubt in Kieran's mind this was a method of counter-combat. Dwindle to a pose of silence, nevertheless, is what they did.

With peace restored, Kie cast a grin at his comrade in arms, who had barely noticed this alteration in affairs and was picking the side of his nose whilst staring up at Clark piloting the lectern above them.

The repeat offence of lateness, the lateness of 人, had the whiff of the Žižek lecture she had missed. She had been stuck between a rock and a hard place, literally. 人 had to extricate her mother out of a hazardous sandstone garden at the same time that the bearish Žižek was brushing off a standing ovation, lifting his gargantuan arms towards the others on the panel, nuzzling his snout in their more worthy direction.

The cab window was a portal of ponder, 人 wondered whether this would affect her job, her being late once again. The Senate were making serious cuts to staff due to the VC's myopic business model. Even academics were evaluated according to KPIs, stringent paper deadlines, bigger class sizes and were under rigorous surveillance. She lingered over the sting of the lozenge, what would she look like as a number, a 4.1, a 5.2?

She sucked harder and shook her head, and concentrated so intensely on the passing high-rises that one would have half-suspected that it was her gaze that was fuelling the cab's movement and not the absent-minded tap of the cabby's sneakers and hands as he whistled the love-song crooning from 106.5.

The minutes ticked too slowly forward on her now cracked mobile screen, it dumbly blinked on and off as if in revenge for her longstanding clumsiness.

II.

Isadora swore she met the devil in the park.

She told her ex-girlfriend, Annabelle, that he wore a top hat with a blue feather. Annabelle was to live with Isadora in a palace at the end of the world. This would occur in a stage that psychiatrists were given to label psychosis.

Annabelle believed this so-called 'stage' had become a part of her constitution and dear 'Is' had set up permanent residence in the splintered hinterland of schizophrenia. It did not help that Isadora's parents called their first daughter after the famous dancer, who, destitute and drunk, danced to her finale with one tragic leap, one hand-painted silk shawl, to make art of every moment, every intention of the finger, flutter of the foot, volta of the neck.

Isadora lived in the silhouette of glory and motorbike rides and late night performances where she would contort her torso, aching fingers into the lover she had chosen for that night. She would arch back the head of some Kate, Emma, Helena, and pour into their mouths rotting lilies and molten rock and whole other universes. She would cast shadow-puppets on the wall, to roll over face forward with a dry throat and cigarette burns and hickies like hacked pomegranates seeds on her inner thighs in the morning. Whether it was accidental or on purpose, it didn't matter nor was it remembered.

Is called Annabelle, and swore she had met the devil in Victoria Park as the dawn crackled over the Quadrangle above her, and he wore a black top hat and polished shoes and told her to bet on Green Moon for the Gold Coast *Magic Millions* horse race.

Annabelle replied, "Is, you don't know a thing about horses, what the hell are you doing?" To Annabelle this didn't sound like the work of the devil, just a bookie looking for a lay and following a freak trend. All she could do was recommend her ex to pay a visit to Royal Prince Alfred crisis unit. Just to be on the safe side. Isadora laughed. Is told her it was no humdrum, no hogwash, she maintained with utter resolve that she had met the devil in Victoria Park near the swan pond. And now she was off to a barbeque with a girl she had just met.

Annabelle knew for too long that this was a flag of delusion – strangers became ciphers, chance became fate, Green Moon and a Coast of Gold were imbued with biblical significance.

Annabelle's brow creased and her lips resolved into a long line — there was nothing to do but sigh.

It was not in her hands anymore. No matter the guilt or the gut of sadness. She would call Isadora's mother, and she could deal with this situation. That was that. She sent the message and switched off her phone, her shift had just begun. As Annabelle exhaled, she birthed a blue haze that dissipated the scene of a woman nearly hit by oncoming traffic in front of her café on King Street.

The man who had saved her was a regular. A piano could fall on my head at any moment – Annabelle thought – just like that, she looked up and grinned.

III.

人 was fiddling with her pen, smiling tensely at staff, the honoured guest. She manoeuvred her way through the rows of huge teetering ears. Her speech was scrunched in her hand, at least some vestige of proof she was prepared. The Vice Chancellor darted his eyes in her direction.

As she sat, the dispute her spine was having with the chair demanded her attention over T.J Clark's exposition: no matter which way she massaged herself into it, it caused discomfort. A hole had emerged at the top of her cranium, as though someone were pouring a heavy liquid that would not exit through her toes. It kept on pouring, she scratched her scalp, shook her shoulders, clenched then loosened her fingers.

