

Edition 2: November 2014

Exploration

Cats
with
Thumbs



Cats with Thumbs

Literary Blogzine

&

Scratching Post

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Editorial Note

The grey area between poetry and the short story has blurred to an indescribable smudge over the past year. The emergence of dribbles, drabbles, hint, smoke, twiction, sudden pros, threshold fiction, nano, micro fiction, short shots and flash makes categorising these forms extremely difficult.

When you assign a name to something you have control over it, but it also means you can dismiss an entire genre. What is important to remember is that poetry and short stories are siblings and their power is their ability to evoke, rather than state.

It is what they say in the gaps that takes our breath away.

Its what they do, not the word limit. They have a compressed power to evoke.

Contributors to this issue are creators of beautiful images whose work speaks at both an emotional and intellectual level. The varied voices contained in this blogzine have issues to explore and promote which will encourage the reader to take a beat, breathe and emote.

For this reason, this editions contributors are not constrained or categorised, so that beautiful images and words can exist alongside each other, rather than compete. Evocative images and photographs are blended to make this blogzine a work of creative beauty.

This edition is dedicated to the theme of exploration and is set in areas, within the home, in the garden, on the road. While each may feel contained within that setting, the exploration goes beyond the physical. The last, and perhaps ought to be the first, is 'lost' a space which links them all; forcing the continuity of exploration.

Annie

Exploring

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Inside



OVER WATER BY KATE MURRAY

A Wardrobe in a Hotel Bedroom

Warren Paul Glover

Like a sentinel I stand guard over your clothes
Those masks of fashion – or not – that you wear
To disguise your weaknesses and doubts

My loyal lodgers, the coat hangers, rattle like the skeletons
Of the secrets you suppress
Raising the alarm that means you'll never outrun them

When you leave my room, you cast me aside
Like one of your discarded garments, or lovers
And I become again a cavern of loneliness

Until the next guest arrives, and approaches me with desirous intent
And I love them, for I am promiscuous!

Bobby

Suvi Mahonen

Strands of light blue twisted, crossed over, then sank into the expanse of knitted wool only to emerge at the next stitch and repeat the pattern again. They ran in parallel symmetry, converging up to the pompom at the top of the cap. Around the circumference of the brim ran a border of yellow on which marched small embossed elephants, each holding the tail of the one before it with its trunk. Fine wisps of dark hair the same colour as Nick's curled out from beneath the edge to cling to its fuzzy surface in places. When we'd bought it eight weeks ago I'd thought it was too small to fit anyone, but Nick had correctly guessed it would be the right size.

The skin of Bobby's forehead not covered by the cap was furrowed as if caused by a frown. This accentuated his eyebrows, delicate lines of barely there hair on the ledge of his sockets, inclining medially upwards to form an arc at the top of the bridge of his nose. His nose was short, more like a nubbin, tilted slightly upwards at the end like mine; its tip was a little raw, as if wiped by a tissue one too many times.

I ran my finger over the smooth and doughy surface of his swollen lips. Velvety glossed skin a few centigrade cooler than mine. Drooping in loose repose, colour not right, a dusky shade of purple.

He lay in my arms, loosely wrapped in a green flannel blanket, the back of his head resting in the crook of my left elbow. His body was both light and also strangely heavy. I held my arms still though there was no reason why. Looking at him I tried to align our eyes. His lids were parted slightly, a hint of blue between moist lashes. As I sat there, propped with three plastic-covered wipe-down pillows between my back and the bed's head, I kept wanting, almost waiting for those eyes to blink.

Nick sat on the edge of the bed, arm on my shoulder, looking at our Bobby. Afternoon light angled in through the window and cast Venetian-striped contrasting shadows on our son's already mottled cheeks. My finger moved downward tracing his chin, then onwards across his jaw to his left ear, curving to avoid an open patch of sloughed skin. It wasn't the only one. There were two on his right cheek and a large one on the side of his neck, the full extent of its angry margins concealed by the collar of his Peter Rabbit jumpsuit. Made of the softest white cotton, it was the outfit I'd planned for our baby to wear on his first trip back to our home. Across the garment multiple little rabbits sat on their haunches, cheeks puffed with chewing, holding a large carrot whose tip was missing. Sewn into the outside seam of the left shoulder was a tiny blue tag saying this was a genuine item. Matching mitts and booties were still in the bag.

