

JOSEPHINE ROWE**Four short pieces****Brisbane**

And she had this way of swivelling her head round, like an owl to talk to you as she drove, except not like an owl because the skin of her neck creased up in folds and she looked so old when that happened, though she wasn't, not then, and Luke would lean over and say Watch the road, Mum.

And what I'll remember of this time is split vinyl and continental breakfasts, fights about who gets the passenger seat, a wallaby cracked over the head with the jack handle and none of us talking till Lismore even though we know she's done the right thing.

We pull in silent to the motel, a low, sandy-brick L shape, with all the doors facing onto the car park and the car park mostly empty, mostly dark. Our room is number seventeen and there is a tv that only gets two stations and one double bed which my brother and I fall into fully-clothed with only our shoes kicked off. But something wakes me a few hours later and I panic, forgetting where I am. I go over to the window on shaky legs and see her from the back, standing out by the road. A blonde in denim pedal pushers and white tennis shoes, standing in the light of the motel sign, like the ghost of 1967. Ghost of her younger self, holding a slim beer bottle down by her hip, fingers round its throat like wants to swing it at something.

In the dark of the room I find the bar fridge, take a bottle of cola from inside the door. Luke lifts his head from the pillow and says Eli, don't you drink that. Those cost like four times as much as they do in the shops, and I say Shut up I'm not going to, and I go back to the window. Try to stand the way she does, the bottle dangling loose from my fingertips. Like I don't care if I drop it. Like I don't care about anything. She stands like that for a long time, just looking out at the road like she's waiting for someone to come pick her up.

In the morning there are flecks of rust-coloured hair dye in the bathroom sink, and Luke takes one look at her and says That's not going to change anything, Mum, because he's older and sharper than I am but he still gets a slap for it, so we're all silent in the car again, all morning, and I wish the radio still worked.

When we get to Brisbane, she's telling us, you won't even remember. And I don't know if she's talking about Dad or the slap, or the wallaby or Victoria or that she was ever a blonde, but in any case I know she's lying, cause she's got her lips pressed into a pale line and her eyes fixed hard on the road.

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Love

He is teaching her how to break bottles against the side of the house. A whiskey bottle works best, he tells her. She thinks this is very lucky, because that is what they have the most of - he has spent the last few weeks emptying them. So whiskey bottles are what they are using. Now, he says. Like this. Crack. So that you get something like a shiv, not just a fistful of glass and stitches. Like this, he

says. Crack. And she feels a great swell of pride in her sparrowy chest – he gets it perfect, every time. Now you, he says, and he hands her the next bottle. Because a father can't always be there, he says, and she nods and tries to look solemn, to make him believe she understands. The bottle does not break on the first try. She swings harder on the second try and gets it, but it is a bad break. Her father does not say this, but she knows. Too close to the neck. Shards of glass from other afternoons shine dully in the dry earth at their feet. He hands her another bottle and the second break is better, the glass jutting out like the snagged teeth of some prehistoric fish.

She tries to imagine when she will need this – how things will ever get so bad. Her idea of evil is a slinking, unknowable thing, formless and weightless and impossible to hurt. She takes another bottle and tries to give the evil a shape, eyes and lips and things, all squinty and sneering – a composite of all the villains and monsters she has seen in films and picture books. And although she finds the result is less terrifying than something incorporeal, she does not know how she will ever be brave enough – will she ever be able to do that to somebody, evil or otherwise?

They both know she will not. Later there will be men and dark rooms and lost hours, a thousand little cruelties and she will never, not once in her life, save herself in the way he shows her now.

But there are so few things he feels he can teach her, so little he can offer before the night calls him back, swallows him whole without leaving any trace but the small change on the bedside table, half a pack of cigarettes and a new bruise on her mother's arm.

But that is not important now. That is for later, and for now there is the smooth neck of the Jameson's bottle in her small hand, the cool glass warming with the heat of her palm, another crack against the wall of their coffee-brick house.

On the other side of the wall her mother stands in the centre of the lounge room and listens, not understanding, her pale hands making light fists and her head lowered in preemptive defeat.

Outside, the setting sun has turned her father to a featureless silhouette somewhere just to the right of her, watching. When she tries to retrieve this moment from the clutter of early childhood – and she will, over and over again, looking for reasons, warning signs, answers – she will not remember how his face was set. But she will remember the sound of breaking glass, and she will understand this as love.

