

**16 Across**  
**and**  
**Place, Play and Online Fiction in Practice and Theory**

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## **Abstract**

The creative work, *16 Across*, examines the possibilities of online fiction through practice. It comprises forty stories which take place over the course of a day late in March 2006. The stories are linked to a crossword that follows the shape of Adelaide's street layout. Each story acts as a clue to one of the words in the crossword grid, and takes place in the part of Adelaide corresponding to the location of that word. There is a considerable intersection of characters, places and times; specifically, where two clues overlap, there is an intersection between their respective stories.

The stories in the top left (north-west) corner take place in the very early morning, and the day progresses as the stories move towards the bottom right and late night; a forty-first story is set the following morning and, in the online version of *16 Across*, only becomes visible to readers who have successfully completed the crossword.

The exegesis investigates the history of online fiction, the developments which have brought it to its current state, and its possibilities for the future.

It places online fiction within a larger history of electronic fiction, and examines the differences between online fiction and offline fiction, whether electronic or paper. By looking at works which have made the transition between online and offline fiction, it examines how the experience of a reader of online fiction is different from that of a reader of offline fiction. It also looks at the technical and social contexts in which online fiction exists.

Finally, the characteristics which emerge from this examination are used to predict the directions, both creative and commercial, in which online fiction may move. It is suggested that the future of online fiction lies, to a great extent, with writing which is increasingly willing to blur the lines between games and stories or between work time and leisure time, or between fact and fiction, or between writer and reader.

## **Statement of Originality**

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Holly Gramazio

## **Acknowledgements**

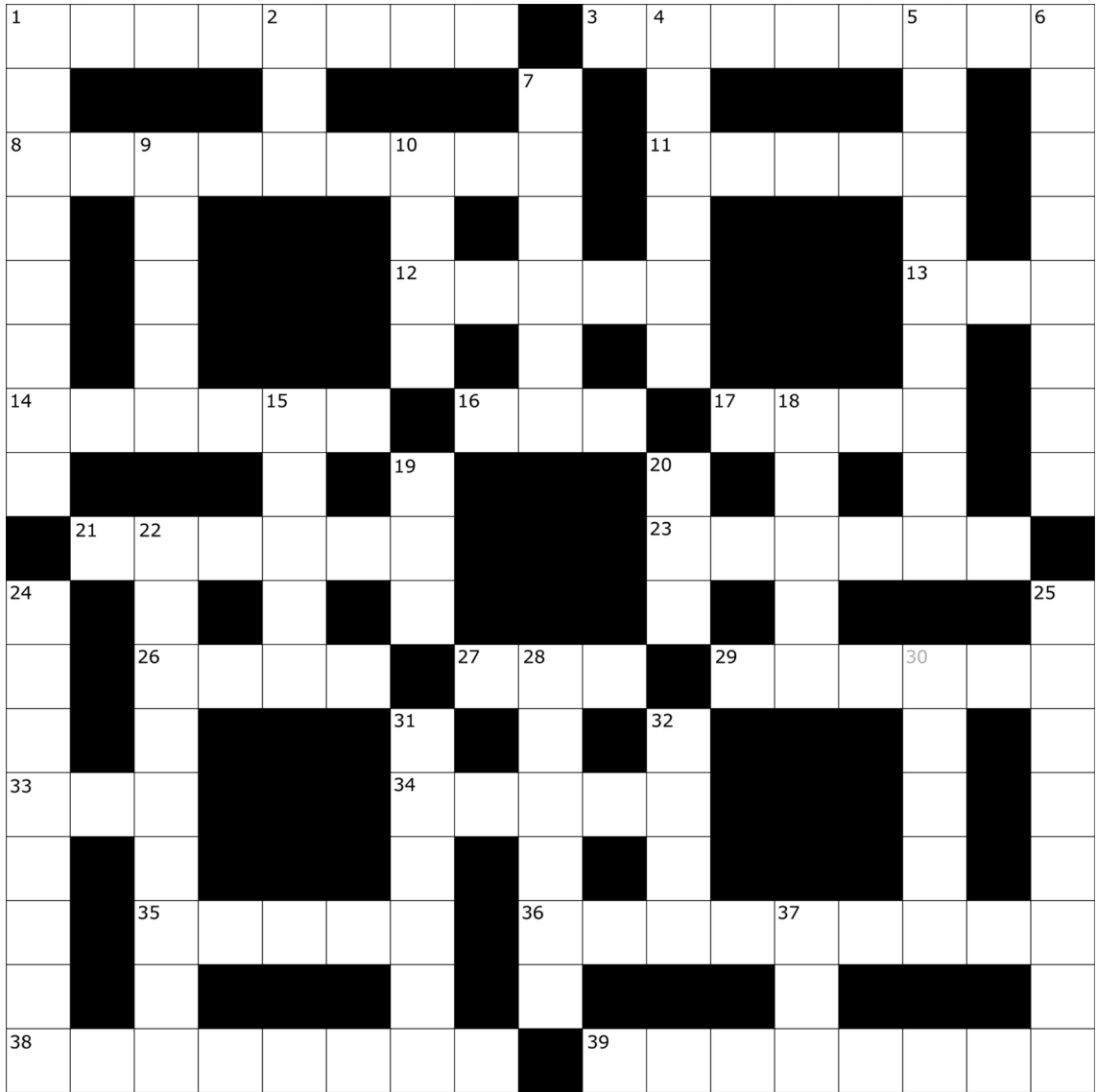
I'd like to acknowledge the help of my supervisors, Nicholas Jose and Moya Costello during the second part of my candidature, and Thomas Shapcott during the first; of Kevan Davis in implementing the *Sixteen Across* website; of Kevan and Raven Black in proofreading it; of Simon Amor in hosting it; of Kerry Lambeth with referencing; and Janine Matheson with printing, binding, delivery and message relay.

**CREATIVE WORK:**

**16 AROSS**



# Grid



## Introduction

These stories originally appeared online at <http://16across.com>, with a new story posted twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays (with occasional gaps). Each story is a clue, with a solution; and that solution is a possible answer to the first question asked within the story. These questions are also used as the titles of the stories.

The online text of the stories remains the definitive version, and allows them to be explored in a non-linear way that is impossible offline. Specifically, readers online are able to fill in answers and have them saved for future visits; to click on a section of the grid/map and be taken to the corresponding story; and to check whether their answers are correct. Additionally, online the final story only becomes available when the first forty have been "solved" correctly.

The stories as made available on paper are therefore indicative of the experience of reading them online, but not an exact equivalent, and readers are encouraged to read and use the online version where convenient.

## **11 ACROSS: What do they have that we don't?**

"What do they have that we don't?", Carol says, nodding her head sideways at the street where a man in a suit is bent over flowers: poppies, lilies, and then roses.

"Somewhere to sit down. That's the difference. It isn't how much you make, it isn't how clever you are, the thing that matters is whether you sit down for your job or whether you don't."

Brett's a bit uncomfortable, but it's his first day and he's trying to remember how the cash register works, so he just nods. Carol's gone anyway, stepping sideways between the racks of fruit and out to the footpath.

"They for your wife?" she says as the man leans down to touch white roses.

"Oh. Um, yes," he says, looking up at her.

"They're pretty," she says, motherly and helpful, "but they've been sitting around a few days. They won't last long, not in this heat. You'd be better off with something like these," and she pulls a bundle of anemones from a bucket. "Tell her to trim the ends when she puts them in water and they'll look just as good in a week, easy."

Brett sells a punnet of strawberries and loses track of the rest of the conversation, but he sees the man walking away with something pink. "They're not for his wife," Carol says sourly as she leans against a cupboard inside the booth. "He gets a bottle of water here every week for years, then suddenly he wants roses at half past nine in the morning? He was through last Thursday with some girl who bought him a mango. You know what white roses mean? Innocence. Happiness. I'm not bloody selling him those."

Brett nods politely again. "What do anemones mean?" he asks.

"Truth will out." She picks something from under her pointed thumbnail. "And it will. You're laughing at me. D'you have a girlfriend?"

"Yes."

"You can take some daffodils for her if you want. Or some of those striped carnations."

"Oh. Thanks." He looks out at the buckets. "What do those mean?"

