

Sit

&

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planes

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by

Tom

Shute

I first meet you on that little suburban street whose brick terrace houses are all painted something between half-burnt red and deep, earthy brown. And you pass me briskly with your earphones in and your beanie covering half your face, then smile awkwardly when we're still headed in the same direction. We bound the stairs. "Hey! Are you going to Sally's?" "Sure am." And when Sally opens the cream-colored door to her Tardis-like apartment her face lights up the colour of the sun.

"You two! It's so nice to see you. As if you already know each other!" "Oh, no, we don't... We met just a minute ago." But Sally's set on reeling off to us all the different drinks that are in the fridge, what the sky looks like melting over her little balcony, and on insisting that there are more people coming. I take a glass from the kitchen and pour myself a cheap chardy I bought from Aldi for \$4; offer you one. "Sure," you say.

Half an hour later we're sitting on little deck chairs with Mohammad and Mikaela and your friend Jimmy, laughing whilst trying to calculate the total amount of hours we've spent on hold during Centrelink phone-calls. "More hours than I've spent talking to people at parties," you say. "Well, in that case, we should probably make sure you do a lot of talking tonight," Jimmy says, grabbing your hand and pulling you up. "Oh, by the way, what's your name?" I say "Tom" and you tell me yours, then disappear in the direction of a boy with a pink shaved head Jimmy thinks is cute.

Later on it's 9pm, and after a few hours spent perusing around the little square apartment rooms talking about gender politics, bathtub plants and that corona virus thing that came earlier this year and still hasn't really blown over, we meet again, on the way to the kitchen to get another drink. "Hey! Let me get you one this time," you say, wiping your nose on your baggy blue top. You take two robust porter beers from a half-torn six pack and hand me one. I apologize that the alcohol I offered you was so much cheaper than the alcohol you're offering me now, and you laugh and sip soft bubbling beer. Jimmy's got himself wrapped up in a heated debate about fascism and Mikaela and Mohammad are moshing half-seriously to Justin Bieber remixes, so we sit on the wooden floor of the tiny balcony. You tell me you and your ex used to sit together on their apartment balcony, watching women in expensive suits walk past on their phones to their husbands about what kind of vegetables needed to be picked up from the supermarket on the way home. "Me and my ex camped in a little suburban island in Sydney once," I say, "and we laid down on a concrete slab facing the Sydney harbor and watched planes fly over our heads." "That was over a year and a half ago. I started a new relationship this month last year. I like where I am. But I've been thinking about planes ever since... Sorry for the little monologue." "Hey, no, it's fine," you say. "Nice even. Tell me more." And so I do.