She arched into the thought of the man she did not properly thank, she saw her head scraping into the asphalt, skin took on the texture of a severed tamarillo. Then it occurred to her that there was no celestial moment. Caput. She thought of how harmless death was, safely cushioned in a coffin, would they have put a sheet over her head she wondered, or a bandage? Perhaps both.

She should call her mother and tell her she would prefer cremation. She had seen her grandfather like this, shrunk to the size of a leg of lamb, the upper-half of his face shot off with a rifle under a white band, the lower-half of his head seemed to be sucking really hard on a gobstopper.

The corpse had the mien of greys, and pastels; or was that the walls carpet curtains in the funeral hall? The burning lily scented candles did more to swell the saccharine putrefaction of the carcass than to hide it. Lilies smelt of death, of rot, of nursing homes and motel cupboards.

She wanted to flick her grandfather, pinch his skin, shake him a little, perhaps he would get up and start cussing under his breath and walk back up to the garage, and tinker on the truck before going down to check on the fences. She would have punched him. It was not out of respect for the dead that she resisted, it was merely fear of reprimands as she stood beside her mother, puffed as a jammy scone, with a grotty aloe-Vera tissue, mumbling a Hail Mary for his damned soul.

The thump and droll of the air-conditioning system of the Con whorled through vents capturing beyond: the Botanical Gardens was in heat, elephantine Moreton Bay figs were dripping with seeds, the ground still moist with the stench of growth and decay below them, Ibises like bedraggled drag-queens at five in the morning fell into rubbish bins. The rich rank of bat droppings unbeknownst to the audience was in the motion of becoming the timbre of a first kiss. Two lovers wrapped in one another

like the bats above them. *She tastes like rain* the woman thought before lulling deeper. 人 ran her finger along the armrest, mossy, she tried to pinch it up and twist but it was too short beneath her nail-bitten fingers.

“You okay?” Kie leant in from behind.

人 and Kieran gawked intently at the photograph of Picasso frozen in an affected solemnity in front of his creation. Forever exploding in a vertiginous frost. Blitzkrieg was as far away from them as the reality that Rhoetosauruses had sauntered over the same spot they were sitting on now, over one hundred and thirty million years ago.

“Near death experience,” 人 blinked up to the projected image.

“Ah, so you received the glare from the VC.”

“Nearly killed by a truck.”

And as though all was as expected, Kieran said, “Is that so,” and leant back into his chair.

By the time 人 had closed the door of her apartment, thrown down her bags and like a woman possessed tore off her clothes, it would have been expected some Fabio was lying on her bed, stroking his bit, waiting to devour her. Instead, she bent down to have Mutt slip his tongue down her throat.

All day Mutt had been toiling over the chaise-longue and having finished his patterns of scratches, had just commenced a vigorous gnaw at one of the cushions before 人 had walked in on him. He felt quite contented with his effort, given the time constraints, and anticipated bounteous accolades from his roommate.

“How could you!”

Mutt froze, then tilted his head, as he glanced from her, then back to his grand opus, his black tail split into stiff antenna, sensing he had, perhaps,

done wrong.

人 shook her head and started singing some gobbledygook, banishing him to the barred confines of the veranda. He sat, longing, yelping, he meant no harm.

She pulled off her last sock, pawing through old-takeaway containers and dirty underwear to clump onto her bed. Mutt had managed to tip-toe in, and with black tufted head and eye-lids lowered in feigned supplication, he leapt beside her, nuzzling into the small of her back. She fondled his snout, whilst finding a comfortable position to torrent Saw VIII.

Slasher aside, the image of the man welled at the back of her throat, where most of her intuition originated, just above the jugular. This was connected with what she believed was a dim strain of synaesthesia that would at times texture life to the point of dis-orientation. She would cack herself over a caterpillar, or be inconsolably balling in front of *Piss Christ*. To combat this short-circuit of discordant objects with unexpected emotions, 人 would keep a crossword puzzle handy as a means of centring a discombobulated existence.

And so, slasher films were lullabies, and she waggled her head, somehow to exorcise the discomfort, nestled beside Mutt, and felt relief as she leant out and pressed *Play*.

Half-way through the slasher, 人 clammed the laptop screen shut. She had likewise defaulted to sleep-mode, on the front of her lids was a man as thin as a broom-stick, with a black hat, taunting her with his apathy.

IV.

0 was looking in.

Now he honed into the high-pitched note whorling down the wall of his ear. Through the channel, where key-holes of light stole in from his nostrils, irises, he swamped through scaly tussocks of hairs, scratches of porous skin, down the slope to the centre, where he faced boundless plains, he began to nomad the earth with only his hunger to surpass the false brink of horizon that separated grassland from a field of stars.