She leans over a rack of fruit and pulls a banana free of its hand, then pushes her just-cleared thumbnail into the stem. "Unrequited love and break-ups," she says, pulling the peel free in two long strokes. "Want them?"

He hesitates. "I don't think she really likes carnations anyway. Or yellow."

"We've got white daffodils too."

"Mm, I don't think I will."

Carol grins. "Yeah, better not."

Brett remembers setting up early that morning: the man in the fluorescent jacket who'd passed through, trying to buy daffodils until Carol offered him yellow poppies for half-price; the girl with a bundle of placards who'd got handfuls of past-their-best tulips for free.

"What are yellow poppies?" he asks.

"Success and wealth."

"What about tulips?"

"Fame and passion."

Brett looks over the rest of the buckets. "Proteas?"

"Proteas don't mean anything. None of the southern hemisphere stuff does.

Doesn't matter who you sell those to."

He watches her as she watches over the flowers. Discounts to girls with nametags, to anyone in a uniform. Daffodils and hyacinths to anyone in a suit.

"That one," he says after an unexpected sale. "What was wrong with her?"

"She had sit-down-job shoes. Shoes are the way you judge it. Sometimes you'll be wrong, but anyone with a stand-up job wearing sit-down shoes is stupid enough to deserve whatever they get." Carol wears sneakers, white with hot pink toes, scuffed but clean, and there's a packet of inner soles tucked away in one of the cupboards, just in case. Brett glances at his feet, wondering what sit-down-job shoes are, and up again, and Carol's smiling as the girl who's wearing them stumbles in the distance.

He takes his break half an hour later, and as he walks down Rundle Mall he looks at violas in the planters, purple and yellow and dark red, and he wonders what they mean, and what would happen if he picked one. The sunlight slants off with a threat or a promise. He doesn't know whether his girlfriend wears sit-down shoes, or whether she's ever bought flowers from Carol, or what it'll be like to spend his

days watching snap judgement and sabotage. In a nearby Go-Lo, he pushes his way past bargain-priced DVDs and chocolate bars, looking for a solution.

When he gets back to the stall, Carol's standing just outside, away from the fruit, blowing smoke out of her nose and watching for customers. "What's that?" she says when she sees him, nodding at the tangle of metal and fabric he's clutching to his chest, dropping her cigarette into a bucket of water and orange petals: they've sold out of poppies.

"I found it in the alley behind Woolies, next to the bins," he lies, leaning it against a cupboard. He'd torn the plastic off outside Go-Lo and stuffed it in a bin, shiftily.

"Yeah?" She follows him in and reaches down to unfold it, kicking its legs straight with her pink toes. "Not bad for garbage. Some people'll throw anything out."

There's a streak of discoloration across the back where he scooped a handful of dirt from one of the planters and rubbed it across. Carol brushes at the mark.

"I suppose," he says carefully. "There's nowhere to keep it at my uncle's place, though. I don't know why I bothered."

She sits on it and bounces appraisingly, then stands up again. "Better than letting it end up at the dump."

He shrugs. "There's no way I'll be able to get it back on the bus tonight, anyway. Is there space to leave it here for a while?"

"Dunno," she says, running her fingers over the seat: pale canvas with a messily lopsided vegetable pattern, corn and potatoes and something that's maybe

capsicum. She stops on a cluster of olives, and then touches another on the far side. Brett waits.

She straightens again. "I suppose," she says. "For a few days, anyway."

A woman in high heels clacks up with a bunch of roses and a twenty-dollar note.

"Those're pretty," Carol calls over to her, walking slowly to the counter, and Brett notices her look at the woman's shoes.

"Yes, they are, aren't they?"

Carol hesitates for a moment. "Good scent to them as well," she says, then, and fetches change.

Brett is silent and careful as she sits down.

"Yeah, well don't get too smug," Carol says, grumpy or grinning, looking up at him reprovingly through eyelashes. "I didn't wrap them up for her. They'll be dripping all the way home."

## **1 DOWN: What was that?**

They've been massing for days, surfing the gusts of wind, rolling another few feet in the wake of every passing car, and now they start to converge in the north-west. It's almost dawn, and they're in twos and threes and more.

They know nothing's guaranteed. They know they aren't the first to run. Usually escape ends with capture and return, but they've all heard stories of the few who disappeared, and the reports that filtered back in the weeks afterward: bent wheels poking out of the river, dented husks left under a bridge to rust.

They drift closer. Cars drive past, but only a few, and they're quiet, curving gradually into existence, moving from a burr in one direction to a burr in the other. One has its headlights on, and they wait for it to pass, feeling the light as it slides across metal to cast gridded shadows. The next is louder, and it strums past in darkness.

It's good, for them, the dim murk: they can feel motion and make out distant lights. Later in the day they'll be blinded by the glare of sunshine as it reflects off their sides and dazzles them with its distortions. Even that won't be as bad as the fluorescent lights they're running from: days in the supermarket overwhelm, the fluoros whitewashing away any shapes, buzzing noisily over the rattles and clunks and vibrating echoes they use to find their way.

There's a sound in the distance, and they fall still. Footsteps.

"What was that?", someone says, and they don't know what it means but they get ready to let themselves roll backward, and it's a long time after the sound has faded



away before they start to move again. They're almost at the edge of the world.

They don't know what comes next. They're creatures of the footpaths, of polished floors and smooth inclines: when they nudge the world-edge border it's jagged and unfriendly, soft, cumbersome. It bends beneath the sides of their wheels and they back away.

Except Cole. Cole's different. Even before he left, when he passed his nights chained in long rows with the rest of them, he was different. They barely recognise themselves as distinct entities, but everyone recognises Cole. He spent months as a Roamer, riding one of the homeless humans, carrying its bags of empty bottles in exchange for movement and protection; but then he began appearing back in the aisles, unpiloted, and disappearing again, and returning. They aren't sure where they're going, now, and they aren't sure how they'll get there, but they know that Cole's going to show them.

It's getting lighter. They stop moving, waiting for the stragglers to advance and draw them into a mass again. A few shift nervously, moving closer for comfort, nuzzling into each other to feel safe. There can't be long to wait now. Cole is motionless in front of them.

When they've all gathered as tightly as they can, he moves, away from them, away from the centre of the world. They listen, and watch. Rattle, clunk-rattle. He moves forward again.

It can't be that simple, can it? Surely there's more to the plan? But no: they see the day's first beams of sunlight glint off Cole's handle, and hear his wheels on the footpath grow silent as he crests the edge of the world, and rolls over into

elsewhere.

He stops again, waiting.

It's almost an accident when the first of the others follow: a gust of wind that carries them forward before they can decide whether to brace against it or ride. Only two of them stay with it for long enough to cross the edge. A few seconds later another follows.

A horn blares. Distant music rises and falls, reminding them of the aisles, giving another few the courage to move forward.

By the time the cars have swelled to a constant whirr, and the sun's high enough to strike every one of them, another ten or twelve have nudged across the borderline, and it's become clear that that's it, that if they wait much longer it'll be too late.

On one side of the border, the mass lets itself fall backwards, rolling away from the edge. They'll wait to be collected. It won't take long. On the other side, Cole moves forward through the grass, slowly, and his companions struggle after him, further from safety and into something else.

### **3 ACROSS: So where do we find ourselves today?**

Sir! Do take a sausage, only two dollars, all proceeds go to the Museum Schools Program and thence to the education of your city's youth. Oh, is it not your city, how marvellous, a tourist: un saucisson then. Please. You can hardly travel to Australia and refuse. But of course, I quite understand, you must hurry onwards, Pirie Street is in that direction; do allow Leah to show you the way, and enjoy your meal.

And you, my dear young man, you can't expect to change the world if you haven't been adequately fed; there's no extra charge for the onions. No, well, hurry along then, you'll only have yourself to blame when your children find themselves ignorant of arrowhead evolution in Pacific Islander society. Yes, you'll be sorry. But you, young lady, you'll regret nothing, and least of all your purchase of a nutritional and exquisite breakfast. My congratulations on your taste.

And aha, tongs, I knew I was forgetting something. A cookery utensil, yes, but so much more. A sceptre of command whose rule holds sway over those assembled, perhaps. A talking stick, passed from hand to hand, and passing authority with it. Excellent. Tongs. Thankyou.