I moved aside a fold of blanket so I could see more of him. His left arm was angled, bent at the elbow, resting on the front of his chest. The embroidered cuff of the suit's sleeve was hitched a short way up the forearm. Between the rim of the cuff and the base of Bobby's closed fist circled a thick clear plastic band fastly secured. In the pocket of the band a slip of paper had words typed on it in small letters, the portion visible to me saying, 'Baby of Alicia Rus ...' The bend over his wrist's bony prominence obscured the rest. A vein line of discolouring more pronounced than that of the skin went up the back of his hand to the fourth knuckle dimple. Lifting his hand gently I straightened his four fingers and thumb from their loose clench. The webbing between them was puffy and wrinkled, like he'd been soaking in a tub for too long.

Such small and frail digits despite their also waterladden state, the creases over their joints swollen to mere faint lines. On his distal pads were enlarged whorls of print. Opaque slivers of flesh were peeling back from around the nails. I closed his fingers again, covering his hand with mine.

We remained in silence.

Me, my husband and our baby.

I was conscious of sounds from outside the room—muffled voices, the ping of a

call bell and the diminishing roll of a trolley. But these didn't enter my reverie. The only noise that was real to me was the whistle of breath from my nostrils and the clicking of the clock's second hand. A mere moment in time, yet this seemed like forever.

'Would you like an autopsy to be performed?' Dr Taylor had asked us.

'Is it necessary?' I said.

'It's your choice. But it may help to find out exactly what went wrong.'

'We'll think about it,' Nick said.

Dr Taylor stood there by the side of my bed. His gaze kept shifting between Bobby and the green blanket. From the edge of my eye I saw his hands move to cross each other and rest at the front of his belt. Speckles of blood soiled the cuffs of his white shirt. I wanted him to leave but also needed him to stay. It was as if I had the delusion that he was somehow able to reverse this. He remained there for a few more awkward minutes then made his excuses and left the room with a final 'Sorry'.

It was then that Nick had put his arm around my shoulder, and we stayed that way with Bobby cradled against my swelled breasts that were aching with the need to lactate.

'You haven't called my mum yet, have you?' I asked Nick as I held onto Bobby's hand.

'Do you want me to?'

I shook my head. Once our families knew, it would be real.

I stared across the room at the wall opposite. Glints of slatted sunlight reflected off the glass that protected a framed painting. A lamb standing on a hill's green slope. Underneath it against the wall was an empty cot on wheels. It was the one in which the midwife had brought Bobby back in to me once she had cleaned, weighed and dressed him.

I looked back at my son and squeezed his hand gently. His soft nails pressed into the folds of my palm. I turned to look into Nick's bloodshot eyes.

'Can you ask the midwives if there are any nail clippers around?'

‘Why?’

‘I don’t want him to be buried with long nails,’ I said.

I started to cry.

“Bobby” has appeared in 2010 The Best Australian Stories.

Her Foreplay Was Not My Religion

silent lotus

the intangible touched me as deeply
as the slit in the peignoir
she pointed to on the mannequin
that she purchased the next day
but never untied the box ribbon
every night when the light went
out.... i had to live without
the sound of crepe paper

i loitered for months before taking
the next bus out of town

Violin Intentions

Tim Greaton

“I’m tellin’ yer, Joe,” Betty said, “My frog was the only reason my daddy stopped touching me. Sure, I was a little bitty thing back then, but I know’d what I seen.”

The bartender continued washing the few glasses left over from the eleven o’clock rush.

Everyone had already gone home for the night. Betty was holding out surprisingly well. A couple of weeks before, she had become a regular who usually had to be walked outside and propped against the building at closing time. He glanced down her low-cut dress, becoming more convinced he could look past her age this once. She was his “type” in most other ways, including that no one would likely miss her if she vanished.

He liked that kind...a lot.

Betty slammed her empty glass on the wood counter.

“Sure could use more o’ that rotgut!”

At one of the only two occupied tables, a middle-aged man wearing a dark blue sports jacket sat next to a woman wearing a man catcher. The tiny red dress hugged every curve, even the ones brought on by too much beer and pretzels. As the man continued to make small talk, Joe wondered why he felt the need to wine and dine a women he ultimately had to pay anyway.

Joe poured Betty another drink.

“So my daddy never violined me again,” Betty finished.

