



birdvillemagazine
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THE WOOD OF SUICIDES
andrew kertes

There's a legendary cliff, somewhere in Sonora, I'm told, from which it's possible to fly.

I can imagine the first man to leap from that bluff. He removes his hat, slicks his hair, and straightens his shirt. He says a quick prayer, and begins to run. Up and over ruddy gravel. His bare feet pucker on sharp edges. There is blood in his footprints. His lungs burn. Sweat congeals in his eyes. And then the sun fills his vision. He falls up into that column of air. He's caught, thrown up, skittering free, flipping like a cat's toy. Spinning, he catches glimpses of the desert; his horse, the thin trail, all slipping away. He bleeds tears, big and hard as rock salt. Rising, his vision is filled by blue. He hears only ripping speed. Perhaps the shirt is stripped from his back, perhaps his limbs are broken by the force. Either way, he is borne into the sky-world ignominiously – an unwelcome intruder.

I've encountered two conflicting stories. In the first, more prosaic version of the legend, those leaving the clifftop are caught by the updraft and rise a few hundred feet before the column is broken by intersecting wind, at which point they fall to their deaths. But in other versions, something magical happens: There, high above us, in a band of elastic atmosphere, the travelers are trapped, frozen flies in amber, drift-

that was chipped in places.

"Read this," said his father, passing him the fat manual. "It tells you about how to work the slides. The man calibrated it - it works great!"

"What's it for?" asked the boy.

"It's for your mother and I being idiots. It's for your birthday. But I have to go. Careful with it, okay?"

"Okay."

When the microscope was finally arranged on his quickly-tidied desk, the boy got the wooden box from his top drawer. He carefully took out army men and a colourful, dead butterfly and a lost tooth, caked with blood, to find the tiny white egg in a bottom corner. He placed the egg under the eyes of the scope and stood on his chair to see into it.

The egg was enormous, and came up at him like he could wrap his hands around it. In the crater where the egg had opened the edges were warped inward, as if it had melted in on itself after a scorching blast. A faint orange outline showed where some vile liquid had dried around this cusp, and inside it patterns like ancient amoebae were just visible against the bright white shell. It was enormous, and it looked like the tall egg of a dinosaur. But not an ordinary dinosaur, some kind unknown to science which the boy had discovered. Something feathered and violent and big, and colourful and fast and hidden in the dense jungle where it lived.

to look elsewhere. He was told there was a place in a nearby suburb which was dedicated to that kind of scientific equipment.

“Christ, I don’t have time to go all the way over there. I have to work today.”

“Sorry,” the staff member said. “We don’t really keep any of that stuff.”

The optics store was clean and everything was presented under glass. There were a lot of telescopes posed in the window. Steve waited at the counter for a couple of minutes before a grey-haired man appeared from the rear office.

“I just need a microscope for my son,” he said. “Do you have anything on special?”

“I suppose I do,” he said. “It’s not really for a child, I’m afraid, it’s more-”

“Don’t worry about that.”

“There’s this,” he said, sliding open a cabinet. “It’s refurbished, so I can’t offer you a box, but I’ve got the original manual. American make.”

“It’s huge.”

“Oh it’s an excellent unit, sturdy. Stereoscopic, see? It’s not cheap, you understand.” The man turned over a label to show Steve the discounted price.

“God,” said Steve. “Alright, alright. Have you got a bag for it, at least? Something I can carry it in?”

“Hey buddy,” said Steve. “Close your eyes. I’ve got something for you.”

The boy sat up in his bed, then put his hands over his face. He felt something heavy pull at the sheets between his legs. When he looked the big microscope was sitting in front of him, shiny with black enamel

ing in a train of broken corpses. Suicides and adventurers, lips cracked, fingers curled and bitter, trapped in a hidden band of convection.

The diaries and letters of early aviators largely conform to the second version. In one memorable account, a pilot speaks of reaching from his open cabin and touching the mist of dead men, his nails scraping against frozen shocks of hair, breaking stubble that is caught in wingtip vortices and dispersed.