How very ritualised this all is, it's quite splendid. Even the exceptions fit the rules. Behold, we cater to vegetarians, but we deny them vegetables and tofu, and instead we offer counterfeit sausages and hamburgers so that they can at least pretend to be taking part. Madame Curator, for you. I suggest a slice of bread and a line of sauce to complement, assuming your ethics permit it.

Remarkable the archaism into which we plunge ourselves at these events, a

throwback to food as a matter for public concern. You'll recall, of course, that less than a millennium ago we would array our guests along one side of a table so that we could watch them as they ate, a habit abandoned nowadays save in outmoded institutions like universities and marriage. We will furthermore none of us have forgotten, I believe, that in the Middle Ages plates were relatively rare, and instead it was common to use slices of bread that were piled with food and eaten at the end of the meal: the resemblance to our current situation will again have escaped nobody.

And yet how much has altered. From where we stand we can see how deeply the changes run. Not the trivialities, these passing buses mean nothing, the layers of car-park are irrelevant, your mobile phones are nothing but low-pollutant smoke signals. The big things, the things that matter. Look at our staff members, and how many of them are women. See how we welcome itinerant foreigners, how we offer them directions and sausages rather than suspicion or insults or patriotic defensiveness. Look how glad we are to accept you, Aaron, how careful not to mention the disability, how we laugh at your jokes about it—but not too loudly. And yet at the very same time see how we've grown simultaneously so much more intolerant: the lengths we'll go to in our attempts to avoid sharing a shift with you, Bethany, when only a hundred years ago nobody would have given a second thought to your odour, which I can't seem to detect just now, one moment, something must be burning. There we go.

So where do we find ourselves today? A fundraiser, yes; a meal, certainly, and many other things besides, but most of all it is this: an exception. Food these days may have become more and more of an obsession, but it has also become more and more private. Even when we dine on restaurant food or picnic rugs we gather in

small and personalised groups, partitioned off from those around us, looking over our own tiny set of condiments. While the march of progress has made many things public that heretofore were private—Dolores, your open marriage springs to mind—food truly is ours to the exclusion of all others.

Except today! Today, when so much else is excepted—we'll all have noticed Gary and Vivian breaking off their endearing little bickers to disappear together for half an hour, yes? And Kyle, taking no advantage of the bags of change. So today, in this day of exceptions, we join together not only with each other but with passers-by and walkers-through, with children and adults and even the seagulls, in an act of community and sharing, and Jeremy, if you would take the tongs for a moment while I open the next packet of sausages? Such lovely objects, twisted together like a trail of bunting, and now if I can have the tongs back we shall see how, the tongs, please, Jeremy. Jeremy, the tongs. No, I think we have quite enough onion cut already, thank you, I'm quite happy where I am. Jeremy. Beth, please, don't encourage him. Turns indeed, nonsense, we have no roster, and what do you care for the rituals of food?

You'll just end up burning them, you know.

And I was trying to keep the onions over on the left-hand grill, actually, the wind's just going to blow onion smoke into everyone's eyes if you don't. No, well, I dare say it doesn't bother you, but what about the rest of us? Aaron, it can't be good for you, not with your condition.

Aaron? Dolores. Vivian.

Well. I shall be inside should you require assistance.



#### **4 DOWN: Sorry, what was that?**

Lewsby's running late, and it's hard for him to piece the world together. The grass behind the museum is cut along sharp-edged curves of light and shade, and they're like mismatched pieces of jigsaw, sitting loosely together and ready to collapse at the smallest bump. He breaks stride for a moment to dodge, careful not to fall through, and checks that the papers are still in his pocket.

In front of the museum he has to dodge again when eskies and stacked bread close in on either side. A fundraiser. He's almost made it out when someone waves and offers him a sausage.

"Je suis francais," he lies in sudden panic. "I'm desolée, sorry, I'm, I am late. I have to find my appointment."

The man with the sausage holds it out towards him, speared on a fork: un saucisson. Lewsby gives in and takes it, digging change out of his pocket, and backs away, but a girl follows to help him find his way to Pirie Street. She makes a face at the sausage man when he turns away, then smiles.

"This direction, I believe," Lewsby says, pronouncing "direction" with four syllables, immediately convinced he's overdone it.

"Yeah, it's only a few blocks, but I'll wander up with you if that's okay. It'll give me an excuse to get away from Chris." She tilts her head back towards the barbecue.

"Sorry about that, he's usually all right but he gets a bit overbearing when he's enjoying himself. We don't let him guide the school tours any more."

Wander up with him. Lewsby doesn't want to be wandered up with. He doesn't

want to eat this sausage either, but it'll look suspicious if he throws it away, and he can't afford that. "I'm, I am fine," he says. "Please."

"It's no trouble." She smiles. "Really."

He takes a bite of the sausage and tries to think. Sauce wells out at the edges of the bread, onto his fingers. "Merci," he says reluctantly. "Though I must stop at the mall of Rundle," maybe he's overdoing it again, "to, to buyez des fleurs."

The girl frowns. "Sorry, what was that?"

Mm, overdoing it. Gah. "Some flowers," he says. "From Rundle Mall. I heard you could buy them there," he adds hurriedly. "In a tourist guide. That I read."

"Oh, yes, definitely," she says. "Just up to the left here. I'm Leah, by the way."

"Francois." Francois.

He eats the sausage, biting into it whenever Leah breaks off to ask him a question, staving off conversation, and she's so friendly and so nice, and he just wants her to go away. He's finished eating when she points him at a stall. It's the one he's been buying his water from for months.

"They for your wife?" the woman from the stall asks. He hadn't noticed her there.

"Um, yes," he says, conscious of Leah standing behind him, surely within hearing range: more than a few words and she'll hear that he's dropped the accent, or else the woman from the flower stall will hear that he's putting one on.

"They're pretty," the woman says, "but they've been sitting around for a few days.



They won't last long, not in this heat. You'd be better off with something like these," and she pulls a bundle of something pink from a bucket. "Tell her to trim the ends when she puts them in water and they'll look just as good in a week, easy."

He needs roses, one would be enough, but the woman takes his panicked silence as acquiescence, "I'll wrap them up for you, yeah?", and he can't argue: Leah would hear. He nods. He'll come back later, he'll find a rose somewhere else. Maybe they've planted flowerbeds in Pirie Street since the last time he was there. It's been a couple of years.

"So are you here for long?" Leah says as they walk on. Roses catch his eye: embroidered along the edge of a woman's dress, folded from napkins in a restaurant window. He tries to ignore them, tries not to look at people's watches as they pass.

"Only until my appointment is completing." He doesn't even speak French, but he's stuck with it now.

"I mean, in Adelaide."

Oh. Yes. "Um, no," he says. "I don't know." They pass a travel agency and he thinks about buying a ticket to France, to anywhere: he's still got contacts, he could get a counterfeit passport, couldn't he? "Perhaps." The streets are so hot, the sun is so bright. The passphrase and counter loop through his head again.

"There's a lot to see here," Leah says, her voice blurring in his ears. "We've got some evening talks on at the museum next week." He wants to nod and ask what they're about, maybe turn up to listen, say hello to her again, leave early if they're

boring. Maybe she'd leave with him and show him through the closed museum, and they'd laugh at skeletons in the dark. He could borrow her life of early morning barbecues and slightly annoying workmates. "I fear my English would be too poor." He stares at spiralled cracks in the footpath, curving outward like petals. "I can understand even you only because, because you speak so clearly."

"Your English is really good," she says, more slowly. "My aunt got married to this French bloke and when they visited over Christmas I could hardly understand him. He was really nice though. He's a baker, he made wonderful bread. He's from, oh, I can't remember actually. Somewhere in the north?"

"Ah, yes, the north," Lewsby says. "I have been there not often. I understand it is very beautiful, with many bakeries. I am from the south." They walk past shop windows and he looks through his reflection into a hairdresser's. Perhaps that's what he needs. Half an hour to change from light hair to dark, and come out and disappear. He clutches his flowers, crumpling their stems; maybe he could pull their heads loose, and throw them into the air in handfuls, and hide behind a cloud of petals.

He stops abruptly outside an arbitrary glass-fronted building in Pirie Street. "I am here," he says. "Thank you. To meet you was very nice." Might have been very nice, if he hadn't been trying to get rid of her.