At the speed of thought he populated the plateau of kangaroo grass, the mellifluous follicles bowing each to the other, with a magnolia stellate – its vertebral trunk rupturing into the thirsting light of a night where the buds were no different from the pulsing constellations above.

In desperation he yelped – but his breath was hollow – he could no longer feel a separation between himself and the epidermis of dust. Dust nerved into shafts of grass that split into the air where the synchrony of molecules so precariously shelved in difference revealed all as a mere rhapsody of vibrations, vibrations of molecules so ceaseless that all form eclipsed into nothingness.

It dawned on him that it was enough - an end was no matter. His feet were the slowly rippling roots that held the promise of embracing this encroachment of ever-ness – in one form or another – he entered back into the portals of his eyes and blinked in the window. He looked again at the clock, his travels had only been the span of a morning minute.

Such mysticism sought every letter as though it were proof, somehow, that he could create a version of himself so discordant and yet true in its ugliness that it could jolt a reader into a grunt, a grin, a side glance at the mirror. He typed further and saw himself disappearing behind ciphers, and strung these sentences together like a child did talismans of pebbles, broken shells, and happy-meal figurines, placed into a special drawer, a drawer that preserved its power by virtue of the exact placement of each object. And along would come Henrietta Rigadoon, mother of the shambolic infant, she'd clear out the bric-a-brac due to unusual smells escaping therein, and ruin the order of things. Poor diddums, poor 0.

Another minute passed.

In the next moment 0 thought of himself stripped down to the letter, perhaps, people would praise him for capturing the spirit of the age, he would receive a standing ovation, and wear tweed and his hand would be shook and people would recognise his face from book jackets. 0 nursed grandiose into the morning, and he reached out and skirted side-walks,

strangers became dancing currents of electricity that melded into him on the laptop screen. And he breathed in, knowing that this air would one day fill the arctic drift and collapse icebergs, a fly on a plastic plate, a fallen dancer, of some black Mutt brought to life in the membrane, and a woman he called 人 sleeping into the thought of him and his hand, a white gash, breaching her into formulation, a sequence of daily events, facile and morbid, a reflection of his own.

0 got up and leaned back with his arms akimbo, and flexed his toes, and moved over to the kettle. He went through the ritual cup of tea and talking to the begonias, flicking the kangaroo paw to watch it fling back unharmed, and the satisfaction of the bougainvillea dawning into a fuchsia pointillism on his balcony that looked out to the cubist explosion of roofs in the crackling hot summer morning.

V.

It had hit forty two degrees celsius. Record fires had spread across New South Wales. News corporations were having a field day. Kamikaze flies filching in their minute infinities, milk, furry teeth, water left too long in the kitchen sink. German backpackers were dabbing on aloe-Vera, over-zealous teens were enhancing their bikini lines and their likelihood of melanoma, some smoked at the café's front. People had been lobotomized on mass, the untapped ash landing on their pants or beverages. Others had, as though abducted by aliens, found themselves in shopping malls, cinemas and pubs sitting aimlessly for hours on end whilst those establishments twiddled their fingers with glee at this freak spike in growth, and were in the motion of hanging up AIR CONDITIONED signs, as if it was the exclusive drawing point.

0 followed the gentle slope, to the marshlands that stretched to the left of St Peters station. King Street bled for the Great Western Highway. Algae, dead fish, sewerage, ducks, children, dog shit, planes off to Melbourne, back from KL.

The crack of plane, its guttural shudder carves into a wail, a hostile polyphony that jolted his bowels. The plane doubled as an apparition that shrieked across the dam, the intestinal uncoil of path, the faint sweet of cud, 0 reels passed the joggers, lovers, and urchins who lurk beside the smoke stacks drinking, yarning into the sweat that brimmed in brows, up to the hill, the smaller slopes centrifugal.

0 sat on a metal bench that held only the visitation of the sun belting around him – the heat sits into his back, and he thinks of his story of the mosque in Paris, peppermint tea and Fatima in those mad eighties, taffeta, two brothers. A terrier was a smear of black ink that smudged for the vastness, his owner on a bike not far behind, he looked out to the airport, an aquatic mirage radiating in its oily distance. A boy fingered the dirt, his sister nuzzled his hair, sniffing a shampoo of pears. She tugged his fringe hard and on purpose and grinned. The boy looked up, hurt.