There are still stranger accounts.

In some versions, the dead bodies become a kind of reef. Life accretes. Swallows and wind-lost moths harbour in the folds of their bodies, building nests of stolen tobacco and pubic hair. Slow-flying pelicans graze the sluggish currents, mouths wide and filtering, gripping slippery sparrows from oozing vapour, slow and graceful as whales. Albatrosses, wingspans of fifteen feet or more. Lammergeyer that blot the sun, feathers smooth as polished brass.

In the late 90’s, during the dot-com bust, I met and interviewed “X”, a onetime poet and electrical technician. His clever fingers were tanned with cigarette smoke, and he made no secret of his addiction to methamphetamine. He lived in New York City.

I began each morning by wandering the outer edges of Central Park near my hotel (I never mustered the courage to fully penetrate that tamed wilderness – it struck me as unbearably sad, surrounded on all sides by indifferent steel). Sometimes I would listen to recordings of our previous conversations. Other times, I would listen to music, running through his story in my mind.

We’d met, of course, through the internet. I’d

published a small article on a semi-reputable website, referencing the air-reefs.

RE: YOUR ARTICLE
DEAR MR N.,
I HAVE SOME EXPERIENCE WITH THE FLOATING
WORLD. WE SHOULD MEET.

Unbelievably, he claimed to have been a whaler from Nantucket during that island's short time as the world's premier whaling port.

"That was hundreds of years ago," I admonished.

He told me they'd been sailing somewhere "on the line" (that is to say, the equator - presumably close to Mexico). He'd been assigned to morning watch and was sitting on the cross-bar of the mainsail, feet dangling as he watched the sunrise. "Then," he said, dewy eyes rolling into his skull, "I saw a big whip of air tear across the water. I didn't even have time to cry out, or jump down onto the deck. The wind caught me and carried me up into the air.

"I passed out, and when I came to, my mouth, ears and nostrils were absolutely coated in dried blood. I looked around, and I was floating. I was convinced I was dead. But then I wiggled around a bit, and I realised, 'I'm still alive.'

"After a while, I worked out the barriers of my world - too far down, and my arms and legs would get slack and heavy, because the air was too thin to support them. If I went too far up my fingertips would get all crusty and black, because of cosmic rays. It was like I was an eel, caught in a drainpipe in the desert.

"It was three days before I saw the first reef. At the edges it was little animals - dead possums and

dles of the guns.

"Don't make a mess. Why don't you wait until later for that? Happy birthday, sweetie," said his mother, leaning over the table to give him his card.

"We can play in a bit," said the boy's father. "Have your breakfast and we can play."

After they'd eaten the boy took the set up to his room, where he put in the rest of the batteries and fired a gun to hear its tinny sound effect. After a while he thought about the microscope. He kicked the plastic guns and the strap-covered receivers under his desk and hid under his bed to cry.

"He was upset, Steve."

"He wasn't. It's just the attention and all that. You know how he gets sometimes."

"He gets like that when he's upset."

"Well? What should we do about it? What do you want me to do about it?"

"It's his birthday. You should get him that microscope."

"He can't have everything. He needs to learn that sometime. Anyway it's too late."

"Go in the morning, early. We'll say we forgot it upstairs."

"Jesus, you really... Where do I even get a bloody...? Alright, I'll go. I'll go."

"He was really upset, Steve."

In the morning the boy's father parked his car in an empty lot and waited by the shuttered entrance to the department store. When it opened he checked the toy section, and then the sporting goods section, and finally found a staff member who suggested he'd have

The boy shrugged. After a while he raised the bean up and bit a small, measured part of it off between his front teeth.

The boy did not save up any pennies. He spent his money on bright green sweets wrapped in thin plastic, packets of cards filled with images of beasts and heroes, and cheap guns that broke after pulling too hard on their triggers. But he didn't forget about the microscope.

On the morning of his birthday he woke up early and padded with bleary eyes downstairs to the kitchen. He could smell bacon cooking and there was a glass of orange juice waiting for him, which he gulped down quickly. There was nobody around so he sat quietly at the table until he heard his Dad coming up behind him.