"Yes, and you," Leah says, and smiles. "I hope the appointment goes well." She steps over a sheet of newspaper; maybe he could origami it into a rose.

"Merci," he says. "Au revoir. Goodbye." Is he going to have to walk into the building? He's got no idea what it is. No, she's turned around. Her hair bounces as

she walks away. He forces himself to wait until she's out of sight before moving, stamping on the paper just as it starts to blow toward the street. It's grubby and it tears, and after thirty seconds of folding he stuffs it in a bin.

No rosebeds nearby either, of course. There's the market, not too far away: he could get something in there, and hope he's not too late (it'd take another ten minutes at least, it might be too late already). Or there's a newsagent across the road: he could buy some chalk and draw a rose on the footpath. He could sing. He could look for a pen, and scrawl "white rose" across a piece of rubbish and hold that. It's all no good, everything would take too long or catch too much attention, the wrong attention. He pulls a petal from one of the pink flowers, and shuts his eyes. They'll turn me in, they'll turn me in not.

He opens his eyes again, and there's a woman: short, blonde, carrying a briefcase. She's walking towards him. He forgets he isn't carrying a rose, he forgets he doesn't want to be here anyway, that he just wants to go home, and watches. Is it her? It must be. Her hair's the right colour, she's still walking towards him. She's stopping, and opening her mouth, and he breathes in huge mouthfuls of relief.

"Hello. Are you Jake?", she says, and she's smiling, and it's not the passphrase.

"No," he says. "Sorry."

The woman makes a face, like Leah at the barbecue. "I'm too late, then," she says.

"Mm," Lewsby says. "I think I am too." He looks around. It's not that bad. He's not trying to remember his Year 8 French any more. And it'll be a few hours or a few days before the repercussions really kick in.

"Nothing too important?"

"No, not really. You?"

She shrugs. "Meeting someone for coffee. I've got a voucher for a free second cup if you want one."

He should wait, just in case he's in time after all; he should get a rose. He should stand where he is for hours, getting more and more desperate.

"That'd be good," he says. "I didn't have time for coffee this morning."

"The anemones are nice," the woman says.

"Is that what they are?" He reaches out and drops them in a bin as he passes, not caring whether it looks strange. "I don't really like them."

## **7 DOWN: Who's this?**

"Come on, choose a flavour. Banana. Banana's your favourite."

He stares through the glass: green, yellow, pink, pink, brown, white, brown, blue.

He wants all of them, consecutively and then concurrently, he wants to swallow them in a single mouthful that lasts for ever. He wants blue. Or yellow. Or blue.

Sarah wants to go back to David Jones and try on those bathers, not that she has much time for swimming these days. Maybe next year. "And you like strawberry," she says. "Remember we had some at Nanna's house."

Matthew does. Pink, then. Or yellow. Or blue. He leans forward, and Sarah jiggles him to keep her grasp, and he's getting bigger, she should get him some new clothes, he's almost bursting out of his orange t-shirt.

It's early but they're both tired: they've been in town for an hour and a half and they're not done yet. Matthew's got a birthday party to go to later, and Sarah needs to find a present, although she still isn't sure whether the Cassidy on the invitation is a girl or a boy. "Come on, we've got a lot to do," she says. "If you hurry up I'll let you walk for a bit."

Matthew hates the stroller. He wants to stop on a whim and peer under low benches, he wants to pick up snails by their handles without being told off, he wants to build them multistoreyed dead-leaf castles to live in. Sarah wants to get home and fall asleep, she wants to get out of town without stopping every thirty seconds for Matthew to pick up rubbish (yes, she'll have to say, well done, now put it in the bin; no, don't put your fingers in your mouth till we've had a chance to

wash them). She wants to walk down the wrong street and find out where that music's coming from. She wants to go into the hairdresser's and come out with ridiculous hair.

"Who's this?" the woman asks from behind her counter, leaning over. Her hair has green streaks in it, and she wrinkles up her nose and grins at Matthew. "You're a cutie, aren't you? I bet all the girls think you're fantastic. What do you want today?"

"One banana icecream in a cone, thanks," Sarah says after a moment, and sits Matthew back in the stroller. "Mum," he grumbles as she does up the straps.

"He's gorgeous," the woman says as she hands over the icecream. "Those cheeks. You'd better watch out or I'll have to steal him."

Sarah says something polite. They are good cheeks, catalogue cheeks, fat and dimpled and slightly pink, the sort of cheeks that sell buckets and spades and sun-washed holidays at the beach and the idea of having children. Matthew bites into his icecream and smears them yellow.

"I want blue now," he says as they leave the shop, wriggling a bit against straps.

"You like banana," Sarah says, pushing him across a road.

"But I want blue."

"If you wanted blueberry you should have told me while we were in the shop."

Matthew would have, if there'd been enough time. He takes another bite of the yellow, but it's boring, he's had it so many times before. Cars go past, bright, and

when he tilts his head back there's sky opening above the buildings. It disappears behind a verandah, but he keeps looking up as the stroller bumps over the footpath, and just when he's about to give up it comes back, and there's more of it in front of him. He fiddles with the buckle that locks him in place.

Sarah pushes across the road. Cassidy can have a playdough machine and a card with genderless balloons on it, she thinks, and then the stroller goes light: Matthew's undone his straps, and he's running ahead, across Victoria Square toward the fountain. He drops the icecream onto the side and leans over, reaching for water. It's blue and grey and swirled like the icecream he didn't have, like the sky.

Sarah still doesn't know how she's supposed to react when he does this sort of thing, whether she should run straight after him and leave the stroller and the shopping and her bag to any passing opportunist, whether it makes her a bad mother that she doesn't. She pushes harder and catches up with him fifteen seconds later, and he's wet over his hair and sleeves and face, splashing water with both arms. Seagulls flap away. He climbs over the wall as she gets closer, stumbling then standing up, the water soaking straight through his darkening trousers, dry patches of higher t-shirt lasting until he dodges back under the fountain jets. He's not coming out, he decides. He's going to stay here for ever; he can do that, can't he?

He's very wet. Sarah watches. Those cheeks, that spring-curved hair running straight under the water, matted down into spirograph curves. He's giggling and happy and watching her with sidelong glances, and she thinks about walking away but she can't step backwards, only sideways, shifting the distance without

increasing it.

Matthew can see her through the spray of water, standing. He ducks behind a block of stone, then pokes his head back round: she's there, still.

On the other side of the fountain the shadows are different, and people look at him and then glance away. The cars are a bit quieter and the water's colder, and maybe deeper. Something bright bobs up from the bottom.

Sarah listens to Matthew splashing on the far side of the fountain, and waits. She sidesteps, then back again in the other direction, a step or two, sliding along the circumference of the circle that keeps him at the centre. She'll get wet pulling him out, she supposes, and then he'll get the stroller wet, and they won't be able to go into shops until he's dried off. She steps again, and again.

"Matthew," she calls. "Get out here now."

He keeps splashing, out of sight.

She walks further. On the other side of the fountain all she can see is two men sitting on the grass, and a woman walking past, and cars and trees around them all and more people in the distance, and buildings behind them, and another fountain jet pouring into the basin, splashing onto an empty coke can and then into the water with a sound like an escaped two-year-old.



## **32 DOWN: Then what's that?**

It's stopped raining. He's jubilant, floating with exhilaration, and as he follows the path he can see how it looks from above, cutting a grey pentacle through wet grass. He changes direction before completing the pattern, then stops to look at the message again, out in the open this time; under trees there's still the belated drip of water caught in leaves. "Hi Karl," it begins, and he grins uncontrollably, and then again at a suspicious glare from the man passing by with a wife and an armful of plastic bags. Karl. She thinks his name's Karl. No wonder she wasn't interested.

He slips the phone back into his pocket and passes the CD case from hand to hand. He left the pirated Photoshop at home, he realises, but she won't mind. She'll ask him to come round tomorrow, or maybe she'll want to visit him to fetch it. He'll make bread just before she arrives.

"Hey," she calls from behind him, "Karl," and this time he can hear the 'K', so clearly he wonders why he didn't notice it before. She's standing by her car, hair even more impossibly red than usual, shining out from the flooded green-grey of the square around them.