The first page of a book I never wrote

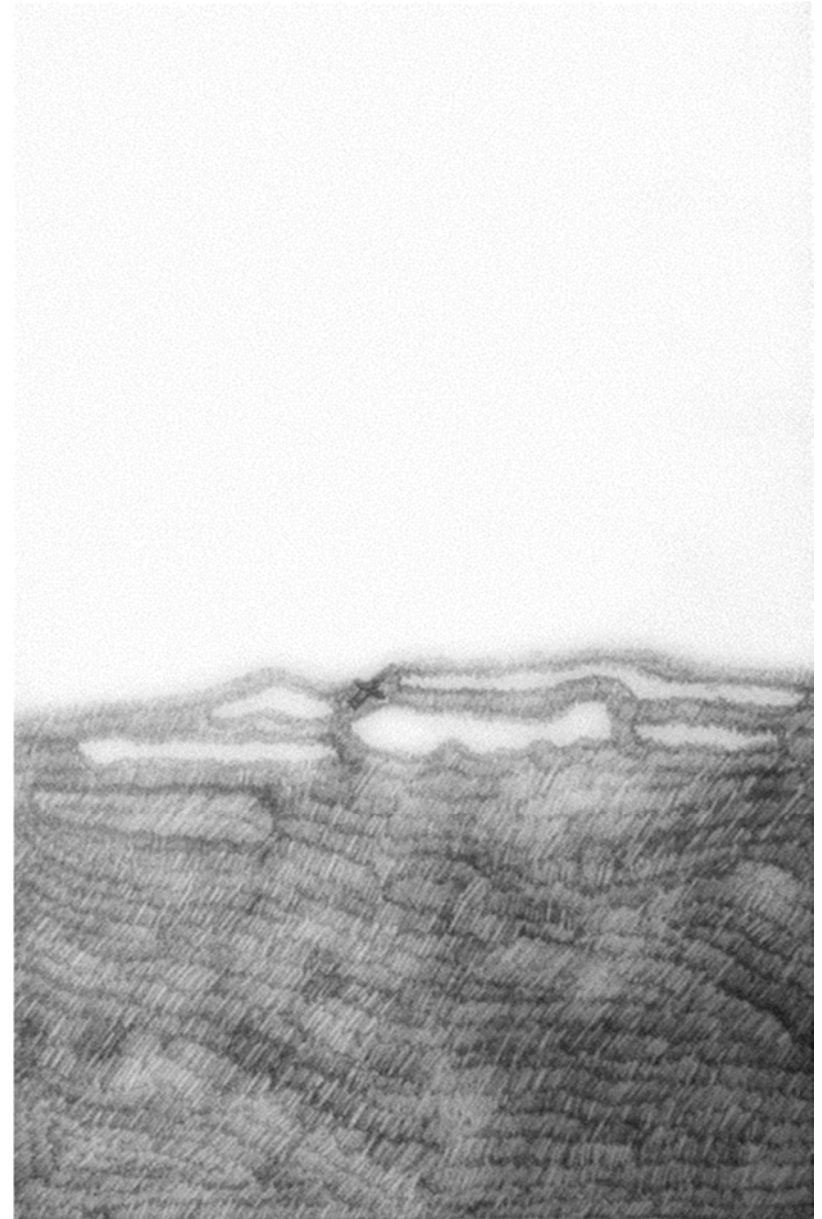
I want to be honest, about everything, but I don't know how. I'm trying to do things and say things and be things and make people smile and make myself smile and walk forwards and wipe the crust from my eyes and live, sun-kissed and tired, but proud.

Sometimes, I don't know if that's what I'm doing.

I hurt people I love; I lose friends; I repeat behaviours I know affect others; I still catch myself thinking things I shouldn't; I carry guilt like a takeaway box in a plastic bag. Why didn't I say anything? — I should've told you. Why did I say that? — I've already seen your cheeks full of rainwater because I said that. It's not that I've been reading the map backwards, or that I had it on driver's route, rather than for walking. It's more that I insist that there is a map, even when I know there's not. Like how when you're a little kid and you're staring down the street your family home is propped up on, the end seems to converge, like it's a single point. Yet, when you make it there, you're confronted with more streets — more city red cars driving along raining tarmac roads; more parents wheeling baby blue prams; more old Greek couples waiting for the tram; more bicycles locked to street signs.

I'm going to collect my thoughts, like these marquee tents store rainwater. I can no longer expect to order them. Not really. The rain seems to get caught in one side of the tent roof and spill out the other. But still, I'm going to try and say something.

Say something to you.



I thought that would be the first page of some book. That would be a few hundred pages of some story I'd spend hours telling some person like you on a balcony at a party. A story I'd spend my whole life living. With someone who laughed in some beautifully particular way I can no longer remember.

Where did you think you'd be by now? On those nights when you were sitting on that balcony, all wrapped up in their smile? And where do you think you are now, so far from it all, but always under that same sky?