"Hey mister," his father said. "Happy birthday!"

He planted a big box wrapped with spaceship paper on the table in front of him.

"Don't open that! Wait for your mother. I have to get this bacon. Don't open it yet!"

When the bacon and eggs and toast were ready and the three of them were sitting around the table he tore off the wrapping greedily.

"It's laser tag," said his dad. "It's a good one."

"Like Phantom Zone?"

"Yeah, like the place we went for Benny's birthday. It's got four sets in there so you can have a big game."

The boy opened the box and slid out the foam-packed contents onto the table, expertly picking out the Japanese batteries and placing them in the han-

rats, birds and wild cats. Then, closer to the centre, dogs and livestock. Then a ring of men. At the heart of the reef there was this huge corpse of a dead whale. It was white by the sun and the air, which was incredibly dry.

"I was almost dead of thirst. But I found pockets of water which had gathered in the under-sides of bodies, and I suckled moisture out from the ribs of cows and the whale. For warmth, I took clothes from the dead people. For food, I used this long bit of wood to club birds, and I ate them raw, or allowed them to dry into a kind of jerky.

"In the end, I made a house. My walls were made of dead men. They didn't smell, and they were as hard as timber.

"It all ended when I came down in a rain-shower. There was this thunder that ripped the reef apart, snapping the band of air. I slipped down the end, falling as slowly as a man sinks in the ocean, and I landed in the streets of Manhattan. Of course, it was several decades later, you understand. Time passes more slowly up there."

I collated notes, but never did anything with them. After all, who would believe it? I met an old friend of X. She showed me photos of his parents and assured me, "He's fucked in the brain, man."

"Yes," I thought, much later, "but does that mean his story is a lie?"

That summer my own mind went flying. I was living in Idaho, and during those hot nights, windows open, I sometimes felt my body lifting, as if it was suspended on a cushion of air. Based on the aviator's notes, the stories about the cliff and reefs I'd collected from

Mexico and my own spiritual suspicions, I found it impossible to fully discount X.

Several years later, through research on an unrelated article, I met Donald, a commercial airline pilot. His wife was the head of a notorious prayer group, and was involved in a long-running dispute with the county government. Donald was, outwardly, the supportive husband, licking envelopes for her mail drives, helping knit her prayer-shawls. It wasn't until I got him drunk that he began talking about his life before "rebirth and true christening".

I mentioned X's story in passing (in the context of East Coast immorality). Suddenly Donald took my hand, and held me by the shoulder: "Y'know it's true, because the good Lord says it's so. That's what my wife told me, and I've come to believe she's a Prophet.

"It's the land of angels, and I've seen it. Night-flight over Rio: There was low cloud-cover, so we went high. As we were circling a thunderstorm ignited beneath us – BAM! – like a firecracker went off inside the clouds. My co-pilot told me he saw threads of lightning as thick as a Buick.

"We climbed, and those clouds followed us. I kept saying, 'We've got to go back – we're coming up to the ceiling!' and my co-pilot kept saying, 'No choice, buddy. There are sparks on the wingtips!

"After about fifteen minutes of constant climbing, I began to feel the engines losing purchase. They'd slip, like a gear under too much pressure. The air was too thin – there was nothing for them to grab onto, y'see?

"And just when I start thinking, 'Fuck, we're all dead! I've just killed two hundred people,' I look out the window.

THE BOY WITH THE LIZARD EGG editorial

The boy found the egg in the back yard, where the fencepost ran into the dirt and blades of grass. It was tiny. He pinched it up and it had a softness to it, like warm plastic, or something made with sugar. He carefully rolled it into the palm of his hand, holding it out like an offering, and he made his way back to the house and up the stairs to his bedroom. He put it in a wooden box in his top drawer. He didn't forget about it.

That night at the dinner table he was looking at a bean pierced on the end of his fork. It glistened with a translucent oiliness.

"I want a microscope," he said.