0 coasted over dogs drunk and speeding, quadruped toddlers crabbing the span of the oval. A few parents were on the side-line in fold-out chairs, beers in hand, as sedentary and gaudy as sea-anemones, their tentacles on alert for any possible and impossible danger. Occasionally one would string a sentence that out of tiredness would evaporate in the deep blue air. The children were walking exclamation marks in rebellion of the sun, they pranced against its oppressiveness. It was a wall of heat that the parents could not breach, they sat looking sullen, occasionally letting a reprimand

dollop from their lips at their child itching their private parts or toppling a playmate over or bursting into tears for the end of the world or eating a scab or disappearing behind the bushes. Too hot to get up they would sign language with immense strain before drifting back into dead bodies as their fingers dripped over edges of knees and bellies and eskies of coca-cola fanta oj water. **O** wrote this down, and pushed the rims of his tortoise-shelled glasses back to the top of his nose, with a smugness more than reasonable.

A girl appeared beside him.

“Imagine, two parks in two days. What is the likelihood of that?” Isadora said.

“Infinitesimal.” **O** replied.

“I forgot to show you the moon tattoo I have, just like the green moon you told me about yesterday.” Isadora pulled up her singlet to reveal the spot where her belly-button ought to have been. There was no navel, instead there was an algae green sphere, or what at one point was a sphere but now looked like an ellipsoid, etched with craters and whirling in an alabaster sky of five pointed stars. “I know. Don’t say it. I’m told all the time it doesn’t look right, people say it looks like a bowling ball or a piece of cheese. The lady fucked it up, the shading’s all wrong, then it got infected, I didn’t clean it properly, and I’ve never managed to get it fixed up.” Her eyes were blood spotted egg – yellow – strained – blotched.

O looked down at the rim of her pants, and then decided it was best to look at the kids chasing parabolas in the grassland at the bottom of the hill. “I don’t see what you mean, I never mentioned a green moon, in fact, we’ve never talked.” He uncrossed his legs and angled them away from the girl.

Isadora cacked.

He fiddled with his pants.

“I saw you in Victoria Park, near the swan pond.”

He did remember her, but at that distance and in the dawning light he could not discern whether the figure was a boy or girl. The person was in the motion of climbing out of the water, and both of them had stood there for a moment, gazing at each other. The figure had reached out its hand towards him, raised an arm and moved two fingers in, he could not tell, a sign of beckoning or recognition. **O**, disconcerted by the situation and not in the mood for any trouble (sleep deprived from the day before, and seeing that Victoria Park was becoming too Victorian for its own good – haunted by Miss Havishams, women in white, gothic Ledas who leeches from the water’s edge) had briskly moved on.

So now, he sat, silent.

“I don’t know what you’re playing at mister, but you told me to bet on Green Moon for the Gold Coast *Magic Millions* horse race. Why the hell would I come up to you, if I didn’t know who you were?”

“I’m sorry, I wish I could help you, but you must be thinking of someone else.” **O** was tensing up, the girl was wearing the same pants and white-singlet from the previous day, though now, they were dry and discoloured. He had been forced to visit Uni early to pick up some essays on Charlie Kaufman he’d absent-mindedly left behind. He was determined to finish marking them by nine-thirty so he could make his way to a T.J Clarke lecture at the Conservatorium. Things had got in the way of that.

He was a creature of habit, and this was his day off. **O** needed to work on his manuscript — its deadline was looming. He would come to this spot every week at the same time. He knew that his seat was always waiting for him, there would be no disturbance as he spied on the world for inspiration. This girl threw a cog in the works, she sat there, a waif-thin rag doll flopping forward. He barely turned a head for pupils outside of class, with their sycophantic chops biting to have just a word, or two, and he found their poses repulsive, affected.

“So what are you doing anyway?”

“I think I’d prefer to just sit in peace.” He stared into the distance.

“Ah, well, we can do that.” Isadora nestled back, but her egging eyes still fixed on his side-profile.

He got up and started to walk down the slope, the girl stalked him at a shadow’s pace.

“I know you’re purpose, Lucifer,” Isadora barked, “Hey! You heard me, Lucifer!”

O began to increase his strides, parents were moving jowls in their direction, dazed and confused, woken from their zomboid trance, only to fall back in after glancing up at a vampiric girl with a bowl-haircut pursuing a man as thin as a broom-stick.

“I see you Lucifer, you think I don’t, but I see you. You may pretend, but haunting me like this, I won’t stand for it. I’ll chase you back to the underworld where-ever that may be, I’ll call the cops on you, I will.” Isadora had caught up to him, she got her grimy index finger and poked him in the chest.

O stopped in his tracks, “Is there someone I can call to help you? Or a home you can go to?”

“Nup, to the former and to the latter, my home is behind my free eyes.” She wagged her tongue, “I was just trying to figure out what your insidious plot was, and how I could extricate myself from this role that you’re forcing me to play. I don’t want any part of it anymore, so stop it, fine if you don’t want to play, and give any more clues, but I’m not going to put up with it, I know who you are and I know the plan you have for all of us, and I am going to stop it, even if it costs me my life.”

