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INTRODUCTION

— David Vernon

I particularly enjoy our ‘open’ short story awards as they give such an opportunity for authors to showcase the breadth and depth of their writing. This collection is no different with the subjects explored being remarkably diverse. They range from alternative history through to romance, humour and a bit of horror, but all have a connection to Australia — no matter how small.

By the time I have finished editing a collection of short stories I have read each one three or four times and it never ceases to delight me that I find something new in each story every time I re-read it. Who would think that a story, crafted in just 1500 words, could pack such a literary punch?

This is the twenty-third anthology of short stories from the *Stringybark Short Story Awards* and it has been interesting to see how the content of stories have changed over the five years we have been running the competitions. For example, in 2010, when we established the awards, even though the Internet was well entrenched in society the web was still new enough in some minds that the Internet was actually the subject of some short stories. Now it is an integral part of many stories — there in the background and not worthy of specific comment.

While these stories presented here are fiction, each one is a small time capsule for future readers to glean insights into the minds, thoughts and jaunts of writers in 2015. I am sure that the reader of 2115 will appreciate these clever tales just as much as the readers of 2015.

Enjoy!

David Vernon
Judge and Editor
“Stringybark Stories”
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DISAPPEARING

— Holly Bruce

Sometimes I wake hours before sunrise and lie silently, waiting for the day to climb out of darkness. I cannot leave this place. I have a room that I share with Amber and Luke. It crouches below the attic beams of a loose and untidy backpackers' lodge in Glebe. I was travelling, now I am grounded.

It began as a holiday but, daily, I search for ways to stay. My new friends have told me that I can extend my holiday visa to six months, maybe even twelve. There is a study visa also, but I am not sure how this works. I need a little more time to research my options. Amber changes my flights. A few minutes on her *iPad* is all it takes. Magician-like, her fingers flit across the screen; she extends my freedom by three weeks. I call my mother and tell her of my delayed return.

“You are going to be in much trouble, Dhara. You have no place in Australia. Get yourself home. Your brother is very much angry with you.” As her only daughter, it appears, I am capable of shaming her and breaking her heart through a single act of independence.

I spend my days walking. Circuitous laneways, lined with narrow prettily-painted houses, lead to thundering roads, which I follow into the city. I find the State Library and slip, like a fish, between rows of silent books. I never want to leave. I log-on to a computer and download exam results from my, hard-won, final year of school. My father was teetering, when it came to me and medicine. When he saw my marks his expression was awash with sadness, he wanted me to have my chance. But my mother, she wedged herself firmly between my dreams and my reality, reminding my father that my duty was to marry. My brother was to be a doctor. Last year my father died. The argument was won. He took with him, in death, my chance to recognise myself as someone other than a fabrication of my mother's will.

My mother calls constantly, a typhoon of spiraling fury. “This money I spend everyday to call you. I cannot afford this money. It is for your wedding dowry. You must come home now.”

“I will come home, Mata, when my holiday is over.”

“You don’t need to holiday. This is your home. You have a good job here. You have a husband, waiting. You must not anger him.” Her voice continues to echo through the phone, shrill, indignant and demanding. I am an adult, yet to my mother I am always a child; ever to be lashed by the whip of her command.

I do not have a husband. I have a stranger. A man my parents agreed that I would marry when I was no more than a year old, and he only three. His stony eyes appraise me when our families gather, he too, is disparaging of his parent’s choice. His gaze, during conversation, dips to my chest, as if in hope a full figure will appear miraculously, under his wishful stare. My height, which exceeds his, bothers his brow with a frown of discontent each time we meet.

Amber suggests we take the bus to the coast. Bondi is a beach I have heard much about. The sea stretches tight, a silk of aqua and green. A reminder of my mother’s Diwali Festival Sari. We walk to the sand and sit. Amber shrugs out of jeans and layered t-shirts to catch the autumn sun.

“I would kill for your skin,” she tells me. I am confused by the smile that accompanies the threatening statement. “I would love to have skin your colour.” She clarifies.

Beneath the denim Amber’s skin is a soft shell-pink. I sink deeper into my cardigan, the sleeves pool around my dirty brown wrists and hands.