"I want a new car," said his mother. "What do you want a microscope for?"

"Dunno," he said. He twisted the bean so he could see the other side, where it had a long seam that might've looked like a valley. "Just do."

"I'll add it to the list," she said. "Anything else you want?"

"Just a microscope. I really want one."

"Well, save your pennies then."

"I don't have any pennies," he said. "How much is one anyway?"

"A microscope? Well... I honestly have no idea. Why don't you ask Dad."

couch, my tv dinner, my ug boots, my salt and pepper.
I can't feel a thing.

Oh yes, I'm still breathing. All I can do is keep on with that.

Don't get caught in the trauma. Don't be a trauma magnet.

If I write this script about flying worms, if I paint this bird wearing stockings. If I sell some bags of plaster today, if I make the 8:05 on time. If I text my mum and say, "Leave the car at the station," it will pass me by; no fire will hit me if I am looking the other way. No storm can catch me while I am washing my undies in the laundry sink. My death doesn't exist yet. It's unwritten. My death is unique and you can't buy it. You can't know it. It's the only thing I own.

What if the wind comes and BANG; a new dream. None of this remembered. Life is a movement in a moment.

I am just movement in a moment. BANG. I won't remember me, and neither will you.

"Remember that it's night, and remember there's the Devil's own thunderstorm beneath us, throwing up brilliant white light:

"I see these men, floating in black soup. They're twisted into all sorts of shapes – some are raising their arms to the moon, others are curled in on themselves. There's a blue flame around them – St Elmo's Fire – and in that light, just for a moment, I saw wings.

"When I came back to earth, I took the first flight to San Francisco. I walked through the door of my house and told my wife, 'I think you're right. I think you've been right this whole time, and I think the whole Goddamn rest of the world is wrong.'"

Could those wings have been pelicans? The slow-flying lammergeier?

I've spent some time on the ground in Mexico, searching for the portal to the Upper Realms. It's a dreary country, hot and empty of kindness. I'd never seen a dead dog until I came here.

There is a town in Sonora, which I will not name for fear of giving it a bad reputation, which suffers from the highest suicide rate in the whole of Mexico. I traveled there, hoping to find some well-trodden path to a local cliff – some traditional way known as "Dead Men's Path".

But in that town, I discovered that men died by shotguns in dirty bathrooms, or in smoking cars, or from tree-branches. I attended with the police, who did not seem to care, and assisted them in their investigations, such as they were. I purchased a house, although I had not intended to stay.

I still keep in regular contact with Donald, and fitfully attempt to reconnect with X. And yet, every time

I speak with my contacts, and they type excited and breathless about the mystical world above our heads, I'm reminded of other bodily drifts – the rice paddy where my Father was murdered because he wore glasses (I imagine his limp mouth, invaded by mud and pale insects), the ditches into which Europe's Jews were discarded, the tangled messes of Stalin's handiwork.

Here, in my Sonoran town, I'm confronted by the wild anger of death. No matter how odourless, how sanitised a corpse, it's impossible to clean from it the human misery of death. Every suicide is the same: Beneath the cage of resin, of gums and ivory, I can see the machinery of lip and tongue; I hear sacramental language, hissing breath. Against my cheek, I can almost feel wild kisses. What hidden worlds were measured by those tanned fingers? There is a dead empire beneath those forehead bones, and I am terrified of its abandoned colonnades. The wings of silence spread over him like a lammergeier.

On weekends, I drive into the desert. I stay in the shade of my car, all doors and windows open, and lie across the back seat – brown vinyl sticking uncomfortably to my back. Through the rear window, I can watch the vultures above, and imagine the cushion of air holding them aloft. I wait for nightfall.

In the desert there's no barrier between a man and the stars. Some are doubtless satellites, crawling through the shallow layers of space. But could others be crystals, caught in reflected city-light, growing on a dead man's beard? Might others be the desiccated flank of a whale, slowly circling above us? The land of angels? The wood of self-murderers, above our very heads?