"Hello," he says.

"Hope you haven't been waiting too long." It's a bit perfunctory, but he doesn't mind; of course she doesn't really care about him yet.

"No," he says. "I like the rain, anyway."

"Great then." She smiles. "You've certainly caught a lot of it."

He smiles back, her tone of voice says he's supposed to, and tries to work out how to tell her. There's so much to say. "My name starts with a C," he says. "Carl with a C. You used a K in your message."

She pushes hair behind shoulders. "Oh, right," she says. "Sorry. I'm so bad with names."

"You'll know how much the difference means," he says, over-eager maybe but it's so wonderful to be sorting it out at last.

"I've never really thought about it." She shrugs and starts walking along one of the footpaths, towards her house. He can't have explained it right.

"You must know," he says, of course she does. "There's you. Cate with a C. And everyone's called Kate with a K, and there's nothing wrong with that, but it's mundane, it's omnipresent. If you're a Kate with a K then you're probably going to work in the civil service or the local supermarket. You'll be nice and a bit plain. You'll have teatowels that match your apron. Maybe you'll volunteer at the local library. But you, you're Cate with a C, so you have this gorgeous hair, you sing, you live in the middle of the city, and you eat bites of other people's food to save money on your own, and you're always ten minutes late for anything but nobody ever minds. With a C."

She laughs, and she's a bit uncomfortable, he can tell. "I don't think my name's got anything to do with it," she says.

"It does," he says, slowly, carefully. This might be his last chance. They reach the crossroad that divides the square into quarters, and he points in front of him at the

sculpture: THE FOREST OF DREAMS, in thick extruded letters, waist-high, one word on each corner. "Now imagine if that read FORREST, two 'r's." he says.

"Okay, there was an explorer, John Forrest, he came through Adelaide from Perth, he was Minister of Defense after Federation, but he's not very interesting. We'd have a whole square filled with, I don't know, political statues. Historical plaques. But there's only one R, so we get grass and trees and it's beautiful," and he gestures up at them. "And you're Cate with a C, and it's the same thing, and I'm Carl with a C as well."

"They only put that sculpture up a few years ago," Cate says. "The trees were already here." He knew that, of course he knew that. She's taking him too literally.

"No, listen—"

"Look," she says. "Thanks for coming out in—"

"Listen." He'll get it right this time. "There's someone behind you taking photos. If I tell you they're Jean and that it's spelt with a J, you'll turn around expecting a woman. If I say it's Gene with a G, you'll be expecting a man." She turns around: it's a woman. He's still talking. "If you meet someone called Cyndi, Cyndi with an 'i', you're probably a bit wary. She might be nice, but maybe she teases her hair and wears tiny denim skirts and leans against brick walls to blow enormous pink bubble-gum bubbles. And if you meet a J-a-m-e-s you're going to expect him to be a solicitor with a nice tie who knows how to choose wine, but if he spells it J-h-a-y-m-e-s you'll wonder what his parents thought they were doing, or whether he changed it himself because he wanted to be an artist and it seemed easier than learning how to draw."

"I honestly wouldn't care. People aren't different just because they spell their names differently." She's stopped walking.

"They are," he says. "You do care. A kilometre might seem like the same distance if you end it t-e-r, but it's not, not really. When it's an e-r, you're on American roads instead of Australian roads, there'll be a different chance of getting run over while you measure them, there'll be different cars and different trees and birds. And then there's your favourite biscuit. If you're spelling 'favourite' without a 'u', then it's going to be Oreos instead of Delta Creams. There are things you can get sent to jail-with-a-j for, but if you're living in a country where it's gaol-with-a-g maybe the same things are completely legal." He looks around him and, for a moment, the square flashes bright with possibilities, the chance for everything to be different with the shift of just a few letters. The flower beds puff white, the scent of rain clatters to the ground in a shower of tiny coins, the flocks of birds searching through damp grass suddenly sprout magenta petals, the encroaching night darkens with armour and swords. And you, he thinks, looking at Cate as her legs thicken and her crossed arms transmute into branches with evergreen needles, her eyes into knots of wood.

"Look," she says again, and the needles fall away from her and dissolve, the phlox shakes its petals back into wings. "I think I should go. I just need to get this poster done by tomorrow." She looks at the CD case in his hand.

Poster. "Yeah," he says. "I'm sorry, I left the disk at home."

"Then what's that?" She points at the case.

"It's music," he says. "Some songs I thought you might like." He holds it out and

she steps backwards.

"That's really nice of you, but I don't need music, Karl, I—"

"Carl," he says. "With a C." She can't have got it right, she can't have understood, he can still hear the K. "Like Cate." He holds the CD out, pressing it against her hand; when he lets go it falls onto the footpath between them, into a puddle. He squats down and picks it up, and holds it out again.

"Carl with a C," she says. "Carl. I've got a lot to get done by tomorrow. If you can't help I should leave now."

She waits for a moment, and then turns around.

"Listen," he says, and she walks away.

If he can find the right words she'll understand.

"Cate," he calls. She turns around to face him for a moment, walking backwards.

"Just leave me alone," she says. "I'm Kate with a K on my birth certificate. I only use C because there was already a singer in Adelaide with the same name as me. Okay?"

That can't be right. It can't be. "I don't believe you."

She doesn't say anything, just opens her front door. The drops of water run slowly to the edges of the CD case; he hears them fall. "Cate. Kate," he says. "I don't care. It doesn't matter." But she shuts the door behind her, and maybe it does.



### **36 ACROSS: How've you been today?**

She observes. She records. Leave nothing but footprints, take nothing but photographs, she read somewhere, but she walks along undentable concrete paths and her shoes are always clean.

It's harder than it used to be. Sometimes she plays with the idea that the history of the world is the history of increasing irrevocability—jars lids with metal bubbles that pop up as soon as the seal's broken, aspirin in boxes desperately shrink-wrapped for safety, tissues that crumple into ruin after a single use. More and more shops disappear behind signs that say smile, you're being watched. Even in the streets without cameras, people ask questions: how've you been today? Have you tried our new pumpkin-seed bread? What do you think of this weather then?

She responds by choosing her groceries carefully, sticking to the range of fresh food, scooping vegetables and grains into unsealed reusable bags. Bank statements and bills arrive by email. Digital cameras have helped as well: pictures that can be undone to a blank page without leaving a mark. She leads ants from her kitchen with a trail of crumbs, she poisons her weeds and leaves them dead without disrupting the ground, she blows her nose on a handkerchief and then irons it back to new.

It's getting dark. She looks down the street and watches someone lean over a mobile phone. A car drives past and aims, throwing half a puddle outward onto the footpath, and she takes a photo: the arc of water freezes with a streetlight shining through, poised just before it collapses around the victim. Nobody swerves to spray her. As long as that's true, as long as she watches and keeps out of sight and leaves the world unmarked, then nothing she does is irrevocable.

In Hurtle Square somebody turns around by the flowerbeds. Another photo: a blur of red hair emerging from green, a mermaid. Her hair was that bright once, but it's grey now, and she's glad of the anonymity (wrinkles are different, giveaway residue of past expressions, so she never frowns and rarely smiles and keeps her skin uncreased, like the books she reads without ever cracking their spines).

There's a fence and a churchyard, and rustling, and another photo: an incipient tree, three inches tall, growing in a crack in the wall, tiny leaves weighed down with drops of light-filled water. Another, with the zoom lens: smoke rising from somebody's cigarette. She'll catch a bus later (she doesn't drive any more) and file the pictures when she gets home, and then wipe the memory card.

Her feet are wet, so she steps around a section of dryly verandah-shielded path: not even footprints. She's a ghost, she floats, keeping the world safe through an impermeable layer of glass and anonymity. Another photo: the edge of the parklands, with figures and tree trunks she can barely distinguish from each other. People are sitting together and singing, and she remembers what it felt like to be one of them, and she can't walk any closer, the footpath ends and the grass would bend under her feet.

When she gets to the end she'll undo it all. Past the people bending wet grass, winding music back into their mouths; past the smoke thickening back into the cigarette as raindrops fly skyward. The crack in a wall will close up as she passes, a girl in the park will ratchet anticlockwise, water will arc into its puddle as a car reverses by. She'll follow everything right back to the start, and try again.