Fleeting forever's

cause I've been loving days that seem to end
in half forgotten memories
that taste the way they did
when they were playing softly
through my smiling eyes

and I still sing her name
softly in the space between
these passing rumbling cars
and kids riding scooters
with their hands inside
each other's pockets

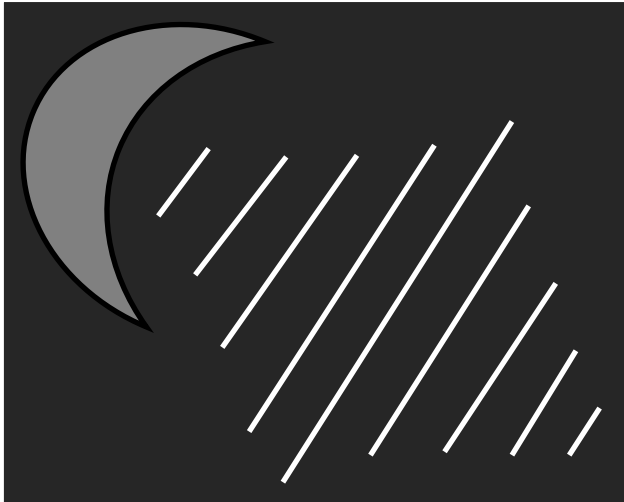
and do you still know

the smell of their body drenched
in half-awake
breathing dolphin murmurs
and smells like freshly squeezed
orange juice?

and do you still know

dreams of a shower head spurting
morning steam
your knees are on the bathroom floor
with a gold ring glinting
"love me
for a very long time"?

You sip on cold porter beer and change the conversation to politics. “Like, governments placing refugees in detention centers and then blaming China for detaining journalists—isn’t that just so much easier to talk about than heartbreak?” “Nah, not really. And who says our hearts are broken anyway?” You laugh little gassy beer burps. “Uh oh. Here we go.” Your voice somewhere in-between teasing and encouraging. The same way a TV show host talks to their half-baked actor guests. Except with a more casual flair, and a late night deep black sky stretching loosely up above our heads.



Half-cracked smiles

You'd say “hey, I need you”
with your face a blanket with the sun
streaming through it

When I winced it was only ever
cause I saw fruit trees
in your open eyes

And when you said you felt it
snap in two
I sewed a piece of pinewood
to my chest and tried
to feel the same

But each splinter was really just a smaller
piece of wood
the jagged ends a different
way to smile

And, like how four torn-
up shirts could be
ruined
or a little part
of your favorite checkered
patchwork yellow, green shirt

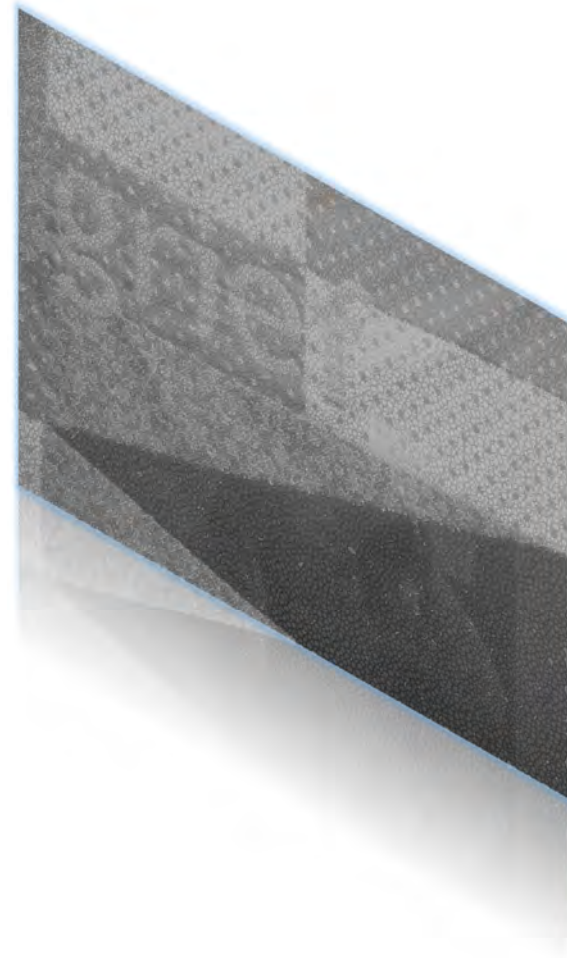
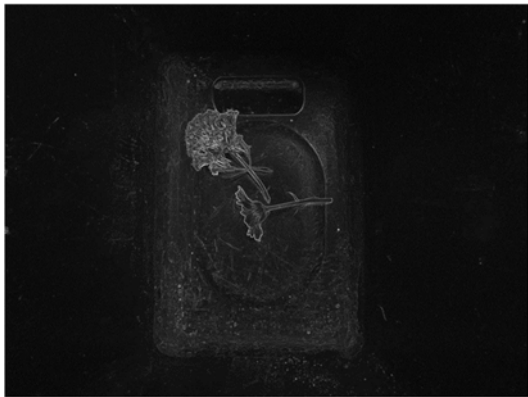
Maybe
we're not br