“I look like the fuckin’ *Milky-Bar-Kid* next to you.”

I smile. I have no idea as to whom Amber is referring.

My mother’s daily mantra swims through me. “Dhara, you come home. I have only one daughter. You will not shame me this way. You must not disappoint your father in death, as in life.”

I return, alone to Bondi, many times. I watch the surf. It rolls in, unfolding endlessly, on and on. There is no resolution.

I want to study medicine, but in our family it is my brother who does this, while I sit on my call-centre-stool waiting for my stranger to take me into his home and allow me to do his laundry and cook his Samosas and Chole Bhature. I am made for more, I am sure, than perfecting pastry crescents stuffed tightly with vegetables, and stirring bowls of spicy chickpeas.

Sakash, my brother, calls. At the sound of his voice I am rendered silent as a stone. He, through landing the lucky chromosome, is living my life.

“Dhara. You are to be married next month. Mata wants her only daughter to have a good wedding. How can you do this to her with Pita now gone? Enough of being childish, come home and stop disrespecting us. Radhak is a good man he will make a wonderful husband.”

“Maybe you should marry him then.” I have hinted, for the first time, of my knowledge that my brother is gay.

“Get home Dhara. Don’t ever think you can disrespect me. I will come over there and drag you home myself. Mata might let you get away with it, but I won’t. I am the head of the family now. You do as I say.”

I slide my finger to the end button and terminate the call. I have worked, for two long years, in a call centre. On the telephone, at least, I have the power.

I walk to the university, where I harvest an armful of course guides along with a string of websites and sit, cross-legged, trying to decipher my future. Students waft by, in a tangle of colourful clothing and laughter. The people here, even in a crowd, are self-contained; passion zipped within their skin. In the centre of this city university there is not the miasma of emotion that swarms the cities of home. In India I would not find a space so wide, to claim as my own, on a clean carpet of green. I sweep my reading to the side and fall to the embrace of grass, the sky slides and shifts above me. I just want to stay.

We sit on the low brick wall that fronts the lodge. Amber paints her toenails a vivid mango-orange. Luke mooches, beer in hand. I tell them of my mother’s most recent phone call.

“That is total bullshit Dhara! Don’t do it. There are ways you can stay, at least for a while. Let *Radish* find himself a new slave. Don’t you reckon Luke? Before Luke has a chance to reply Amber, taking a long drag on her cigarette, continues. “If you’re not happy with your job, or your home life, how can you find happiness? What else is there?”

The irreverent reference to Radhak amuses me. He is so proper, this would make him reel.

I do not mention that my brother, I suspect, is pushing my marriage to keep Radhak close, but I realise in this moment, with Amber’s sharp insistent voice tearing at my thoughts, that my brother also, is trapped. Each of us strongly desire what the other has. Resentment is concreting

negativity between us; a wall which now, is so well constructed, we have blocked each other out.

“Tell your mother you love her, but she has to live her life and let *you* live yours. Dhara? Okay? That’s what you need to tell her.”

“My mother, she has no life but us. My father is dead, she has spent her whole adult life taking care of him. I am her life now, Sakash and me.”

“Well that’s pathetic. Can’t she do a course or something?”

“It is different where I live.”

“It’s fucked if you ask me. You’re entitled to your own life. Luke wants you to stay, don’t you Luke?”

Luke’s laughing blue eyes slide my way. He winks. My stomach dances Masala. As I try to explain further — my mother’s life — to Amber and Luke, I walk a clear verbal track to her point-of-view, to her position, and in doing this there is no backtracking. Deep within the dust and powder of her bones, thousands of years of culture dictate the framework on which she hangs her beliefs.

The plane rises on vaporous currents. My dreams fade below. There is an increase in distance between me and myself. I am moving toward my mother, my brother and my stranger. Hours later the plane lands, I disembark. Once again I am a barely discernible speck in the collective crowd. I am my mother’s daughter, the sister of Sakash, and Radhak’s bride.