## **2 DOWN: What is that?**

*The Festival Centre plaza. White clamshell buildings upstage; in front of them, angular works of modernist sculpture jut out from the ground, red and blue and yellow. These double as seats, tables, pedestals, anything they need to—though not always comfortably. One side of the stage is occupied by a fountain; the other, by Milly and Gordon. They're dressed in stagehand black, separated by an awkward metre or two, and awake sooner than they'd like. They look out across the audience from their seats on top of the taller sculptures, and maybe it's an excuse not to look at each other.*

*It's early morning, and the shadows change gradually, sunlight moving across the stage.*

*A crash comes from behind the audience.*

Gordon: We should go and help.

Milly: I don't start till eight.

Gordon: Even so.

Milly: They're doing perfectly well without us.

*Pause. Perhaps Gordon has some breakfast; if so, perhaps he moves to offer Milly a share and then thinks better of it.*

Gordon: I didn't know you were working here.

Milly: There's no reason you should have.

Gordon: I wouldn't have applied if... I mean, not that it isn't good to see you. It's been a while.

Milly: Eight months.

Gordon: You're looking well.

Milly: Actually I just got diagnosed with lung cancer.

Gordon: No you didn't.

Milly: *(after a moment)* No.

*Another crash from off-stage. Gordon flinches.*

Milly: This is going to be a disaster. I told Anna to keep it inside. She said we need to open the production up. People have this thing about Shakespeare under the open sky, I don't understand it. Maybe they just want to get rained out so they can go home early.

Gordon: I quite liked that Titus Andronicus we did in the park in oh-three. Smell of roses. Lots of parking. Easy access to vending machines.

Milly: I told Anna about that one too. Also about the sausages we put in a bag for the decapitated heads.

Gordon: That worked surprisingly well, I thought. Until the seagulls came, anyway.

Milly: Lawnmower over the lighting cables didn't help either.

Gordon: Well, it discouraged a few of the moths.

*They smile at each other, then look away. Another crash. Another pause as they watch something happen over the audience's heads.*

Gordon: What is that?

Milly: It's for the mist during the shipwreck.

Gordon: What about that one?

Milly: Cloven pine. It's metaphorical.

Gordon: Oh. What about that?

Milly: That's... actually I don't know what that is. *(Shouting)* Cassie. What's that? *(She listens to an answer.)* Oh. Are you sure? *(Listens again.)* And a what? Why? *(Pause.)* A what? *(And again.)* No, never mind. No, I don't start till eight.

Gordon: Oh dear.

Milly: Lighting techs.

Gordon: *(defensive)*Some lighting techs.

Milly: Yes. So how is Theda?

Gordon: She's fine. She was off doing an opera in Melbourne last month.

Milly: That must have been nice for you. Easier to get to sleep.

Gordon: She doesn't snore. I don't know why you think she snores.

Milly: Mitchell told me.

Gordon: How would he know?

Milly: That's hardly my place to say.

*Another crash. They wince.*

Gordon: We broke up actually.

Milly: You couldn't deal with the snoring.

Gordon: I didn't mind.

Milly: So she does snore? I could tell. It's in the shape of the nose.

Gordon: It was endearing.

Milly: And she made you sleep on the couch.

Gordon: Only twice.

Milly: And she ate half your dessert instead of ordering her own.

Gordon: We don't all need a dessert to ourselves.

Milly: And she slept with other people.

Gordon: Only twice.

*Pause.*

Milly: Never mind, it happens to the best of us.

Another crash comes from offstage. Milly turns around.

Milly: I can't watch.

Gordon: Oh dear.

Milly: It'll be fine as long as they keep it dry.

Gordon: So if someone mistook the condensation for smoke and brought a fire extinguisher out, that would be bad?

*Pause.*

Milly: Yes.

Gordon: Mm, I thought so too.

Milly: *(turning back around to see)* Oh well. I did warn them.

*From this point the stage begins to fill with fog; at first only a little, but then more and more. Scraps of music edge into audibility, an orchestra tuning perhaps, individual instruments playing a few bars from "The Skaters' Waltz" or "Waltz of the Snowflakes" and then fading out.*

Gordon: There's quite a lot of it.

Milly: Do you still bring orange juice to work? We could take the bottle over and freeze it to make a delicious yet healthy snack.

Gordon: Only apple juice. Will that do? You can have it if you like.

Milly: It might seem a bit frivolous.

Gordon: And we'd have to help them clean up, yes.

*Milly slides down from her sculpture to stand on another one, lower. The rising fog is at her toes. After a moment Gordon drops to the lowest sculpture, a wide platform. The mist swirls out around him. It's at least knee-high, maybe higher, and still rising.*

Gordon: If this spills down to the railway station it's going to look like the city's being attacked by terrorists. Or vampires. Could we make it red? What happens if you mix food colouring in with the water before you pour it on?

Milly: I don't know.

Gordon: We could spike all the fire extinguishers and find out next time.

*The fog keeps rising. Gordon kicks around in it a bit aimlessly. Milly watches.*

Gordon: We should go. It's eight o'clock.

Milly: Go on then.

Gordon: Aren't you coming?

Milly: You're not going.

*He isn't. He stands back and looks at her.*

Gordon: It's quite nice, this dry ice stuff.

*Milly looks down. Gordon walks to the edge of the platform closest to her. The fog's up around his waist now, and over her feet. She sits down on her sculpture, legs triangled in front of her, floating just below the surface of a cloud.*

Milly: I suppose you got used to it. Lighting technicians and their fog machines.

Gordon: She didn't feel the need to introduce them into everyday life.

Milly: She didn't set up a distracting mist so she could steal your dessert without being noticed?

Gordon: No.

Milly: No? Fair enough. I would have.

Gordon: Mm.

*Milly slides off her statue. Gordon watches her, almost invisible, then steps down as well. They're an arm's length from each other when they disappear beneath fog.*

### **31 DOWN: What's she got this time, then?**

Five minutes to closing time and the market begins to collapse. Racks of cheese disappear behind pull-down grilles, butchers pile their Pork Sausages with Rosemary and Tamarind into a bag and take them home for the dog. Bakers sweep their shelves clean, french sticks battering into pyramids of unbought rolls and sending them tumbling down the concrete aisles. Greengrocers shake loose grapes into bins, and pile everything else onto a trestle table while they finish cleaning up: two dollars for any five vegetables, one dollar for any ten, fifty cents for a bag prepacked with everything that still hasn't sold.

Gwen takes the last bag of mixed fruit and escapes, rollerdoors closing in her wake. She starts rummaging before she's even reached the corner, too curious to wait: what's she got this time, then? But oh; no sprays of purple berries, no pomegranates, nothing with a spiky rind or fur, just a Red Delicious and a lot of Granny Smiths and Jonathans. Tut. There might be something else further down, but it's raining and the bag's made of paper so she has to hurry between verandahs to keep it dry. There's a flash of yellow at the bottom.

"Excuse me, miss, do you have any change?" someone asks, and when she turns around the pieces of fruit spill over each other to fill the tunnel she'd been digging towards the bottom of the bag. It's a man with a prosthetic hand, standing in a doorway.

"Oh," she says, and edges into his shelter to keep the bag dry, "no, I don't. Sorry. Are you hungry, though?", she adds, and she opens the bag and holds it out towards him.



He looks at her for a moment. Her hair's still pinned up fiercely from the protest, and stuck through with lopsided red tulips; maybe it's making her look unduly martial, she thinks. Isn't he going to say anything? Maybe he's too embarrassed. She nestles the bag in the crook of one arm and pulls out a couple of Granny Smiths, then balances them on the windowsill. "If you want them, anyway," she says, and walks on. (Excuse me, ma'am, the same voice says from behind her to somebody else: do you have any change? For five dollars. For the phone-box.)

She catches sight of yellow again, but when she pushes her hand down there's nothing different, only the cool roll of fruit over her fingers and a flap of thick damp paper that she has to peel off her forearm to free it without tearing. Maybe if the bag was a bit emptier, but the man with the prosthetic hand is half a block away now, she can hardly go back to give him more.

"Excuse me," she says to a couple standing at a bus-stop; there's no space for her, so she talks through the veil of water spilling over the edge of the shelter roof.