ok

en.

You smile through my story. Then say your mother died when
you were four. You cut the heads off every toy she ever
bought you. Put her nail polish remover in every glass vase
your father put the flowers people brought you in. And
remember those days in fragments. Like leaves dropping in
that yellow colored season.

But you remember broken. Like it was this morning's break-
fast cereal, left
half eaten on a
marble
kitchen bench.



Dying to be alive

Nanna stopped breathing in a hospital ward the moment the priest started talking at her sister's funeral. Everybody said it was like we were in a film. One of those slow-motion moments when everything simply *stops*.

My cousin turned pale a few short hours after she sent texts telling everyone they could visit in a few day's time. Her husband simply bellowed. Carved her initials on his fingers. And her four-year old son asked if they could bury her phone inside that big dirt hole, so they could still *call her*.

And the last time I saw Nanna my mum was on the phone calming down the girl I had let go of to kiss 28 year-old men in lane-ways, then begged to still be able to love a month later. She said, in a fleeting moment, maybe she wanted to die. And I walked to the other side of the hospital and *prayed*.

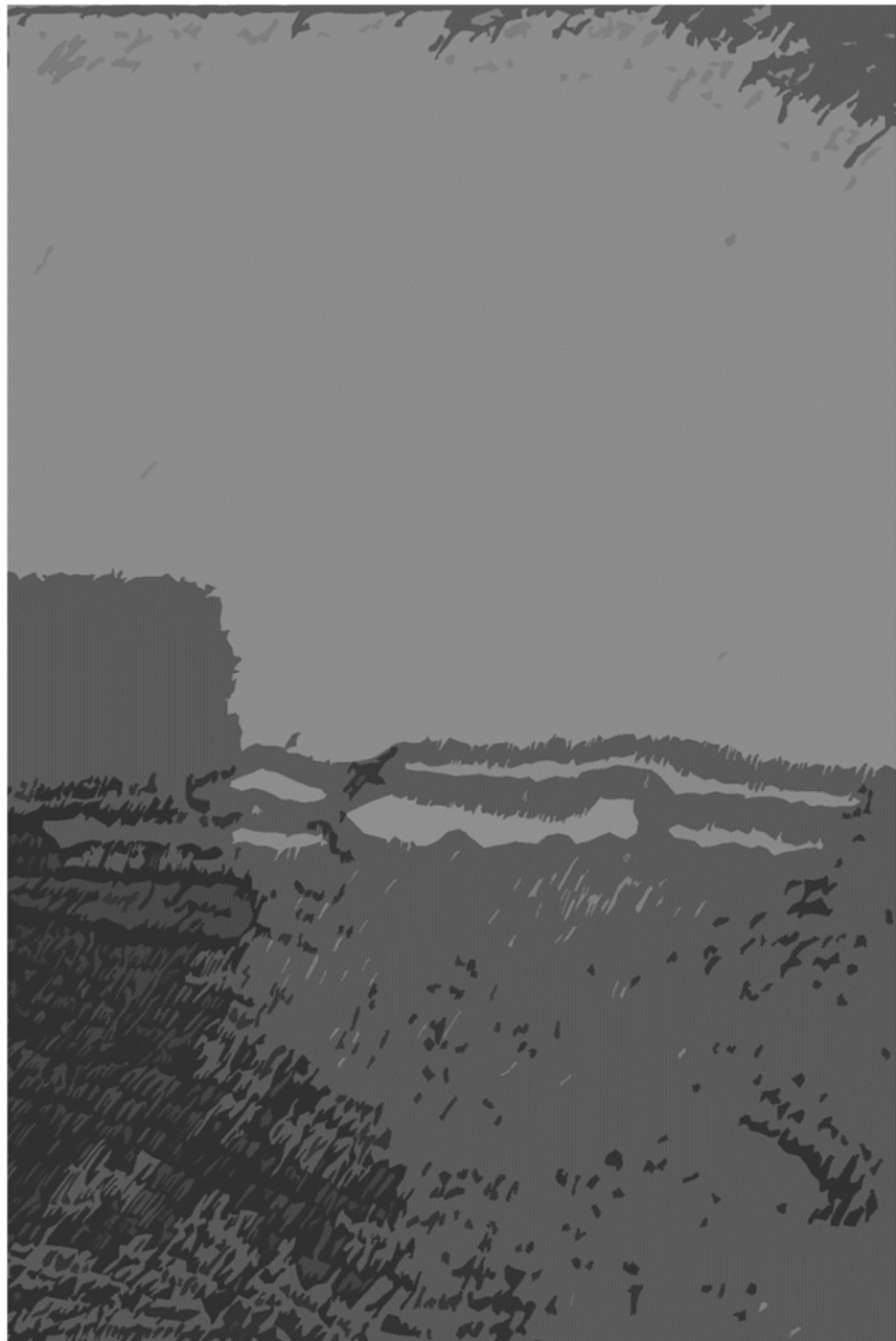
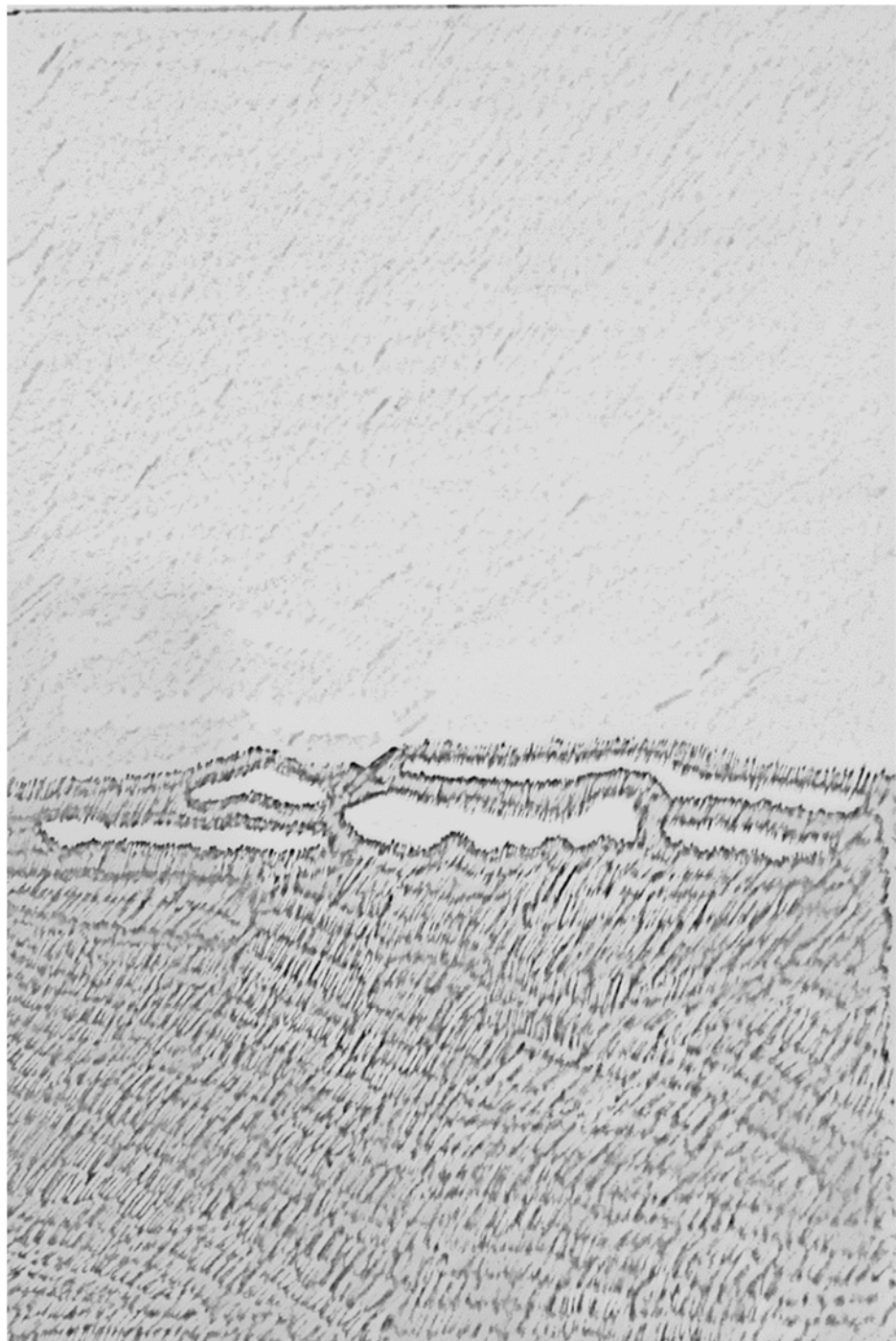
Like