Holly Bruce is lucky enough to live in Belmont NSW, a lakeside suburb crouched on a lush ribbon of land which hugs both the eastern shore of Lake Macquarie and the sands of the Pacific Ocean. She walks for exercise, practices yoga for relaxation, attends Buddhist classes for wisdom and writes for joy. For love, she spends time with family and friends, both human and animal. Her goals in life: limitless love, peace and publication.

NEXT

— Brendan Murray

Thirteen minutes to five. A mother with a tantrum prone child, a no nonsense suit with pole-up-the-ass posture, and a stocky Asian man adding up the number of stamps he will require to get fish-oil tablets back to Laos. I suppose the line could have been longer. I hadn't any change to put in the meter, so I'm counting on some swift service. Twelve minutes.

It's cold and wet out despite being the peak of summer, something you come to expect living in Melbourne. The room itself is humid, a mixed scent of sweat and card stock accompanies each breath. A heavy set security guard dressed in all white like an old fashioned milkman is standing by the door prepping for close. We all shuffle on the balls of our feet in ill comfort. Eleven minutes.

The child whines letting out a loud and never ending "please" that becomes the baseline to an orchestra of post office sounds. The suited man jingles the keys to his BMW, the Laos exporter rattles the large tub of oily capsules, the phone on the front desk ringing without answer. Ten minutes.

I would much prefer to be at the front of the line. It isn't really even a line when you are at the front. It's only ever considered a line to you when there's somebody in front of you. When you're at the front you are bestowed the title of 'next' and people call out your name like you've won a prize. It really is quite special. Nine minutes.

The suited man who I've decided to name Paul continues to swing his keys around his fingers ensuring we all understand he drives a beamer.

"May I go in front?" I gesture with an apologetic smile. "I just need..." Paul cuts me off with a grunt and shakes his head the way you would at a waiter who brings you the wrong meal three times. Paul only cares about Paul. Eight minutes.

I wander over towards the door to have a word with the guard. I can't help but grin.

"Sorry mate, not sure who to let know but there's a beamer out front in the lot that's left its lights on."

The guard, looking like he just lost a divorce settlement, radios Centre Management as I waltz back into line. A few moments later an announcement comes over, informing everyone of my little fib. Nobody

really reacts. Except of course Paul. He chucks a larger tantrum than the three year old pleading to go to the bathroom and storms out. His place in line forfeited. Seven minutes.

The fishy scent of the Laos pill peddler is stronger than ever now that I'm standing right behind him. He's a small man, speaking fractured English at best.

"May I go in front?" I ask, speaking slowly to ensure he understands. "I just need..."

"No, no, no" he cuts me off, understanding completely.

I decide to enquire as to what he is sending, explaining I'm a doctor and can give him my recommendation. I take the tub of capsules from his hand and do my best 'doctor with bad news' face. Six minutes.

"This brand has been known to violate health and safety standards, my friend," I state while shaking my head like a disapproving housewife from a nineteen-fifties commercial.

"If you hurry two doors down is a pharmacy, tell them John sent you and they'll swap them over for you." He hesitates at first but my discerning gaze is enough to convince him. He shakes my hand and hurries out past the guard exclaiming, "I'll be back." I have no idea who John is, but hopefully the hairdresser's two doors down can help him. They're about as qualified as I am on the matter. Five minutes.

Just the lady and her dancing child are left now.

"Excuse me, may I go in front?" I politely inquire. "I just need..."

"No I'm next," she rather harshly interjects as she returns to resting her elbows on the handle of her pram. I don't blame her, once you've been bestowed the title of next it really is something special. Her little boy would only be three or four, hopping from one foot to the other. Four minutes.

"Hey champ! I bet you couldn't finish off that juice box you've got there before I can count to ten." A smirk draws across his face before a candid look towards his mother who is now too busy with her head stuck in a magazine.

"One, two, three..." You can add urine to the odour of the room. Three minutes.

His mother lets out a deafening squeal before grabbing the little boy's hand and yanking him out the door, complete with pram flailing behind her and pee spraying down his leg. Not my tidiest work. Two minutes.

As I stand alone next to a puddle of urine in a post office at two minutes to five I can't help but imagine how important everyone else's business

must have been that they wouldn't even hear me out.

"Next," shouts the croaky old gran perched behind the counter. "How can I help you sir?" she continues. One minute.