A MOVEMENT IN A MOMENT

janet walker

What if my hands did not feel. What if my fingers shrivelled and flopped around like the ears of a dead rabbit. What if my bones just bended and didn't stand me up? What if I crumbled up and stumbled and collapsed in a heap, flat-slap face down with my nose to the footpath feeling shoes thumping and my heart pumping sideways and my fingernails digging into the hard-packed earth. What if I died now? Sucked my last breath and bang, gone. Gone.

We haven't cleaned the gutters yet. There's dry scrub sticking out like mossy pubes from a nanna's cossie.

Dry scrub wishing for embers. This valley is a firebowl and we know it but we cook our pork chops and we steam our rice and we watch A Current Affair.

Rob says he would stay and fight. He reckons he could hide under the rock ledge in the basement and the fire would pass him by. I say he's a fool. Anyone knows this house is a matchbox.

I've seen so many disasters and I'm only 26. I've downloaded them to my eye-balls via digi TV. I remember watching the Gulf War on our old wood-veneer tele box. I've seen massacre death debris and disaster. I'm a disaster voyeur.

All that horror and then there's me, my plush

the bush, after all. She has about twelve million mosquito bites – “Mike, feel them.”

“Oh man, me too, feel –”

“Oh my god, what is that, like, fifty?”

“Hundreds – we’re gonna die of West Nile. It’s probably already working on us,”

“Darling, hold me!”

Wild giggles. But the darkness really is disturbing. She’s not dying to see the mosquito bites any time soon, but she would like to see his face, to at least make sure she won’t swallow a moth if she leans in for a kiss. “Mike, do you –”

“Yeah, sorry. Here.”

He might have quit smoking, but Mike always has a lighter on him. He flicks it open and the tiny flame shoots up. Thankfully the wind has died down by now. There’s only the faintest smell of smoke still lingering. Ellie wonders how long the fire’s been out by now, if it’s out at all.

Mike holds the lighter between them and the little flame dances, furtive, whispering light across them. Ellie sinks her fingers into the grass and leans in to watch – bridge of his peeling nose, his small upper lip, his lower lip cast in shadow, a hint of those eyebrows of his tilted up so he always looks just a little sad. A gleaming eye, the softest brown.

I close the doors and windows and open a thermos of coffee. I dare not sleep. Not under that sky.

PARIS
lyrian fleming

When I read the headline I knew, instantly. I reached for my phone and turned it off, not looking at the screen. I circled the apartment, all two rooms, drawing the curtains and locking the doors. I had seventeen cigarettes left and what might pass for red wine if I added ice and swallowed each mouthful quickly. I lit the first using the toaster for a spark. You were the one that carried the lighter.

I never meant to be the first thing on your mind. When you asked way back when if I preferred black or white, I lied. I might wear black, lathering myself from head to toe, great big brush strokes of it, but that is just to bring out the whites of my eyes.

Your love was heavy. Thick. Unchewable. I planned escapes, smashed cars along the curb, fell asleep with my foot still on the brake. You couldn't see the damage if you only approached from the front.

I tried not approaching you at all. Leaving half full coffee pots and mints at the back of the shelf behind the decaf no one drank. I emptied rooms. I didn't once replace my surname with yours in silent murmurs on the bus home, just to see if the syllables matched. I kept to the rear of the room in meetings, picking at my fingernails with corporate boredom.

I ignored the way I felt electrified, exposed, entrapped with the sought after intrusion of your all

stroking her back slowly, which he knows she loves.

"Cut it out," she says, smiling.

"If you quit the prairie dog thing," he says. He kisses her again. She sinks her head into his shoulder, ignoring the wet armpits. Another secret: she doesn't mind the smell of his sweat, not with the wind and grass and smoke mixing with it. A ladybug is crawling along her finger. She looks at the little round body, placid in its domestic dress. She lowers it to the grass, where its glossy wings flap absurdly.