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Suitable For a Lampshade

I got the call when I was too far away to do anything about it. There was a pile of marking to get through that I knew I wouldn't get through, but that had been the case even before the call.

I'd rented a holiday house from a friend of a friend. And they'd probably bought it and all its contents from the children of an elderly deceased lady, or of one who had recently been moved to an aged care facility, because the bookcases were still crammed with Reader's Digest omnibuses and craft books; *Advanced Macramé*, *Crocheted Endings*. Also the kitchen cupboards were stacked with earthenware plates and mismatched glassware and crockery, and these anodised aluminium cups that reminded me of the photographic version of my childhood, which is really nothing like the childhood I can actually remember.

The rent was only one hundred and twenty-five a week because I was a friend of a friend and because it was the middle of June. The wind came right off the Pacific to whine under the

doorsills and through the gaps between the old weatherboards, and to rattle the windows in their poorly made frames.

I'd gone there to dry out, from you as much as anything else. Okay, from you and only you, because I was still drinking and I had no intention of drying that out. Straight vodka or watered whiskey out of the little blue anodised cups, which I considered taking with me when I left. It was inherited bric-a-brac, after all, and this friend of a friend hadn't had time to develop any real emotional attachment to any of it. So the cups, and to a lesser extent the books on crochet and macramé, and some sixties plastic swizzle sticks I'd found in the third kitchen drawer - I was already thinking of those things as mine.

I was trying not to think about you. I had all this work to do and I'd bought a pair of glasses with small lenses and thick frames so that only a limited amount of the world was in focus at any one time. I thought they might minimise peripheral distraction, help me keep my attention on what was in front of me. You probably know it didn't work out that way. But the glasses made me look like someone who drank Laphroaig instead of Jameson and worked from a typewriter instead of a laptop, and I liked that.

There was no good place to buy coffee near to the house, so there was no good reason to leave it. I made drink ice in the freezer of the ancient Kelvinator and read most of a book on anaesthesia that was written in the forties, and if those things didn't keep me happy they at least kept me a reasonable and safe distance from unhappy. I'd say anaesthetised, but that would be too obvious and not entirely true. I played chess and Scrabble against myself, and the essays on Jeffers and Riding stayed unread and unmarked on the kitchen table.

In the weeks I was there the sky never grew any lighter than the colour of bruised mushrooms, and if I drove to the ocean it was grey and hungry in the James Reeves sort of way. Maybe every second or third day I drove to the ocean and just sat in the driver's seat, watching the container ships crawling after each other so I could tell where the horizon was, though most days the sea was the same colour as the sky and if not for the ships you wouldn't have known any difference between them.

Some afternoons there was a girl on the sand with her dog, a black wolfish mongrel she'd throw pieces of driftwood for. He churned the wet grey sand up under his paws, chasing after whatever she threw.

Yeah, I thought. I know how that is. I know exactly how.

And down on the beach the wind pulled at them, made their hair and her loose clothing ripple. Like the two of them were only shapes cut from cloth.

Cloth girl with her cloth dog. My fingers would always creep to the door handle but wouldn't push it down.

Yes, it was because she looked like you. There are worse reasons for wanting to talk to someone. Because they look like they have money, or they're beautiful or they look like somebody famous - those are worse reasons.

Anyway, it was because she reminded me of you that I finally got out of the car and went down to the beach to ask her about her dog, or whether she lived nearby or something similar. Maybe I asked if she knew a good place to get coffee. I don't remember what I asked because, whatever it was, she didn't answer it. She just pushed her hair off her face and asked if I was the one driving that blue Skyline. All her clothes were shapeless and only the wind whipping the fabric up close to her skin brought any kind of definition.

When I nodded she said, Yeah, I thought so, and threw a stick for the dog. Nobody just watches the ocean. Not in this weather.

I'm just watching the ocean, I said. The dog came back with the stick. Why, what are you doing in this weather?

I'm just walking my dog, she said. He doesn't give a damn about the weather. Sweet stupid thing, and she threw the stick again. Then she smiled and looked at me from behind her wind-whipped hair. Maybe, she said. Maybe you're just watching the ocean.

And I was still trying not to think about you, or the holiday house I'd once rented with you; its own mismatched glassware, or how we'd made love against kitchen benches and spat gin into each other's mouths. Carrying everything back out to the car on the morning we left, your tired grin above a box of groceries we hadn't managed to get through, or the carton of bottles that we had.