“You mean violated?” Joe asked, peering down her dress again.

“Yep, that’s what I meant,” Betty agreed. Joe was silent. What did he care if her father diddled her?

As usual, she held her drink just below the counter, almost as though she liked the feel of ice against her thigh. Joe could think of something else she might like against her thigh.

“Little girl’s room!” Betty announced, sliding her empty glass on the counter. “Another one,

Joe.”

She tilted as she walked, almost as though her purse were filled with bricks. He couldn't help noticing that beneath her stained and baggy jeans was a glorious slender frame. Hunger did make women enticing, he thought. He'd seen it dozens, if not hundreds, of times.

He missed being overseas. The women surrounding U.S. military bases were amazing. And it helped that most were afraid to talk afterwards.

Joe placed another clean glass on the shelf under the counter.

Screw them, he thought. It was their loss when they kicked him out.

Betty returned walking a little straighter, but her eyes were still glazed.

Joe glanced at the clock: only ten minutes to one. He'd decided it was time Betty had a roof over her head, at least for part of the night. After everyone else was gone, he escorted her to his car then locked the place up. She snuggled up to him as they drove the half-hour to his storage unit.

“Nice place you got,” she mumbled as they parked in the dark alley and he rolled the door up.

He flipped the battery lantern on before throwing her onto the blood-stained mattress. He'd been meaning to replace it.

“I thought you might be the one,” she said, pulling a large water bottle from her purse and emptying the liquid onto the mattress and floor.

Bourbon?

She smiled. “Never was much fer drinkin’ He tried to kick her, but she suddenly seemed younger and rolled lithely away. Something flashed and sliced across his chest and hand. She held up a long knife with a silver frog on the handle.

“I'm not going to be violined again,” she said.

“I don't....”

“Even homeless women's got friends.”

The frog went to work.

My Pen My Gavel

silent lotus

in the upper branches of trees
taller than my Mulberry
blends beautifully the morning sounds of
tree frogs
the tête-à-tête of birds
and vapor trails
of jet airliners

passing

far far over head

& the
new born deer
frolicking
in the

backyard

a walking stick
the reach to serenity

loitering

In the Garden



HARE BY KATE MURRAY

Haiku

Kim Johnson

silence surrounds
no whispers no boughs breaking
ebony cold night

A Rose Taught Me

Gary Hunter

A rose gave me understanding
I bled from her thorns,
smelled her beauty
and watched her fading petals
chase the wind . . .
What more was there to know
about life on this earth?

The Preamble To The Warm-up

silent lotus

*i took death's voice
to its highest aureole to the
finest aperture to where ever
it was that it wanted to go
let it speak to me as if it was for
no one else and no one else was
listening . . .*

i don't remember one stitch of the
wardrobe that she was wearing or
the rouge of her face from the wind
only the circling of sea gulls and that
it was the time of year when parking
meters did not ask for coins

she left designer shoes dental floss
and a screwdriver *the kind to fix eye
glass frames* and went back into the
café first to use the ladies room and
then to wrap up the crusts of her
cinnamon raisin toast

poems of blackbirds

Gary Hunter

rain
with the fragrance
of rose and sadness
speaks in childish giggles
and warlike roars
With the sun
a new leaf emerges
soaked in joy
Did you know poems
of blackbirds
come from great longing
and
that no one kisses us
more than the sun?

Marigolds

Kim Johnson

A flower alive with ambience
in green earth elicits wonder and awe,
dazed by time of year – preciousness.
Snow falls on petals like orange and yellow menageries.
Eagle or raven, like stealth birds in fast flight off the ground –
icy and cold and waiting for days of rich regal sun.
Seen from my window, the beauty of golden blossoming
of flowers, sunny and resilient - vibrating.
I love these tough marigolds growing in winter.



DOWNWARD TIGERLILLY BY A MITCHELL

On the Road



WINTER GATES BY BEC MILLER

Big Earl Wants A Girl

Patrick Welsh

Derek drove his minivan through the ghetto to an abandoned warehouse. The words Big Earl Wants A Girl were spray-painted on the outside wall and a No Trespassing Sign was nailed into the door by the city. Derek kicked open the door and walked down a long filthy hallway, stepping over a homeless elderly man with his pants down, and into the room where he knew his son Derek Jr. would be.