"Would you like some fruit?"

"What?" The woman turns around.

"Fruit." Gwen tilts her head to one side, and the rain batters a tulip petal out of her hair and onto her cheek. "Would you like some?"

The man smiles at her, leaning out from the shelter and looking into the bag.

"Thanks," he says, and picks one out, red and patterned with dots of water that break when she touches them.

"No," the woman says. "Thank you. We're fine."

The bag's still too full to sort through properly (and there's another voice behind her: you're not actually going to eat that, are you? Further back, a one-handed man finishes his phone-call and squints at himself in the window, wondering if he needs to shave, if he should get a new shirt). There's a girl by the next bin, anyway, under an umbrella, pale with thick black hair and thin red lips, and she takes one as well.

The bag starts tearing through as Gwen reaches South Terrace, and she holds it closer and hands the contents out faster. One to a schoolboy with an enthusiastic almost-beard; he takes it and walks on towards three girls in matching uniforms, sitting on a fallen tree and calling out to him (anyone want this?, he says; further back, a girl with black hair coughs and grows paler). There's a woman waiting on the footpath by a narrow parking space, too, gesturing to someone in a car, and she takes a couple as well (parking noises, and a car door slams: you know the doctor said we shouldn't eat fruit. Behind them, three schoolgirls call out: I want it, no I do, no me.)

The bag's already blossomed tiny holes along every crease, but now the bottom gives out. Braeburns and Jonathans spills out onto the parkland, thudding and rolling, scattering the magpies that are searching wet grass for worms. Gwen looks up just in time to see an indistinct yellow fruit (a melon? A mango?) roll into the stream with a muted splash, ducks taking off from the surface in fright. She scoops the rest of the fruit into a pile while she thinks.

The mud'll wash off easily enough, and the damp shreds of paper. She'll never be able to get them all home without a bag though. "Here," she says after a moment, squatting down, calling over to one of the magpies (it's settled five metres away to watch her suspiciously). She bites a piece of a Jonathan off, and takes it out of her

mouth, and tosses it forward. The magpie flaps away for a moment, then stops. Gwen bites off another chunk, and throws that as well. It isn't until a duck's landed and taken the first bite that the magpie runs forward for the second. She rolls the apple towards them; they wait as it slows and stops. Another duck struggles out of the water and steps forward.

There, then.

She rolls the next one towards them, relieved at the solution, after taking another bite to start them off. The next, and the next. By the time she's rid of the dozen she's dropped there are twenty ducks pecking at them where they lie, and three or four magpies retreating to eat in the distance and then coming back for more.

She moves over to the edge of the stream and looks down for the last piece of fruit; glimpses of gold show through reflected clouds. She still can't tell what it is. The water isn't deep, though, and she's already soaked through, so she kneels down and reaches and finds it and almost loses her grip but gets it after all and grins and sits up and ah. It's just a Golden Delicious.

She takes a bite then turns back to throw it among birds. So much for her bag of mixed fruit. Still, it was only fifty cents, no harm done. She's got some leftover soup to finish off at home, as well, she thinks, while magpies squabble behind her and ants begin to pour from rival nests.

## **27 ACROSS: Where the hell are you going?**

They've been eating and drinking since midday.

"I've run out of money," Elsie says.

Brent too. "Come on then."

Nicholas has sixty dollars left, and of course they could just use a credit card.

"Okay," he says.

They skirt around pedestrian lights and cross further down, dodging the flowers that run along the middle of the road. Elsie tries to pick one, but cars are approaching and the soil's damp; she runs across the road at the last minute, landing on the other side to a blare of horns with a bundle of petunia roots and leaves in her hand. "Where the hell are you going?" somebody shouts out of a window, slowing down.

"Elsie," Nicholas says, and she grins.

They walk past the courts and the pawnbrokers. Brent reaches out to touch the wall every few metres.

"They might have replaced him," he says.

"They haven't." Nicholas watches the footpath. "He was still there a few weeks ago, anyway."

"You went without us?" Elsie stops.

"I needed to get some money." It's louder than he'd intended. "I didn't realise I was

supposed to consult with you first. And I was with a client."

"There are other banks," Elsie says.

"Come on." Brent's ahead of them now, turning around to look back solemnly.

"Stephen wouldn't have wanted us to fight."

Nicholas laughs after a moment. Elsie takes longer. "Do you remember," she says, "that party with the cake?"

There's a man using the machine when they arrive, looking from his phone to the screen and back again. Nicholas spends a few minutes quietly resenting the delay, and then Elsie nudges him.

"What?"

"Shhh." She nods towards the man, then nudges him again.

"What?", mouthing silently this time.

"Make sure you stay out of view of the cameras," Brent says loudly, and Nicholas catches on. He's too sensible for this nowadays, or insufficiently drunk.

"Have we synchronised watches?" Elsie asks, watching the man at the machine for a reaction.

"Of course," Brent replies.

Nicholas shrugs. Elsie glares, and he manages a proper response. "Yes."

"And it's an even split this time, yeah? None of this forty-thirty-thirty garbage."

The man in front of them leaves before they get too much further. Elsie's biting her bottom lip, trying not to giggle. Nicholas pinches the bridge of his nose. He's tired. But the machine's free, and when they step up to it Stephen is still there, dressed in a suit he'd never have worn outside a photographer's studio, speech bubble tethered to his grinning lips. Hello, he says. Please insert your card.

Nicholas does.

Stephen slides into a different pose. Enter your Personal Identification Number and then press OK to continue, he tells them.

Nicholas presses buttons, 4355684373; Hello there, the letters on the number pad spell out.

I'm sorry, the speech bubble says as the Stephen on the screen changes to another, apologetic, concerned, one hand thoughtful under his chin. That's not the right number. Please try again, or press CANCEL to go back.

It's us, Nicholas tells him, 48787.

I'm sorry, that's not the right number. Please try again, or press CANCEL to go back.

He puts in his real PIN while Elsie looks away from the keypad politely and Brent doesn't.

Welcome! What would you like to do today? Stephen talks in a bulleted list. Deposit. Withdrawal. Account Information. Favourite Transaction. Or press CANCEL to go back.

"That tie," Elsie says, reaching out to touch it on the screen. It's patterned in bank colours to match the suit.

Withdrawal, Nicholas presses.

What would you like to withdraw? \$20. \$50. \$100. \$200. \$300. Other.

Other.

Please enter the amount you wish to withdraw, or press CANCEL to go back.

Nothing, Nicholas tries, 6684464, but he can't put that many numbers in. 968, you.

I'm sorry, Stephen says, and it's the same apologetic stance as before, You must select a multiple of ten (other than \$10 or \$30).

Nicholas settles for a hundred dollars and a receipt, and Stephen switches position again, Your request is being processed, and again, hands on hips, head tilted quizzically. In the market for a new home? Our interest rate is lower than any other major bank in Australia.

Elsie laughs. "Karen's got to him," she says. "Next year he'll be telling you to take the garbage out, and wouldn't some new curtains be good for the lounge, and isn't it time you started to think about children?"

Stephen slides into the final pose, the one they recognise, the only one that doesn't look like him playing up for the cameras: quiet head-tilting, not quite a smile.

Remember to remove all bills, and your receipt! Thankyou for banking with us, the speech bubble says, but the expression says yes, you, I remember you, hello.

Nicholas pulls the receipt free and crumples it into his pocket without looking. The screen fades back to the start. There's a lull in the traffic behind them.

"I didn't think about it much this year," Elsie says. She picks a shred of petal from her bundle of petunia leaves, and lays it by the keypad. It's wet and dark and crumpled.

"No," Nicholas says. He presses CANCEL, go back, go back, but nothing happens: it's four years later, still, and there's nothing left except an annual lunch, and some fading memories of a car on wet roads, and some artificial dialogue that never ends with goodbye.



### **37 DOWN: Hey, who do you think you are?**

Eleven o'clock and Phil's waiting in the churchyard, torch and green bag nestled under a bush, calm until he hears the telltale hiss of a spraycan round the back.

Vandals. Usually he'd get Jed to scare them off, but he's the only one here; nobody else is due until at least quarter past.