"Hey, God, I don't believe in you (I'm sorry). But I believe in this girl. So, please, help her be *okay*."

And I still don't know if that God dude ever did. Help. But I remember the first time I really felt her smile, after all that. How it felt like rainwater kissing growing seedlings *softly*.

I say I'm sorry. Try to speak more but the words don't come out right. So end up mumbling something about the way the clouds are still visible in this night-black sky. You laugh and mumble back: "Mum's up there. Even though that stuff's all bullshit. She's up there, *smiling*."

A plane flies by and doesn't stop to stare. "Looks exactly like the one I saw with my ex in Sydney," I tell you. "Looks exactly like the past getting up and going some place else," you tell me. And, for a second, I'm lost for what to *say*.



Yesterdays

We pick flowers at the street on the corner of your house, and you laugh and it sounds musical. Walk up to the 16 and catch a tram to the Lido, and you're on the phone to your mum as we roll along. And here comes the melody. Energetic hello's, syllables melt into one another, and before I know it, you're saying that you love her. Whilst looking at me. Like an interlude of a favorite album. Only sounds, but you could swear you hear the lyrics.

And I get home from Japan and it's colder on the streets that circle round your house. Where I watch, half-smiling, my granddad make deadpan jokes to the receptionist at the Cabrini . Hoping I'll bump into you. Convince my parents to do the shopping at the supermarket you tend to go to. They're fighting about something. I close my eyes and buy the expensive bread Mum asks for. And I'm in the carpark, where Dad makes me redo the park three times before we get out and go shopping. And, oh, time still isn't following rules these days. So I take a peek at the sun reflecting on your apartment building where a crop of flowers grow out of the corner where the bins go. Then keep on driving.

And it's winter when we meet. You in a purple rugby jumper. That makes me dream you woke up in an op-shop . We catch a tram into Fitzroy to get pizzas the size of our heads. But it's closed. So we eat burgers on the second floor of a shop overlooking clothes stores and people walking out of them. Head back to those skyscraper streets and drink beers in a park overlooking a tiny lake. Talk about the people we love sheepishly. Laughing without knowing why. And I go home and wait for the summer where we're picking flowers for each other.