He found his son passed out with a string tied around his arm and with a syringe in his arm. Sighing, he yanked out the needle, hoisted him over his shoulder and carried him outside to his minivan.

Derek stopped at Arby's, choosing the drive-through because he was embarrassed of his son's condition. They ate and then Derek Jr. leaned out of his window and threw up. His father punched the wheel with frustration sending a brief honk out into the parking lot. He calmed himself, smiled, and said, "You know, if the Arby's chef sees you vomit he'll take it as an insult."

Derek Jr. laughed and then gripped his side in pain.

Derek drove home and lowered his son into a hot bath while his wife called the rehab center to schedule his admittance. Derek scrubbed the dirt and dried blood from his son's naked body and thought of the words spray-painted on the wall, Big Earl Wants A Girl. He laughed and asked his son what Big Earl looked like. Derek Jr. opened his mouth to speak but only vomited into the water.

Derek kicked the toilet, left the bathroom, and returned with his ten-year-old son. He walked the boy up to the bathtub and said, "This is what drugs do."

The boy cried and ran out.

In the morning Derek Jr. stepped into his father's minivan to be driven to Pines Rest Rehabilitation, a place he knew well.

Derek would drop his son off and go straight to a job he hated. He thought of how many

hours of abuse he would have to take to put his son through the program again.

He said, "Son. Once you get out, you're gonna go right back to that place again huh?"

Derek Jr. wept and curled up and nodded that he would. He would always go back to that place.

"And I'm just going to have to pick you up again, clean you up, pay for your cure again, and it's never going to end is it?"

Derek Jr. just cried. His father drove past the exit for Pines Rest, back through the ghetto and to the abandoned warehouse. He leaned over, kissed his son on the forehead, and opened the passenger door, saying, "You're twenty-five years old. Old enough."

Derek Jr. cried, in the same way his little brother did. Then the door of the warehouse opened and a large man stepped out. He was three hundred pounds, with bright acne on his face, a bald rocky head and he was wearing a torn pair of mechanic's overalls. He hands were missing several digits and he had also lost some key teeth. He yawned melodically and high-pitched and walked up the street.

"So that's Big Earl?" asked Derek.

Derek Jr. nodded that it was and he stepped from the car and walked towards the warehouse. He turned and watched his father's minivan drive off and then he watched Big Earl fade into the gray landscape of the city.

Two Men and a Gun

Frank Scozzari

It's hard to say exactly how I ended up in this dreadful situation, although I could easily put all the blame on the Thomas-Cook train schedule. If they had made their timetables were a little easier to read, and their columns more evenly aligned, I may have never ended up on a midnight train to Athens. Yet here I was, sandwiched in among all the dissolute of Southern Europe in a third-class train compartment, trying to figure out how I was going to get some sleep.

It was bench seating only, benches that faced one another, with such little space between them that one had to sit straddling the knees of the person opposite you. There were smells of human body odor and of middle-eastern cooking, zeera and black cumin, the mixture of which was not a pleasant thing. I couldn't imagine someone could be cooking in such confined quarters. I looked around but couldn't make out where the smell was coming from. Across from me was a sinister-looking character; a man in his mid-thirties with narrow-eyes and high cheekbones. I assumed he was from North Africa, although one could never really be sure about this kind of thing when traveling along the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean. He had dark skin and an angular face, and he was carrying a canvas satchel with Nubian markings. He was a man of mixed races, and a man who could not be trusted, I knew. Call it experience, or traveler's intuition, after logging many miles through third-world countries one acquires an instinct for this kind of thing. I had encountered this type before; trouble, not in size, but in opportunist nature. And I saw the furtiveness and cleverness in his eyes. He was filthy and unshaven. His clothes were soiled. Among the many odors in the train compartment, one was particularly strong and I assumed it came from him.

And in the instant I was thinking this I caught his dark eyes studying my carry-bag. The satchel, which I kept on my lap, had a shoulder strap securely wrapped around my neck. In

it were my most valued items; my passport and credit cards, what few euros I had left, and some souvenirs I picked up along the way. His eyes went from the bag itself, to the attachment latch, and followed up the strap to where it disappeared around my shoulder.

When he realized I was watching him he quickly turned away. He had a satchel too, and when he saw me looking at it, he pulled it closely to his side.