“Why don’t I call someone?” **O** was thinking triple 0, the girl evidently needed help, special help.

So calculated and deep and soft as to be barely audible, Isadora growled, “Fuck off,” and ran behind a tree.

Frozen, **O** stood there. Stephen Crooke was scratching his head and was gawking at this entertainment at a distance.

Stephen Crooke had done his daily grocery shopping, and was going home to feed his cat, Lady Ellemonde. He saw **O** staring back at him. Crooke decided it would be best to move on. As Crooke looked out to the water of Sydney Park he felt happiness in the distress of others. He was safe, he had never had such public fusses, and he was very glad of it. He’d just finished paying the mortgage on his apartment, and perhaps tonight he’d make the discounted pork-chops with apple sauce, yes, pork-chops with apple sauce would go down a treat.

O felt embarrassed, or was it ashamed, or was it regret, he could not seem to quantify the sensation interrupting his body, he felt duped and he blamed her. He could feel the heat stretching the cap of skin on his face, his clenched fist, and a feeling in his gut, scratching behind his organs, wanting to run out.

VI.

“You’re damned if you do, damned if you don’t.”

It’s true it’s rather true, 人 thought, rehearsing this to herself, she should just go in and face the music, ah, no escaping it.

人 stared up to the coffered ceiling. Gladys waltzed in and shut the door behind her. She plonked behind the desk, and in its over-polished surface, 人 winced at Gladys’ reflection. In 人’s mind the bloodwood table was an unsurpassable stretch. She was back in Rookwood Cemetery, she was combing through fields of boundless grass, the serpentine dry dirt, past the flower vendor forever in the same blue parka, the throb of cicadas. She pinched her own wrist, breathed in for three, out for three, then there was her mother, forever in the modality of the Widow, with no male-figures, she blamed her daughter, settling her eyes back on the Head of Department, 人 tried to centre herself.

“It’s best if you resign.”

“What?”

“Your post has been reviewed. Unfortunately a great many staff, as you know, are being made redundant. We just don’t have enough in the budget to keep you.” Gladys sipped her tea.

“It’s because of the Clark lecture isn’t it?”

“That was merely the last straw.” She raised an eyebrow then continued. “We were more concerned with the stress that the workload here was causing you. We believe it is for your own benefit if you took a rest, and envisaged this as an opportunity to find something more suitable. I am sorry.”

“Gladys, I don’t think there is any evidence of work related pressure. I love my students and my work. Have you had complaints from students about my method of teaching? Or is the faculty not happy about the way I am organising the *Chaos* lecture series?”

“Nobody likes to tell people such news. The University has taken a particular direction, and the Head of Department must bear the news.” Gladys petted the buttons on her blouse.

人 sat there stunned that Gladys had now created a distance so much greater than the mere table between them, the third-person tense stretching them both into ciphers. It seemed as though she was talking to a screen and Gladys was satisfied with the havoc that an assertive terseness played on 人’s conscience. 人 read into her words a whole tumult of indifference, not considering the gamut of other worries for which Gladys’s reticence was a symptom.

“Look, I find this whole situation rather comical,” 人 swallowed before it escaped,

“I have dedicated myself to my courses, to my students. I remember the days when a library was a library and not a place where librarians were pieces of machinery. In those days when we were not judged on the quantity of papers we produced but on the quality of our work, and on the quality of our teaching. We’re now micro-managed by this god-forsaken academic planning and development rigmarole, the management now is just plain patronising.

“I am overwhelmed with a terrible sadness about the future of this institution. Something as unquantifiable as learning is increasingly measured and instrumentalised into absurdity, if you don’t tick the right boxes, you’re out.

“I know it’s not you personally Gladys. But that’s just it, we’re all replaceable. This current regime is alienating the lifeblood of this place. The only reason you would pursue the life of an academic is for the sheer love of it. We persist regardless of being paid a pittance, the hours, the bureaucracy, because of a passion for teaching, for knowledge. And when that is undermined by the flagrant disregard of an ever-conflating administration department with so little appreciation for the nuances of particular faculties and courses and teachers as individuals, you’ve got to wonder!

“Too great a number of us have no job-security, well” at which 人 laughed at herself, and pointed at her gut “point proven right here. There is nothing but a loss far greater than any balance sheet of costs and academic output, it’s an institution with no vision.” 人’s voice had worked itself into soreness. She had reverted to her childhood habit of over-animating her hands in what seemed frenzy but was what she would resort to in order to get a word in with a mother who had no stop-button.

Gladys was inwardly reeling but masked this with a blissful outer shell. Her husband was in palliative care, there were two other staff members she still had to dismiss, and she had to finalise the trip of delegates heading to Spain at the end of this month. It was all too much.