"Calming down yet?" Mike whispers in her ear. The next second he's got his fingers under her knees, where her nerves are practically above the skin, and she feels the jolt and screeches, rolling away. He rolls after her, it's like they're seven or something, she's probably getting grass stains all over her shirt, and soon enough they're breathless and laughing and hidden in some bushes, where it's shaded and it hums with bugs. Ellie tries tickling him, but that's never worked on Mike – he knows how to ignore it, he says. Still, she keeps trying – she'll find his spot someday, she's sure of it. After about ten seconds of this he's a little hard. Ellie grins wickedly, starts kissing his neck, then stops – she heard something in the distance – and then he's got his tongue in her ear and his hand in her shorts and she stops thinking about much in particular.

They're waking up and it's pitch black.

"Holy shit, the power's out!" Mike mumbles, and then, "What time is it?"

It's pitch black and they're alone in Point Douglas, and normally this would have Ellie scared out of her head, but... well, they do have some shelter. There's

ners, broad-shouldered boys with normal looks and mall clothes. What would it be like to live in his body? Would she feel invincible? When they're naked she likes to lie behind him sometimes and line her arms up with his, warm skin of his back against her front, and half-circle his wrists with her little hands, and jostle him like a puppet. 'You are mine,' she'll murmur, in a Dracula voice, trying not to giggle. 'All mine.'

"I'm yours," he'll say, smiling, complacent.

There's a strong south wind today and it's pretty hazy in the park, but the faint wood smoke smell is better than cigarettes, at least. Mike used to smoke, but Ellie talked him out of it pretty quick. He only did it out of boredom anyway, and because it pissed off his parents. She made him quit because of the smell, and the cost, and those oily black lungs they showed them in health class. Here's a secret: she thought it was sexy. She knew this was wrong of her, but that didn't take the feeling away. He was smoking the first time she met him, actually, around the back doors at school which made it that much better. She remembers the way he held the cigarette so casually between those big fingers of his, exhaling slowly, flicking off the ash only once or twice the whole time. She'd had a few cigarettes before, but she'd been so worried that the wind would blow that ash against her and set her shirt on fire or something that she flicked the thing violently about every five seconds.

When she gets up to check for danger a fourth time Mike finally shakes his head and pulls her back down with a wet kiss. He's still not a talented kisser, but other things make up for it – his hair, which is getting just long enough to tickle her face, or his nails

staff e-mails into my neatly organised inbox. Deleting them, unread, made my hands tremble. Little earthquakes. And they say no man is an island.

Two hours pass and I can feel the words trying to slip off the page and smear their inky stains over me. A battle I can win, I think, sees me standing over the sink trying to set fire to the corners of the page with the glowing end of my cigarette. Ten left means I could be here for the afternoon. Paragraphs go up in smoke, covering the drain hole with ashes as strong as our commitment. One drop is all it took to wreak havoc.

I should have started from the top, but lack of forethought once more left me holding your name closer to me than I suspect we both ever meant. My mind is frantic. My heartbeat will not still. I breathe in and I breathe in and I breathe in. Smell of smoke thick in the air and I am down to eight, almost seven.

Six. It will not be dark soon enough. Too scared to risk the radio, I try losing myself in all the albums I never lent you. Janis Joplin and Leonard Cohen and all the optimism I could bear until I remembered you were alive for the summer of '67 and I turned off the stereo at the switch. I have seen pictures of you with long hair and I know about the tattoo you bought for ten dollars. Be the change you want to see in the world, you said, was the moral compass you steered by. I suppose LSD was your northern star, I jibed. You kissed me quick.

There were rushed dinners. Sushi suited well, served in minutes and swallowed in seconds leaving plenty of time. Breakfasts while I missed pilates, hour long debates at three a.m. from my number because they

all had yours. I never missed a full moon and soon, neither did you. Had I heard of Heidegger, you asked, complex character. Arendt should never have loved him, I argued emphatically. On Foucault we could both agree to the point of Queer Theory. By the time we reached The Whitlams you merely laughed. Lounge room music by a man who likes merlot was not enough to compete with your dead heroes.