I brought my hand thoughtfully up to my chin. It was only then that I realized I was likewise filthy and unshaven. Perhaps it was I who smelled of body odor? I thought. I discreetly took a sniff of my underarm but could not tell if the odor was coming from me or not.

It had been nearly three days since I had taken a bath. Having crossed by ferry from Brindisi the night before, arriving in Corfu in the early morning hours, there was no time to shower or shave. By the time I reached Patras, sleepless and exhausted, I was desperate to find a sink or washbasin. But the train station had only the old, European-style bathrooms with a launching platform, no running water, and a bucket for a flush.

It was an uncomfortable arrangement no matter how you look at it. And despite the lack of accommodations and the desperate guy across from me, sleep, I knew, was what I needed most. I looked around the car. It was completely full. A group of young Europass students had already commandeered the one small piece of floor space and were sleeping there, piled on top of one another.

I pulled my carry-bag close to me, keeping an eye on the man across from me, and I tried to get comfortable. In shifting my body weight I accidentally bumped his leg.

“Excuse me,” I said.

He did not reply.

He was sleepy too, I could tell, and as tired as I. His eyes were bloodshot and his lids looked heavy and like they wanted to drop. He also shifted uncomfortably and likewise pulled his satchel in close to his side. Then he curled his hand around it and held on to it like it was filled with gold. It made me wonder what he had in it. Maybe he’s a gem trader? I thought. Or the thief of a gem trader?

If only he would fall asleep. If he would sleep, then I could do the same. And almost exactly when I thought of it, I saw his lids beginning to drop. Go down, I thought. Yes. Let them go down. Let them drop. But then the thought crossed my mine: What if he’s faking?

Lulling me into a false security, so that I would sleep, only to wake up hours later and find my carry bag gone, cut from my shoulder with a knife.

We both exchanged guarded, hard looks, and bouts of drowsiness. His eyes would close, and his head would bob, and then he'd snap himself back awake. And I, in one instant, lost all consciousness, although just for a few seconds, awaking to see him glancing at me with a little smirk on his face.

Not so easy, I thought.

I caught him pinching himself, and then shaking his head, trying to shake out the drowsiness.

You're going down, I thought. I can outlast you. But each time I saw him struggling, I found myself struggling too; fighting off the inevitable sleep that I knew would eventually win over my body.

The night wore on. The vintage train rattled over the tracks. The noise and motion helped kept us both awake. Still, as the hours passed, it became nearly impossible. The accumulation of three bad nights had caught up with me. The weight of my eyelids were feeling like lead shutters, ready to close for a long winter. I did everything I could to fight it. I tilted my head back, and then sideways. I scratched my side, though I didn't have an itch. The good news was that he was not doing much better. I watched his head bobbing. I watched him fighting it, and clinging to his pouch more protectively.

And finally I saw him unclasp the middle button of his shirt and reach down deep into it; down along his side. His eyes gleamed at me. He gave me a little grin, and a head-nod, letting me know that he had something there, a knife or a gun perhaps. It didn't matter what, I realized. He had a weapon of some sort down there in his shirt, and whatever it was, it brought him fresh confidence, and comfort enough to sleep.

And now his eyes began to close and his expression was sure. I watched him with one eye still open, watching me.

And he's probably a light sleeper, I thought, with a hair-trigger finger that's equally light and fast.

It is unfair, I thought, as my eyes, too tired and too heavy to fight it any longer, began to close. There was no justice in it. This scoundrel would have a peaceful night while I would suffer from frequent awakenings and sleep apnea.

Then it dawned on me that I had an option too. The idea seemed too obvious, yet likely to work. I unbuttoned an opening in my shirt and reach down with my hand, down along the side of my chest to where I kept nothing. I left my hand there, warm against my side, and I watched him, his one eye still open, watching me, but fluttering closed.

Okay, I thought, détente. And I smiled at him, a little smile; a warning smile, and I closed my eyes and slept.

The Road to Longreach

Mary Mageau

the coastal fringe
of green and blue
disappears
behind the gateway
to the outback

wheat, sorghum
and cotton stubble
glistens
in the autumn sun
as hawks patrol above

sunflowers
faces to the sky
the last blaze of colour
in the dryland's
barren outlook

brown soil
of the rural strip
surrenders to
brick red, burnt ochre
of the open range

beyond
and further out -
in orange dust
a single cornstalk
displays its tassel

... days pass as we move through the desolate landscape, carved into two parts by the road we travel on, a continual ribbon drawing us straight ahead into its vanishing point, where only spinifex grass and saltbush lies between us and our destination ...