人 went on searching this well preserved mannequin for any sign of acknowledgement, “Gladys, you know this will not look good when I go for my next job, whatever that may be. A semester post?”

“That is why we are giving you the option of forwarding the department your resignation. You could say that it was not for you, teaching at the institution within which you did your undergrad and doctorate. It’s a more than valid reason. Broaden your horizons. The panel are not budging on

this, the VC has cut our budget substantially, and as Head, I unfortunately have to play the Ebenezer, and believe me it's not a role I enjoy. Please don't push it further, you know it is all for the best." She relaxed her derriere in a new-found safeness, and finished the tea, puckering her maroon lips into a decisive full-stop.

人's heart was in her jugular once again and she saw her academic future flash before her. A torrent of swear words were storming at the back of her throat. She swallowed them down. It were as if her insides had been hooked up to an electrocardiogram machine and articulated her stretch into a lifeless line, a boundless plain, no slopes could pulse that distant incision into existence, all was a long and flat oblivion, false and acerbic and deadening. She sat lifeless, all that 人's body could re-iterate was: "for the best."

VII.

Annabelle slumped into a lounge in the Psychiatric Ward's visitor room. For a public hospital, she thought they'd done a pretty good job making it look comfortable. It was better than the two other hospitals she'd visited, the only sign that things were awry was a lounge chair that had been turned upside down in the corner.

She stood up as the door opened but sat down when she saw it was the nurse with a clipboard. He nodded and shooed in a priest, who sat on the chair opposite. The priest acknowledged her with a smile, which she returned. The door opened again, and in walked an unusually tall man. Annabelle thought he had an uncanny resemblance to Topol, rather regal, with his barbarous rust beard and loden vest. It wouldn't have surprised her if he burst into some tune from Fiddler on the Roof.

"Who are you visiting?" The tall man asked with a mouse-squeak voice.

"A friend of mine. You?"

The man waved his hand into the heavens. "The tooth fairy."

She had heard him but a "What?" still escaped from her lips. The priest nervously looked from the man to Annabelle, from Annabelle to the regal man, as though he were, perhaps, on the verge of stopping the looming figure from moving any closer.

"Come on now; don't be silly." The Topol man let loose a girlish laugh, "Silly dear, no, no, I'm going to the dentist, yes, you see," he bent over her and opened his mouth, although she couldn't see his teeth rotting because of the subdued lighting, she could certainly smell it.

"Ah."

"Ah indeed," he replied, "that's exactly what I'll be saying. You won't," penetrating her with his eyes "tell anyone? Especially not Nurse Lee." He then pulled the corners of his eyes into slits. "We all know how you Asians like to stick together," at which he petted her leg, waiting for an answer.

Annabelle really didn't know what to say. She'd never had someone be so demonstratively racist to her face. Well, not since she was in primary school. She didn't know whether to laugh or scold him.

The nurse came in again. The priest was now clutching at what Annabelle presumed was a pocket sized black bible; it must have been hidden before below his cassock. Annabelle glanced in his direction, perhaps he was a patient too.

“Hubert, nurse is looking for you; it’s time for meds again.” The nurse turned to Annabelle, “Don’t worry about Huey, he’s quite harmless when he’s like this.”

“I thought he was a visitor.”

The nurse smiled. “Invisible illnesses. It’s definitely not the first time someone’s made that mistake. You’re waiting for Isadora aren’t you?”

“Yup.”

“She’ll be here soon, we’re just trying to locate her.”

Hubert waddled out after the nurse, the door slammed behind them.

Annabelle looked at the priest, who had not said a word, “Well, that’s reassuring, they’ve lost a patient. Bit of a worry.”

“What’s a worry?” The priest cooed, as his hands shifted over his lap.

“That they can’t find her.”

“Oh, there aren’t many places she could’ve got to, nowhere to hide in this place, if she’s not in her bedroom or the common area, she’s probably in the bathroom.”

“So you know the place well?” Annabelle was now hesitant as to whether he was a priest at all.

“Ah, yes, yes, I’m the minister for Saint Joseph’s across the road,” at which he pointed his finger at the wall, as if the road was somewhere in its vicinity. “I was also called here by Isadora, I believe, isn’t it? She said she wanted to meet with a priest.” Spit had congealed at the corners of his dry mouth, “I often come here to provide solace for the people in here.” He gulped, “and so, well, yes, I do know this hospital rather well, you could say.”

There was a pause that the priest took the onus of filling. His eyes lit up, “Sometimes, I can’t tell the difference between who is the nurse and who is the patient, the only way to tell is by the counter that separates them.”

“Really?”