I clear my throat and shove my hand into my jeans pocket fishing.

"I just need change for a five?" I ask holding out a crumpled pink note. "I'm parked at the meter out front."

"No need," she remarks as the wall clock strikes five, "Meter's been busted for weeks."



Brendan Murray is a Melbourne-based writer currently studying a Masters of Screenwriting at the Victorian College of the Arts (University of Melbourne). His short fiction has been previously published in Questions Journal and Phantasmagoria Magazine. When he's not suffering from a bout of existential worry, he enjoys cereal in the afternoon and reviewing the latest in contemporary cinema. For details visit www.brendanmurray.net or follow him on twitter @BrendanMurrayAU



WHERE ANGELS DWELL

— Peter Smallwood

The boat sliced through the calm sea, its powerful *Evinrude* throwing up a huge forked plume in its wake. The sun had risen over a cloudless horizon; I set a course to the north of its nuclear glare. An hour to go.

I smiled as I recalled last night, cutting the cake: “Daddy, Joanne hit me on the head with the spoon when we were icing your cake.”

“What! I can’t imagine your lovely big sister doing anything like that. She’s such an angel.”

“She’s a pig-angel.”

At four she has a way with words. “Well, if she hits you again, you can hit her back twice. How’s that sound?”

“Yay!”

Wisdom of Solomon. Jo is unperturbed.

“I reckon ... this is the best cake I have ever seen ... ever.”

Smiling, looking cool and pretty in a floral beach dress, their mother hands me a plate.

“Weather’s looking good for tomorrow.”

“Are you sure ...”

“Go while you can birthday boy. You and Jim stay together.”

“Don’t worry, out there we’re inseparable.”

Jim didn’t turn up at the ramp; his mobile not answering. Damn it! It wasn’t like him to let me down — probably went home last night with that crazy barmaid he’s fallen for.

It wasn’t good; I should have cancelled. But the boat was in ... fuelled up ... motor burbling ... time and tide ...

Fifty miles from the coast I was scanning the water for signs of breakers ... there they were! I throttled back and glided. The reef soared up from the ocean floor until it was just below. Visibility was great and conditions perfect for snorkelling. I threw out the coral anchor, felt it take, and listened to the ripples as the hull settled. I had found my special place.

I pulled on my flippers, spat in my mask, stood up on the side of the boat, took a breath, and jumped.

My warm skin thrilled to the sudden chill as I plunged into the tropical sea. Salty blue bubbles blossomed before my eyes and rose with me. I floated for a while, feeling for the slight current. It was coming from the east so I swam against it towards the outer edge of the reef, leaving the boat calm at anchor.

The ancient gardens of Atlantis were all around me — a marine paradise. Brightly coloured Parrotfish were busy trimming the plate corals with their tough little beaks, occasionally squirting out clouds of coral sand. A school of Surgeonfish approached, turned, and swirled away in a kaleidoscope of rainbow colours.

I finned past some spectacular purple Staghorns. Feisty Damselfish patrolled their little territories, ready to chase off intruders. Giant clams were everywhere — signs of an unexploited reef — their shells open, displaying the beautiful azure-blue mantle tissue, and their pulsing water syphons.

The coral formations were interspersed with valleys of white sand. I spotted a two metre White-tipped Reef Shark sleeping in one of them about ten metres below me; it posed no threat. I peered under a ledge and saw a huge Coral Trout, gaping at me with his big mouth; his orange skin speckled with iridescent blue spots. A predator himself, he was eagerly hunted by fishermen, and was wise to hide.

A patch of undulating soft corals appeared, forming a stage for a showy pair of orange Clownfish. They were playing among their protective anemones and flashing their bright stripes. It seemed to be lot of fun, but if one ventured too close ... there was a hidden sting waiting in the wings.

I rested, floating above a large pedestal of brain coral, and was rewarded by a visit from an inquisitive Emperor Angelfish. His flat body was patterned with gorgeous alternating stripes of vivid yellow and cerulean-blue. There was a black band around his intelligent eyes, and his light-blue pouting mouth suggested a refined and sociable personality. He circled in a majestic display of his colours and I marvelled at the show.