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Lost



HAZY MOUNTAIN PATH BY BEC MILLER

Happiness Halfway

Gary Hunter

I'm thinking
that happiness
waits for us
halfway
then acts
as surprised as us
when we eventually show up . . .

The Spanish Chalice

Warren Paul Glover

The silver chalice sits alone

No longer does it serve

A Spanish throne

Lost at sea

Until now found

At auction

It goes for English pounds



LIONS BY KATE MURRAY

Lions

Janet Shell Anderson

“Mark, you need to see the lions.”

He’s so drunk, so far gone, twenty-seven years old, Mark Davis, back from a castle on the Rhine, from a woman twice his age, Baroness Ursula Von Suttner. She collected him, used him, got rid of him. I picked him up at the airport, BWI. He’s my cousin.

Our mothers were sisters.

“I’m too sick.”

“You need to go. Just to look in their eyes.”

“He’s dead, Jen. Seeing the lions won’t bring him back for us.”

“Maybe they have his spirit in them. Maybe there is such a thing.” Doesn’t he remember Botswana? The Limpopo River? When his brother died, we went there. The lions at the river were a kind of salvation, as if Nicky had not died.

“I’m drunk, but you’re crazy.”

“Maybe. When I see them, I see him alive again.” Nicky. His brother.

“I know. I know. Don’t you think I remember?”

“And Rosewood?”

It is the horror that sits there in the middle of his life. In mine too.

Rosewood was an institution for the profoundly mentally disabled. Mark’s brother Nicky was sent there. Rosewood, thank God, no longer exists. Haunting images online are all that remain of its gothic horrors, its empty corridors, barred windows, terrible grayness. A place where the wordless innocent were tortured by their supposed caretakers. When his brother Nicky died, Mark and I went to Africa together, travelled near the Limpopo River, in Botswana, and there, in the vast, red, brutal African sunset, in the smell of dust, in the great riverine valley full of creatures that seem to come from a time before time, we found the lion that came to us out of the gathering dusk. It had Nicky’s golden eyes. I wonder is there metempsychosis? Transmigration of souls?

As I drive down I-95, Mark tells me he screwed the baroness constantly, that was what she wanted, says he can do it seven, maybe eight times in a night. This is too much information, but I can't shut him up. Before the baroness, he slept with other rich women, one per centers from Green Spring Valley, from My Lady's Manor, second-hand Vanderbilts, not so extremely rich Raskobs, Robbs related to Linda Byrd Johnson, even German aristos, like Von Suttner. Mark's dark, intense, Byronic. The superrich love him.

When he isn't with the women, he's a wildlife photographer, fairly famous. Some of those pictures you see out of Africa, those are his. He says he sleeps with rich women so they'll finance more trips to Africa, raise money for his cause. I wonder. His brother, Nicky, eighteen months older, was a beautiful child, red gold hair, thin, winsome face, like an archaic angel. Gentle. We loved Nicky. When we were six, Nicky disappeared. Our mothers said it was best. Nicky's father didn't care. For a long time we didn't know where he was. I drive to DC, to Connecticut Avenue, to the National Zoo, our old-time refuge. When Nicky disappeared, we thought we would vanish too. In a way, we have. Mark's so drunk he doesn't want to walk, doesn't want to face the steep slope of the National Zoo, the rich reek of summer vegetation in Rock Creek Park. "I want to puke."

"You'll be ok."

"I had to get off the plane in London. They took me off. They put me in the hospital. I was in restraints." I see the fear in his eyes.

"You were so drunk." It was a scandal. "Who paid for that?"

"Ursula? The Brits? I don't know." He doesn't care.

He walks slowly down the slope at the National Zoo. He's so sick. I've gotten him to the animals. It's all I can do. The lions lie in a large area, a big male asleep as we walk near him, sprawled like a drunk, eyes closed, an image of despair. Mark's face is like the lion's. This is a mistake. An animal shrieks in its cage. I smell excrement, urine, sweat. The heat is green and frenzied, the air, disgusting. Nicky was sent to Rosewood, a "home" for Fragile X children. Twenty three years old, Mark and I located Rosewood, went to visit, carried a soft toy lion for Nicky, like one he'd loved.