And it's 3.30PM and still as hot as sunned up concrete on my naked feet. Like, if I stretch my hands out far enough, I could touch a January, all the way here from October. And the bus comes late. And your name is accompanied by your face in my head for a moment. Teathy grin and tears the day we said goodbye. So I board and fold that memory in my pocket. Think about that girl I started talking to on tinder. Saw your name on there. All cute-belly-full-and-fast-asleep-at-10-oclock looking. And I see a tree blur slowly through the bus-tinted window like half-developed film. The sun sitting on it. And it looks the way that tree on the corner of your house did. That day I told you how sun stretching through a tree reminds me of my grandma. Then months later started reminding me of you. Throw ing your clothes off in the corridor when it was hot. And now I'm looking at it seeing just a tree. With pale yellow sleeping on it. Like how a beautiful moment is still just another moment fading. So, getting off this bus, I pick a yellow flower, and spend this moment cradling it to my chest.

Today

Honey decided this morning ,with sleep sprawled across her cheeks, that since it's been over a year and a while since we'd been all fuzzy head and smiley just the two of us, that today was a day for big white bubbles. We had savory buckwheat crepes for lunch and drunk a cheap bottle of prosecco on the front garden couch. Talked about that time we drunk country supermarket white in her mumma's van the night we ate pasta in trangia pots at 10pm.

A big truck whizzed past and I told her about the story my primary school library teacher read to us when we were 10. A girl whose first ever word is octopus wants only to be a garbage truck driver like her dad. Honey drew complicated patterns on my hands. I asked her what they formed and her face turned all bubbly, like small wet hands in soapy water. "I'm drawing you, in the passenger seat of a garbage truck, writing poems about octopuses between traffic lights."

I kissed imaginary letters across her stomach and told her they spelt "you're kinda cute." Rolling her eyes, she waddled off; a blur of yellow turtle-neck and overalls, like a Mario and Luigi brothers outfit. I picked a rose from the front yard, tucked it behind the same ear she whispered in, and headed on inside.

The time between the yesterday I thought I'd write a book about,

and today

1

year,

8 months &

11

days.



And if *yesterday* has gone some place else then where is *today*? Is it getting up and going too? Or is it sitting *still*, here, with us, leg's *dangling over* the varnished wood balcony of *Sally's place*?

After several minutes of my eyes tracing the city skyline like a torn out page from a connect-the-dot booklet, you stretch your arms and yawn. "Dude, y'know, we've been out here for nearly three hours and all we've talked about is romantic relationships and death. I think I might fall asleep at this rate." You line your empty beers up in a wonky line and I head into the kitchen and come back with two mugs and the remaining quarter of my cheap bottle of chardy. "If we drink it in mugs it's kind of like having a relaxing nighttime tea," I say, pouring the wine as you cackle. Mikaela, Jimmy and Mohammad come sliding through the glass door of the apartment's little lounge-room holding plastic containers of takeaway Indian food. "You two have been awfully rude," Mikaela says, pulling out a pouch of tobacco with a few filters swimming in it and a pack of papers with the top lip torn length ways a few t times. I turn to you. "Well, what do you want to talk about?"

“What do you remember about that corona virus thing?”

Sitting on the front yard couch two weeks after moving out for the first time, watching wind pull the pumpkin plants in different directions as Honey climbed through our bedroom window carrying a little plate of toast / Mohammad says he remembers his mum putting a wall of chairs along the entrance to the kitchen so no one could interrupt her during baking hours / Mikaela places the butt of her cigarette in the empty plastic container that the saag paneer was previously in and says she 's never drunk as much tea as she did in those six months / cinnamon, always open on the kitchen bench / the sound of car traffic gradually getting louder each month, like a half-awake child turning up the volume on the TV when their parents weren't watching / kindness from strangers / morning joggers walking and talking on the phone / zoom calls put on mute so I could smile as Honey poked her head into our room to ask if we could eat choccy / Jimmy says he downloaded grindr in May, two weeks after he noticed himself getting turned on lying on the couch with his pants off as his housemate tattooed the outline of his pink fixie bike on the top of his right thigh / the smell of paint from neighbors starting little projects in their backyard / time stretching on, going quick, spreading itself face down in snow angel position on the lounge-room floor / buses driving past with no more than 5 passengers / the feeling of being closer to the present, yet less attentive of it.