“I’m only joking, this place is a lot better than some of them, nurses do a tough job, of course it takes its toll.”

Annabelle laughed, belatedly. The priest looked pained.

The door opened and this time the priest stood up, more as a way to extricate himself from the young lady. Annabelle also was glad someone else was finally coming in, there was something off about the priest, and she couldn’t put her finger on it. Spending so much time in places like this, one must become a tad affected. It only heightened the unreality of the situation that he was in his clerical attire. It wasn’t often you’d meet a priest on a

casual basis wearing the black cassock with the white neckband around the streets of Newtown. Actually, for all her time in the area, she realised this was the first time she'd seen it. What was Isadora thinking?

Speak of the devil, Isadora sauntered through the door, ignoring the priest who had stood for her grand entrance, and walked straight up to Annabelle wrapping her arms around her, trying to slip for a kiss straight on her lips.

Annabelle managed to turn her head away and with the most disciplinarian tone she could muster said "Isadora. We're not together anymore, remember."

"Yes. Of course. I just thought, for old time's sake. And you?" At which she gestured towards the priest to come forward. "You? Did you come here to seek my guidance?"

"Actually, I believe it was you, you asked for me." The priest stammered, not expecting even this, though why not, Annabelle could not fathom. They were in a madhouse after all, these patients were so highly sedated that they'd forget who they were and what they'd done from one minute to the next.

Isadora slowly fluttered her lids again, holding Annabelle's hand. Is sat down and crossed her legs. "Proceed."

A flock of sadness, white, bleating, duplicitous, overwhelmed Annabelle, she spoke to overcome it. "How are they treating you in here? Do you need anything? Underwear? More clothes? Do you have a toothbrush?" The last question was more a hint because Isadora smelt awful.

"Oh, yes, yes, very nice, very pleasant, lovely people, lovely. But I feel that my time here is done, I am ready for the next phase of my trials and tribulations. Do you have any good news for me?"

The priest was following the conversation, and was moving to the edge of his seat, anticipating some kind of segue to begin his consultation.

"What do you mean Is? Tell you about what? What news? From who?" Annabelle searched her eyes.

"The good news, about my purpose, any messages from the outside concerning my next mission, any menace from the blue-feathered and goggled phantom, Lucifer?"

Annabelle petted her hand, "Ah, well, I think you are needed here in the hospital. Perhaps you will stay for a few more weeks. I'll talk with the nurses about that."

“I see what you’re doing.” Is let out a hearty laugh. “Very good Annabelle, very good, I see you’re plan, very good, diversion tactics. You’re a snaky one, aren’t you.” Annabelle pulled her hands out of her clutch, she loathed her, she really loathed Is right now.

Isadora leant forward and continued “Lucifer is writing this all down, he knows. He has his talons typing at the bit, our every word, he’s listening through the walls right now, up there,” her eyes squinting up to the ceiling.

Isadora turned to the priest, now that she had pieced together the duplicity of Annabelle. “And you, you, you came here to talk to me about something, what matter of the heart bothers you priest, priest...?”

The priest responded “Joshua.”

“Ah, we are aware of another Joshua, yes, he is a disciple of mine. Well, I should use the past tense, *was* a disciple of mine, he is the walking traitor who lives in room 50, a few doors down from me, fat man, but a good man, now a bad man, but the day of judgement is soon at hand, all shall come to pass. You know how it goes, I choose the thieves and beggars, the wretched and the meek...”

“Well, I came here at your request, you left a message that you wanted to see a priest with the head nurse, so” he brushed his knees off, “here I am.”

Isadora nodded, for she believed she had foreseen it was as it was written, nodded slowly but it was almost as if she was nodding off to sleep. The priest saw this as a sign to move his chair closer so that they formed a triangle, or as Isadora envisaged it, a holy trinity. Annabelle had her eyes plastered to the plastic floor.

Is began, “So I have some poems to read you.” She pulled a tiny piece of paper out of her pocket and with great concentration proceeded to unfold it, each time her shaking hands faltered.

“Would you like me to help you there?” The priest shrilled. Annabelle didn’t like his sharp teeth, his thin lips.

“Thank you Joshua, but these are blessed scriptures. Fresh from the horse’s mouth.” She puffed her chest out. “So to speak. The holy letter.” After two minutes of fiddling with the tiny thing, until it flapped into an A3 sheet, Isadora breathed in, then uttered,

“Follow the leader, me, a humble monk, a secret agent, my radio is God in my ear, inspiring me, aspiring me, assuring me I take the chosen path. Resurrected in Australia, land of the oppressed, set the refugees free, for there are boundless plains to share, I have come to reconcile the masses at the end of the end. Hallelujah. Praise the Father! Blessed be all in my

name. P.S. Ned Kelly is no hero of mine and illegal aliens are welcome in my holy church. P.P.S. Breakfast is served. Amen.”