We found him.

He lay strangled in his restraints, hands grasping metal bars of the bed, blind eyes open. He was the last one to die in Rosewood. We made sure of that.

The lion opens his golden eyes and looks into Mark Davis' dark ones. A shaft of sunlight crowns the great beast's head.

Lions.

After I came back from Africa, I became a prosecutor. Mark has raised more than a million dollars for Fragile X children.

But we both fear some day, some night, like Nicky, we will just disappear.

"Live as long as you can," I say. "I need you."

The Shaft

Tim Greaton

I fell at least thirty feet.

It's hard to tell exactly how deep this shaft is, but that's my best guess. I mean, a man couldn't survive a longer drop. Could he?

A furry limb brushes against my cheek. I don't bother to push him away. I call him Harry—no pun intended. It's like we're friends now. I think he's been hurt, too.

I pull the new piece of webbing from my face. It's a thick, sticky string. I roll it up between my palms. It reminds me of Mr. Salbury's class where Eric and I used to roll up balls of masking tape and throw them at each other whenever he wasn't looking. That was fifteen years ago. I toss the web roll against the stone wall beside the others. How much longer can Harry keep making this stuff?

I didn't know they came this big...spiders, I mean. I had to pull Harry out from under me after the fall. He must weigh five, six pounds.

I hear him move down toward my legs.

I'm a little hungry, but mostly thirsty. A soda would sure go good. My leg hurts. It's pitch black here, blacker than I've ever seen. Many times, when I was a child, I thought I was in the dark. Now I realize I wasn't. When I hid in closets, light always seeped in through the cracks around the door. And those times me and the other kids held séances in the basement, light always made its way through the makeshift drapes we stapled over the squat windows. But the bottom of this shaft is truly dark. This blackness doesn't even carry the memory of light.

I knew my leg was broken in several places by the way my right sneaker was pressing against my left ear when I came to. I must have passed out a dozen times before I was finally able to push the shattered limb back where it belongs. Still crooked, but....

I struggle to a sitting position. I'm really hungry now and I'd die for a drink. Harry and I are friends, but I think he knows what I'm thinking; he doesn't come near my upper body any more.

He's done a good job with my leg, though. Wrapped it real good. It hardly hurts at all. I've been pulling off any webbing higher than my upper thigh. I think the lower part is completely cocooned now.

When we get out of here, I'm going to put Harry through medical school. He'll like that. Chuckle.

I don't expect anyone will find me here. I came alone. Me and Julie had a fight just before, so I didn't tell her where I was going. Hell, I didn't even know myself. Just grabbed the flashlight and started walking.

I used to come into these caves a lot when I was a kid—

I feel a sharp pain in my right shin.

"Cut it out, Harry!" I shout. Echoes of my croak fill the cool, stale air. "Be careful, will you? You've got the worst bedside manner I've ever seen." Chuckle.

It's been over forty years since they stopped mining here. I heard there never was much gold anyway, just enough to tease old man Winters into bankruptcy. No one else was stupid enough to pick up where he left off. Been abandoned ever since.

I don't feel much now, just the chills that occasionally sweep like a Canadian wind up and down my spine. It's as though my nerve endings finally gave up, excepting only the sporadic checks to make sure I'm not dead yet. It's just a matter of time....

Too tired to sit anymore, I'm lying with my head propped on a rounded stone. A few jagged shards of rock poke at my back, but they don't bother me now. Funny, how a person can get used to things. Another pain shoots through my leg.

I kick Harry.

He was attempting to wrap my left leg at the time. It's not that I mind. I know he needs the practice for med school, but....

I only take two of his legs this time.

He crawls away.

I think he's mad.

Seems fair to me. After all, I did give him one leg and mine are bigger. I suck the juice from the furry limbs then chew through the fur to get at the stringy flesh. Reminds me of the frog legs we used to eat at Range Pond Camp Ground. We never had frogs this big, though.

With food in my stomach I drift off to sleep, barely noticing as Harry again begins work on my left leg... hold the rock tightly in my right hand. I rub my chin with the other and feel the stubble has turned to almost a beard. I wish I could get at my comb to run through it, but Harry's got me webbed just above the waist.

He'll definitely be a credit to the medical profession: pain in my leg's completely gone.