The day I wore my red heels with the impossible height I didn't ask how the coffee stain made it on to your silk weave white shirt. I watched you squirm on screen, too hot with the button of your suit jacket done up. Sweat threatening to spread from your salt and pepper hairline. PR scolded you after on your performance. Un-Australian, they criticised. Alienating. I couldn't have agreed more, I said, as I slipped my shoes back on over my stockings. I had tickets to a book launch and you had twenty minutes to make Swan Lake.

Tomorrow will be Monday. The very thought has me retching into the toilet bowl. I am sixteen again, and my mother has seen the love bite on the side of my neck. I am twelve and have spent my school camp deposit on a book about tomorrow, when the war would begin. I am eight and have locked my brother in the car on a Sydney summer day and lost the key. I am twenty four and I have been photographed with my black skirt bunched at the top of my thighs.

The Eiffel Tower earns every ounce of it's cliché, you once said, but I have never been one to take your word for it. The unrivalled city of love, you said. I hope beyond all hope you are wrong, I think, as I pack the scarf you bought me one winter evening when the breeze from the water whipped through my hair.

Point Douglas is like a bratty kid at his grandparents' place. The houses are stately and dilapidated and painted flowery colours to cover their age – red, green, purple – and there's a huge brick church dotted with spots where they've had to paint over graffiti. If you cross your eyes a bit you might think it's a nice neighborhood, since it's certainly bright enough on a summer day like this one. August is when they always take photos for real estate magazines. But if you look a little closer you'll see its some of its brattiness – a broken bike, a dog with a torn ear, beer bottle shards glittering in the sun.

Ellie finds it hard to believe that only two blocks over you'll find dingy hotels circled by police cars, since the park looks so nice today – barely any trash, and the grass is freshly cut. Still, she checks the ground for needles before lowering herself. Mike dives down and sprawls out with a satisfied grin. He's gonna be sunburnt by the end of the day, he burns so easily and they always forget sunscreen. With her head on Mike's chest and the cool soil beneath her, she can't bring herself to care about skin cancer anyway. They'll probably have cured all the cancers by the time she's old.

Still, Ellie is never completely free of worry. She can't help but prop herself up on her elbows every once in a while to give the park a suspicious glance, expecting the worst – a gang looking for easy prey, some bum strung out on meth and seeing things. Mike laughs at her for her cautious streak – well, more than a streak, really. Being Mike, he doesn't laugh to be mean. She knows he finds her perplexing and adorable. But then it's different for boys, especially boys like Mike - tall boys, not that bright but fast run-

night – tealights all over the bedroom leaking vanilla-scented wax, a heart-shaped box of chocolates about a week expired, even a tiny bottle of champagne that she knew had been sitting in his basement fridge for almost two years, though she'd never had champagne before so she didn't mind too much. He sang Hero by Enrique Iglesias and his voice quivered at just the right parts, and by the time he put the guitar down she was half naked under the covers. Things went pretty well from there until he started putting the condom on, at which point he softened and retreated, like a turtle. He went all shaky after that, kissing her with stiff lips and a flailing tongue, grinding her nipples like marbles and dry-humping her until finally she pushed him away, very gently, and stroked his hair while he blushed and fought back tears. A few weeks later they got drunk at Trisha Marten's grad party and managed it in the bathroom. He observed the tiny pink stain on her panties afterward and laughed with just a hint of hysteria – 'Thank god, I thought...' She knows what he thought: bloody bedsheets, brave silence. Well, it does happen like that sometimes. She's heard horror stories. But overall she's been very lucky.

She probably wouldn't be with Mike if it wasn't for the guitar. Sometimes she feels guilty about this. But other times, watching her parents fight about toilet paper or hydro bills, she wonders if anyone ever really loves more than bits and pieces, scraps of personalities, body parts. Calloused fingers on guitar strings, chipped teeth. A shaky voice promising to be a hero, terribly hopeful, so kind, so earnest.