She watched them expectedly, “I mean, you can change breakfast to lunch or dinner. Depending on the time of day,” She blinked, “you know?” When she lowered the paper to the table Annabelle scanned the purple scribbles, the triangles and strange algorithms.

“Very good, Isadora. Very thoughtful and poetic. You know, to some, like myself” at which Priest Joshua pointed to his chest, “believe Jesus is the son of God, and he came to Earth to save us from our sins.”

“Well” Isadora paused, then sat back crossing her arms, “I am the new son of God, and I have been created woman, I am the final frontier, my bush is the burning bush, the holy V, the Virgin.”

Annabelle found *that* last comment highly questionable.

“Mmm. We are told by a book, the Bible,” at which Priest Joshua rubbed the black book on his lap, “that we are the children of the Lord. So yes, in some ways you are a child of God. Jesus was his one true son, who is one in God, he gave his life for us, so that the Lord’s children may be saved.”

“Yes.” Is nodded, “it shall be as it is written, given time constraints being as they are, it shall come to pass.”

Annabelle looked up from the floor, “You shouldn’t encourage her like that, I’m sorry, but she is not in her right mind, and trying to reason with her, or speak of the Bible, in a place like this. *That’s* insanity, actually, it’s worse, it’s exploiting her vulnerable circumstances. She knows the Bible, before all this she was a freelance writer.” Annabelle’s head hurt, her eyes hurt from staring so fixedly into nothing, but she was mostly hurt by the whole situation.

The priest leant back, and looked more intently at the patient, “Well, I didn’t mean to offend you, but Isadora seems as though she is searching for guidance, and the Church offers guidance to whoever seeks it. I am not forcing any views on your friend, I merely am suggesting an alternative perspective on the situation, after all she did ask for me. Perhaps, I am providing her with *enough logic*”, he emphasised the last words so fervently that Annabelle was a little worried he had run out of people in his congregation, perhaps this was the breeding ground for a 21st century evangelism, “to overcome the belief that she is a Prophet of God, as she seems to think.”

“She can’t even remember calling you, she thinks that you came to seek guidance from her, and logic? The only logic at work here is madness.” She felt a part of her slip back on the defensive, she felt as

though Isadora was her lover all over again, here she was, once again in a psychiatric unit worked up over a gal who probably wouldn't remember she'd been there the next morning.

“Calm down child, all shall be answered.” Isadora stroked Annabelle's shoulders. She turned back to the priest, “But what of the second coming of Christ?” She gazed frostily beyond them “I am the Messiah, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. So says Revelations. You see, it is coming.”

VIII.

On his way up to 人's flat, Kieran had to stop every second flight of stairs to catch his breath - but went hard on the up - he would count it as today's calisthenics. He knocked and knocked, until 人 answered, and followed her to her bedroom. He was a bit put out by the lack of formalities, not a cup of tea, a glass of water, and he was a tad parched. She was usually so attentive, worst of all was 人's physical appearance, the poor dear she really had let herself go, and it had only been two days.

"This is foul. What the hell is this?" Kieran used his fingers as faucets, dangling the underwear in front of her.

人 really didn't know what to say.

"There is a hole as big as the Bermuda Triangle where the crotch should be." Kieran peered through it, like some balaclava clad Cyclopes.

"Umm. I have a yeast infection?"

"Foul just foul! Why in God's name the hole? Easy access?"

"A mouse perhaps, a rat, I dunno. The building has an infestation problem." 人 lackadaisically leant back as would the Dresden Venus, her head resting on her arm, her lids heavy, the conceit of indifference, the chiaroscuro enhanced by the heavy drawn curtains and ruby cushion.

"That might explain the smell of rotting corpses rising from your floorboards. You may have poisoned the poor dear with your toxic juices. Better the dog." Kieran shot a glance at Mutt, threw the undies at the bin, and missed, landing them near an unamused Mutt. It was no matter. It blended with scattered books, bills and clothes which assumed the role of rug.

He stood for a moment, taking in the scene. It was not without a hyperbolic tinge of Juliet's tomb: the still-life of carefully arranged photographs of family departed in some kind of dialogue with the ornaments: a miniature wooden Buddha, a chipped mammy doll, a sheep skull as a book-end, a used tampon, Mutt was letting out muffled snorts, probing his butt with his snout, "Mutt get outta there" 人 muttered.

Kieran occasionally flinched but with a mouth that remained fixed as it was led along the shelves of art monographs that circled to their origin, he squeezed her foot to punctuate the silence and that was more than enough.