I hear him sliding across the floor. Now that four of his legs are missing, it's much easier to hear him. He's real careful not to come too close to my arms.

Suddenly, I pitch the rock.

A satisfying thump announces my success. Everything from my waist down is wooden. It takes me the longest time to manoeuvre my body close enough to grab him.

A tear runs down my cheek as I rip two more legs from his plump body. I'm worried that I hurt him with the rock.

After I've eaten, I hug his body and fall into a deep sleep....

My right arm is still free. In my hand I hold a small round stone. I promised Harry I wouldn't hit him with a big one again.

I listen carefully for any sound of movement. Harry's having a tough time getting around, only one leg and all. I don't know how he's going to make out when I take the last one. It's only fair, though.

I hear him scurry. My rock flies....

I hug Harry tight, a furry ball against my cheek. He's shivering. I don't think he'll make it much longer. I feel pincers breaking the skin on my neck as I drift into the land of dreams.

Contributors

Janet Shell Anderson was nominated for the Pushcart Prize for her fiction, has been published by Vestal Review, decomP, Convergence, Belleville Park Pages, FRIGG, Grey Sparrow and others. Her work is published in Paris and London. She is an attorney.



Annie Evett is a contributing editor in a number of publications and manages a small Indie publishing house committed to promoting the short story form. Trained as an actor and teacher, Annie does voice overs and readings for radio and leads workshops on the creative process, as well as on social issues and lifestyle. She has a string of short stories published and has been guest editor and judge for a variety of international anthologies and short story competitions.

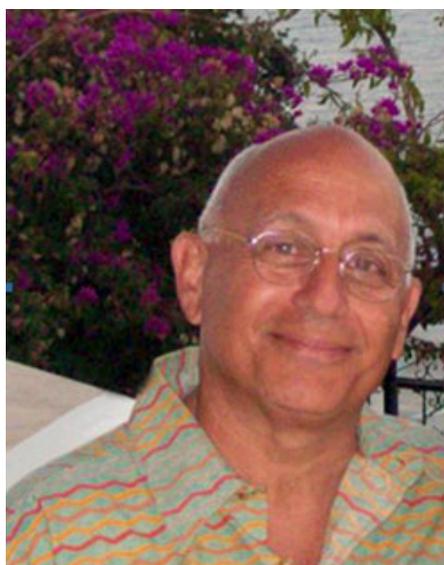
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Warren Paul Glover is an English writer, actor and director living in Sydney, Australia. Warren writes screenplays, stage plays, short fiction and poetry, and is currently attempting a novel. Warren's short fiction and poetry is published by Ether Books: <http://catalog.etherbooks.com/Authors/259>. He is represented by Roxy's Mob Talent Management.

Tim Greaton lives in Southern Maine, where he shares space with a beautiful wife, two exceedingly bright college sons, a dog, three cats, and more ducks than can usually be counted. When not working on corporate writing projects or novels, Tim can usually be found landscaping, pounding nails, or doing something equally restive on the family's surrounding seven acres.

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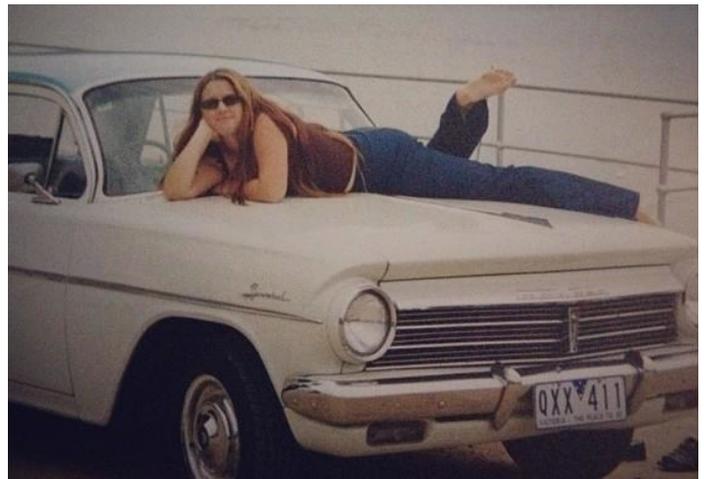
Mary's blog, Nature as Art and Inspiration, is located at <http://marymageau.wordpress.com>

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Bec Miller is a Brisbane based photographer who sees beauty in all landscapes.



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