*

DETOUR
justina elias

It's thirty degrees out and the Forty-four sweats a gleaming trail of gas along the dusty streets. Ellie and Mike are going downtown. They sit in the back of the bus, as usual, where Ellie swings her feet in idle figure-eights, plastic soles of her flip-flops dangling. Mike has his arm slung around her shoulder even though there are sweat stains blooming across the armpits of his t-shirt. Ellie can't imagine not noticing this. Her own arms are pinned to her sides, just in case. She feels his moist armpit, the wiry brush of hair poking out from his sleeve, and looks at his pale legs spread wide and big flat feet in their canoe shoes. She shifts a little, fiddles with her bra strap, closes her eyes. She opens them at the scratchy voice from the driver's radio:

Attention, all eastbound on Higgins...

The rest is unintelligible, but everyone wakes up when the bus lurches off-course, away from the Louise Bridge. The air's gone thick and smoky all of a sudden. It's a rare smell for the city, kind of wholesome. Ellie's imagining marshmallows and wiener roasts when Mike lets out a slow, impressed 'Jeee-sus' and a murmur crescendos from him to the front of the bus. She leans across him to peer out the window and there it is – she breathes a responding 'fuck' – black sky and dense flames the colour of egg yolk, fat ugly

fire on the other side of the river.

"Where's it coming from?" she says, still leaning over him.

"One of the factories, I guess," says Mike. "Smells kinda woody, doesn't it?"

The woman squished into the seat ahead cackles softly, shooting them a conspiratorial grin.

"Here's an adventure, eh?"

They're curving beneath Disraeli now but traffic's backed up enough to leave them stuck in the shadowed underpass. A pair of toddlers at the front of the bus starts banging against the windows in a steady rhythm with fat little fists, thump, thump, thump, fire, fire, fire! 'Shut up,' their mother is saying as she drops her head back. 'You guys, c'mon, shut up.' Sirens wail in the distance and the woman ahead of them flips her cell phone open - 'Christ, Rickie, it's a fuckin' madhouse in here, you shoulda come!'

"Let's get off," Ellie says. She shrugs Mike's arm away, already on her feet. 'Fire, fire, fire!' "Mike, come on, let's get off."

Normally he'd make a dirty joke at this, but he's lazy in the heat. They hop onto the sidewalk one after the other. Ellie is amazed they're the only ones. Then again, they weren't going anywhere in particular - just downtown, just wherever the bus took them. Maybe the mall - Mike needs new basketball shoes. There would've been air conditioning there, at least.

Soon enough they're on the bridge, where they lean over the railing and observe the chaos in the distance.

"Jeee-sus," Mike says again. "Hope no one's hurt. So we catching an eleven, or what?"

"No more buses. It's so hot, Mike."

And then they're darting past the stagnant cars and down the grassy hill that slopes off the overpass until they're in a little park in North Point Douglas.

Her real name is Elena, actually. Elena Christina Ferrera, like a nursery rhyme or something. She likes Elena. But when she was little her brother couldn't pronounce the three syllables, and instead of something like Lena her mother decided to teach him Ellie, which is a name that rhymes with jiggly things like belly and jelly. She's yelled at her mother about this before, who always laughs and tells her to be grateful for what she's got. She could be like the Perez girl and be called Pear - really, what kind of person names their child after a fruit, would a boy have been Banana? - and besides, at least she gets to sign her real name. She has never once introduced herself as Ellie, but somehow it always gets clipped the same way, they all hear it somewhere. Mike called her the right name for a whole two months until he came over for the first time, where he flashed those big chipped teeth in delight when he heard it - 'Ellie, that's so cute, how come you never told me?'

Ellie doesn't want cute. She wants glamorous - she wants smouldering, grown-up, sexy. She wants him to breathe her name at night before he falls asleep - that smooth, voluptuous triplet. Elena. But she'll take what she can get. Mike's sweet, and tall, and kind of stupid but he plays guitar so well. She's always getting him to play. And it's not stupid music, either, not Metallica covers or anything - classical stuff, Mozart, or old jazz by that guy with the three fingers. Most of his music is just instrumental, but he sang for her once, the first time they tried having sex. He went all out that