But it was no good and I remembered everything. The arguments, the ugly carpet. The way the sound of the hot water system found its way into our dreams and we dreamed of the same things for six nights. How the firewood had been cut from old railway sleepers, and the bolts

glowed red hot amongst the embers. Sleeping in the car at the side of the highway on the way home. The trucks shuddering by and your breath clouding the window, the early light cold, almost blue, and oh god – if I could have kept things just like that. If I could have stopped time at the side of the Hume with you sleeping and your hair across your face and me just watching you sleeping, the trucks shuddering past. Well, you know I would have.

I think maybe the girl knew this. Maybe even knew that she reminded me of you, but she was good about it. Or she didn't have to be good about it, because she didn't care either way. Her dog lay on the wooden decking outside with his legs stretched out ahead of him, and when I said that he could come in she said, No, he can't, and he stayed out there, looking woeful. It seems strange to me now that I never learned the dog's name. It could have been Samson or Solomon, something biblical. The girl shook the rain out of her coat and left it by the door.

Then when the call came through, she was asleep on her stomach, her long legs still slightly parted and the damp sheet pulled up across the backs of her knees. I stumbled naked to the front room with the phone, not wanting to wake her, tripping over a powerboard, a lone shoe. When I answered my voice sounded thin and hostile. I stood looking out the window. The sky had grown dark and the dog had fallen asleep out on the decking. There was the pile of paperwork that had never left its manila folder, and your mother on the line asking why I hadn't answered the home phone or the work phone, why I hadn't returned any of her damn messages.

Three days, she said, and as she kept talking and all I could think about was how I should have gotten out of the car that morning. I should have walked along the highway and thumbed a ride back to Melbourne with one of the truck drivers. Then you would still be asleep in the passenger seat. The light would still be almost blue, your hair just-so across your face, and this little cluttered house with its storm and its sleeping dog and its anodised aluminium cups would be a dream you were having. I would be standing naked at the window of the dream, watching the sky grow dark. There would be a box of groceries on your back seat, and you would be okay. You would be safe.

Your mother said *sudden*. She said *collapse*, she said *supermarket fucking car park*, and I don't remember how I answered any of that. I don't remember what I said before hanging up. Just that after I'd hung up, I pulled a book down from the shelf and turned to Chapter Three: Suitable for a lampshade, or a handkerchief. And how I just stood there with the book open at page sixty-two, waiting for those words to mean something.

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Tame

For J.V.C

As children they stood at the edge of the property, blowing through tin fox whistles as dusk fell. Their father had used the whistles before the war, but after the war he did not use them because he did not shoot things anymore, foxes or otherwise, and he gave the furs of dead foxes from before the war away to people who thanked him and to people who called him soft.

But the whistles he kept – each a tiny round silver thing the size of a twenty cent piece – and he stood in the kitchen watching through the window as the children welcomed each twilight with greasy pieces of meat left over from dinner and with the squeals of phantom rabbits shrill through the metal whistles.

And the foxes would come, a few minutes later, creeping from the safety of the pines and the thick scrub, to stand a few metres away on black stockinged feet, noses raised to catch the scent of the rabbits which were made of only sound and had squealed out moments earlier. When the children threw their pieces of cold chicken or fatty lamb or sausage to the foxes, the foxes would flinch, sniff at the meat suspiciously, then snap it up into delicate jaws and run with it back into the pines.

Over time the foxes came closer and stayed longer, eventually taking the meat from the small hands which offered it and eating there, by the fence, only flinching when those same small

hands reached out to stroke their soft ears. And the whistles were not used, because the foxes came hungry to the fence each night and waited, and were often there waiting before the children. The children's father watched from the window of the kitchen and wondered what would happen when the children grew bored of feeding them. Whether they would still come hungry to the fence line when the children were grown and the whistles themselves had been broken or lost. Or would they stop coming after a while - weeks or months - and go back to hunting real rabbits, live birds, and feel something like abandonment, betrayal?

Would he inherit the foxes, and the guilt? He knew that to tame something was to ruin it and he wondered about the average lifespan of a fox and decided it probably didn't count for anything, that there might be generations of foxes to feed and that he would be old, alone there, still feeding them, reaching out with his large hands to stroke their soft ears. Being responsible for the foxes, when he was no longer responsible for his children. Speaking softly to the foxes, somehow making amends.