“What’s your favorite colour?”

“Purple.” “Blue.” “Orange.” I say I don’t have one. Jimmy presses me. So I say something wanky about the blurry, light colour you see when you first open your eyes in the morning and are still adjusting to the fact that the world has been awake for several hours now. Mohammad says he wants to change his answer. Says he likes the colour brown when you’re like a little kid mixing all the paints in your primary school art class together. Mikaela says she likes the colour of raindrops on bright surfaces. And Jimmy insists his favorite colour is still just purple.

“What’s your go to place to buy fruit & veg?”

“The organic store in Seddon.” “La Manna.” “Aaah... Coles?” “Oh, actually, Coles bins.” “You mean from bin dives?” “Yeah, absolutely.” “Yeah, nice.” “Maybe you should try La Manna’s bins.” “Ooooh, good idea.” “Honey’s veggie garden?” “Yesss! And figs from overhanging branches on people’s front yards.” “And one’s hanging over laneways.” “Damn, I wish I had a Greek Nonna’s garden.” “Mmmm. Me too.” “Yeah. And a Greek Nonna’s temperament. Would make awkward tinder dates more interesting.” “Hey, what’s your favorite place to buy fruit and veg?” And you start to smile. Widely. Say through laughter: “Mum and Dad’s place.”



Time keeps ticking. Night-time seems half-way close to morning. You rub your eyes as Sally opens up the glass sliding door to our little slice of her wooden balcony, that boy with pink shaved hair quickly kissing down her neck. Jimmy grits his teeth in exaggerated disdain. "Fuck this," he proclaims. "Why does no one have a grasp on sexual fluidity?" "Hey," the dude with pink hair says. "You asked me before if I was gay, not if I wanted to make out with you." And Jimmy's a spluttering mess by now. All grumpy toddler smiles, as Sally says she's thought about attraction to women a lot, but doesn't know if she'd ever actually act on it. Mohammad says it doesn't really matter; "Just flirt with whoever you want to flirt with and see what happens." "Just listen to yourself," Mikaela adds. "Doesn't have to be a big critique of heteronormativity, even if a lot of the way our society thinks about this stuff is kinda fucked." Georgey rubs his pink head and says he has a friend from Uganda whose uncle was beaten and detained for kissing his friend in public. "We're all in one big fucking bubble. And sure, guilt doesn't do anything to change the structures of the places where people can't be themselves. And we can be aware, and we should. But also, we can, be ourselves, so let's just focus on that." Sally grabs his hand, Mikaela smiles at Mohammad, you go over to Jimmy and give him a real big hug, and I wonder what Honey looks like right now, all tucked up snoring in our bed. "Hey," I say. "I think this might be the first time ever I've been a part of a conversation like this without saying anything myself, or going all on and on about my gender and sexuality. It's kinda nice." Jimmy says "Oh, shit, sorry. What are your pronouns?" And I just smile, as the night fades away.

Another plane soars above us, and I say "Look! Someone's coming home, someone's leaving, and someone's building something new." In just a moment we'll all be getting up and heading home ourselves. That point where we're all so close to fast asleep that we could nearly taste it. You say hey, "We should all hang out together sometime. Georgey scrawls his number on Sally's left palm; says that sounds nice. Jimmy, Mohammad and Mikaela all exchange numbers. I think, *I'm glad. I'm glad I'm here with all of you.* And,

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