He swam up close and we looked at each other: an indefinable quality in him somehow conveyed itself and a wonderful tranquillity came over me. I felt secure and at home with this beautiful creature. We floated together in a gentle current, tinged with turquoise by the warm Capricornian sun. I wanted him to stay, and he seemed to be in no hurry to leave. But then something changed ... he reacted to an unseen signal, turned in a flash, and flew away to hide in the coral labyrinth.

I moved on, hoping I would see him again.

Without warning, the reef dropped away: the coral sloped down into the yawning blue depths and I couldn't see bottom. Then I remembered that I was swimming on the edge of the Continental Shelf. At this point the earth's surface drops away into the deep water of the Coral Sea Trench — a little-known, alien place.

At the limit of my vision, something down there moved: purposeful, with direction. Some sort of submersible — or maybe a miniature submarine. Wouldn't you know it! I come out all this way to this remote reef and there are people in a ...

Tiny claws ran up my spine and across my scalp. My eyes bulged ... I wasn't looking at a miniature submarine ... but the largest shark I had ever seen.

Primordial fear crawled out of a deep vault and chilled my mind. If that monster was hungry he would sense me, and I would become just another person who vanished in the ocean without trace. I became more alarmed as I considered my situation and realised how vulnerable I was.

My plan had been to spend an hour exploring the outer reef. In its place, a vivid picture of my adored wife and girls came to me. What the hell was I doing here, alone, in such an isolated place? I had to get home!

Fighting back panic, I crept away from the abyss, turned, and finned away to the west. The boat was about five hundred metres away. I didn't look back and tried not to imagine what was happening behind me.

I had covered a good distance when I sensed something was following. Fresh paroxysms of fear shot through me as I glimpsed something at the limit of my peripheral vision. Below and to my right ... something large was gaining on me ... coming fast ... a great dark shape swooped up beneath me. My body froze and braced for the shock of the bite.

The dark shape moved ahead of me and sped on — a giant Manta Ray. I breathed again ... then coughed and gagged as I sucked in the sea water which had entered my snorkel. The coughing persisted, emptying my lungs of air; I floundered and sank with an aching chest. I fought against a tremendous urge to inhale and kicked back up to the surface. Thankfully, the snorkel was still in my mouth and the coughing had cleared it. I took a great shuddering breath and at last sweet air rushed in to my lungs.

It took a considerable time to recover from the terror and realise I was unharmed. I was starting to feel better when I noticed a trickle of blood coming from my ankle — a coral cut. I was now releasing an inviting trail of red cells into the water which would attract and excite any shark within

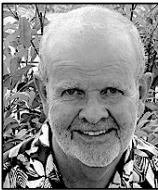
range. There was nothing I could do about it, except keep moving. Sick with foreboding, I forced myself to start swimming again.

After about ten minutes the White-tip appeared, awake now and circling me. It looked agitated and unpredictable. I couldn't tell if my blood would embolden it to attack. If it did, I wouldn't make the last fifty metres to safety.

A fresh breeze had sprung up and the boat was bobbing in choppy water, tugging at the chain. Through my mask, I could see the curved steel prongs of the anchor buried in coral rubble a few metres below the hull, but the jerking chain was pulling them up and it looked like the anchor would come free at any moment. If that happened the boat would drift away with the wind, leaving me stranded on the reef.

Images of the reef at sunset flashed before me: sky turning dark, Tiger sharks moving in from the deep to hunt the shallows; unseen jaws in the black water, the first thump, blood pumping ...

I swam fast now, heedless of exhausted muscles and gasping lungs — I swam to save my life. I was almost there when the anchor came free and the boat started to move away. I kicked like mad ... lunged ... and felt a surge of relief as my fingers closed around the chain. The boat steadied a little and I reached up and hauled myself over the side with the last of my strength.



Peter Smallwood trained as a medical technologist in Sydney but spent most of his working life in the tropics. Since retiring he has completed a couple of online writing courses. His first short stories were descriptions of some extraordinary episodes that occurred during his unusual working life. Having got the bug, he is now venturing into fiction. Other interests are reading, making and drinking red wine, trying to keep fit, and playing golf badly.