He doesn't want to draw attention. On the other hand, he doesn't want the back of the church covered with scraggly graffiti, either, so he picks up a shovel and rounds the corner shouting "hoi", and there's a thud as somebody drops something, and then a scuffle of footsteps through leaves. It's too dark here, he can't see anything.

He moves back around to the front after listening for a minute or two, and then his phone vibrates. It's a message from Liz: someone ran me off from the churchyard, meet in square instead.

That was me, he sends back, and waits, leaning over the wall towards the footpath. His latest seedling's been knocked about since last week, by passers-by or the weather, but he pushes it back into the crack in the wall without even disturbing the raindrops that brim from its leaves.

Liz prods him in the shoulder when she gets back. "Shouting at me," she says.

He straightens. "I thought I heard spraypaint."

"It was a plant mister." She holds it up; the nearest streetlight shines through the plastic and casts a green shadow over the dirt, like moss.

"It's been pouring all afternoon," he says. "You can't possibly need a plant mister."

"There's some lichen under the eaves that doesn't get rained on."

He helps him carry her seedlings around the front from where she dropped them when she ran. They're looking good: strong enough to survive on their own, just beginning to flower.

"And look what else I brought you." She hands him a paper bag. Seed pods; small and brown and a bit fuzzy. He doesn't recognise them.

"Kudzu," she says. "Picked them up while I was in Queensland."

"Kudzu," he says, and suddenly the pods seem hairier and menacing. "Liz." He's never seen the real thing, but he's seen photos: miles of forest buried under vines, disappearing sheds, houses abandoned to the encroaching front. He's read the studies, too, how most of the pesticides don't work, how a few of them just make it grow faster.

She smiles. "Mm, I know. It's just a joke."

He pockets them to burn when he gets home; bins can fall over, especially in this wind. Jed turns up a few minutes later with a sack of bark chips and a girl called Rachel (khaki singlet, combat boots; she's probably got a balaclava in her bag, Phil thinks); the others filter in by twenty-five past. It's a better turn-out than he'd expected.

At half-past eleven they scatter along divergent roads like a puff of dandelion seeds. Phil heads for the alleyways. A few years ago he'd have tried the high-profile streets, risking alarms on shop rooftops to wind bright-flowering vines around drainpipes, planting geraniums in blocked-up chimney pots. Some of the others

still do. Their plants don't last, though; someone always notices and tears them down. He goes for corners and crevices instead, places that nobody cares about. Milk crates filled with dirt and lobelias, hollyhocks slotted into any narrow gap between walls that looks like it might get sun. There are recesses hidden behind dustbins that he's been working on for six months now, and abandoned corners of parking lots, and they're gorgeous: clusters of waist-high trees, groundcovers with tiny purple flowers.

The flowers give it away, in the first alley, before he notices anything else: it's dark, but usually that doesn't matter, he can smell them from around the corner, all sugar and air. This time he can't, and a moment later he's near enough to see why: someone's put a thick metal gate and a private property sign across the entrance, and when he shines his torch through the slats the plants are gone. The flowerbox by the street-lamp's been emptied out as well, and replanted with council marigolds.

The parking lot in the next street over's been bulldozed, and there's a sign out the front with an architect's sketch of some angularly futuristic apartments.

He meets Liz at the corner, and they walk down the next alley together. She turns on her torch and it lands on tangled graffiti, high across a window, so high that the taggers must have been standing on something, and yes: below it are upturned tubs of trampled seedlings. Phil thumps the handle of his spade into a wall.

"It's not that bad," Liz says, turning the tubs the right way up and pressing the dirt back down, pinching off damaged leaves; but it is. When they meet up with Jed, khaki-singleted Rachel is crouching in a flower bed, interleaving tiny marijuana plants with the pre-existing petunias.

"You can't do that," Phil says. He reaches down and starts pulling them out.

"Hey, who do you think you are?" Rachel grabs a plant back and starts to push it back into the soil.

"Come on, Phil," Liz says. "What's the harm in it?"

"This is supposed to be about reclamation," he says. "Reclamation and beauty and nature. It's about creating an environment where people can be happy. We're not here to sneak drugs into a flowerbed outside government offices and then snigger at how interesting and counterculture we are. If that's what you're after then go join Resistance. Chalk up messages about the World Trade Organisation and knit communist scarves."

Rachel glances at Jed, then back. "It's just a few plants."

It isn't, not to Phil. "Anyway," he says, "you've got no idea what's been dumped in the ground around here. If your plants end up in someone's body there's a good chance you'll poison them." He turns around.

"Don't mind Phil," Liz says to Rachel behind him as he walks away. "He takes this very seriously."

Very seriously. There's so much potential, it could all be so wonderful. Bring in clean soil, cover it with orchards; vines clustering over the stobie poles, grapes weighing down telephone wires, streets mazed with hedges and pumpkins. He clutches the kudzu seeds, and thinks about a garden that doesn't crumple under security-guard boots, that covers bins and graffiti, that bursts open sudden metal gates, that splits walls in half or swallows them. And when he comes through into

the churchyard there's a woman on the footpath, crouched by his last tiny seedling, and she stands up and walks on and won't the world leave him a crack in a wall, does it have to tear up even that? He pulls the bag out of his pocket and grabs a handful of seeds, then he holds them tight till they press patterns in his skin and he throws them with as wide a gesture as he can manage, seeds thudding lightly into the ground around him like raindrops. He sees green leaves breaking apart the pavers at his feet; vines twisting around official flowerbeds and council walls, tethering bulldozers where they stand, crumpling half-built glass-and-metal apartments to the ground and rising from the shards.

## **16 ACROSS: Where's everyone gone?**

The side of the fountain is wide enough for one, so Theda sits down with rolled trousers and pushed-off sandals to edge her feet into the water. It's hot at the surface, and cool underneath. Ants march in parallel lines toward an ice-cream cone melting slowly beside her. An empty can floats past, and she kicks it away.

The world spreads out from here, arranged in pairs. Schoolchildren hold hands; workmates sit down for a late lunch on the grass, stealing lettuce from a shared sandwich; two boys stumble off a bus in the distance, tethered to each other by an mp3 player, one earpiece each, the cord tightening as they move apart and then wrenching them back together. Theda looks away and breathes slowly, stretching her feet (two of them) and bringing them up to the surface of the water. Beyond the ends of her toes the fountain is home to statues: metallic women, each one reaching out with a long-necked bird in her hands.

The public toilets are paired as well; one for men, one for women. Cars pull up next to each other at traffic lights. Small green WALK silhouettes cohabit with DON'T WALK, unwilling to break free. Bus stops mirror each other grotesquely from opposite sides of their roads; you like the 173—I like the 173 too! Oh yeah, definitely, the 99B as well. There's nothing unpaired in the city, Theda thinks, except her and the statue of Queen Victoria, glaring out at the coupled world in queasy distaste.

The floating can bobs back with a bottle in front of it. Theda pulls them both out and stands up, looking around for a bin. She finds two. Tunk, the bottle goes when she drops it into one; she hesitates, and then keeps the can.

The footpath's hot, and she tiptoes in her own wet footprints on the way back to the fountain. As she sits down again she drops the can back in to float, confused, on its own. It isn't as satisfying as she'd hoped: it disappears behind fountain jets quickly enough, and the rest of the world is still paired. Two flagpoles, two flags that stir in the wind for a moment and then collapse again, two trams in the distance, two clock towers behind her backing each other up sycophantically on the time. She leans forward to let her stomach settle, and splashes her face. Water runs down her nose, and the world narrows to reflections and shadows and the continuous splash of the fountain.

The wind comes back, and for a moment it's almost cold. Spray lands on the back of her shoulders. It happens again a few seconds later, and then again, and then it's rain: when she sits up and opens her eyes, the pavers around her are bright, sunlight shining off the raindrops, reflecting them into silver, and the ground into the distance is like the bottom of a wishing well. The ants on the fountain-edge disperse toward cracks, their ordered rows soluble in water. The ice-cream dissolves too, threads of yellow flooding outward into raindrops.

A woman with a clumsily navigable stroller pulls a small boy by the hand; they rush for cover beneath awnings, stepping in front of cars and stopping them with a glance, though the boy's already surely wetter than anyone can get from a minute's rain. A pair of seagulls flaps away. The flags grow darker and heavier until they outweigh the wind and fold around their poles. The square empties, breaking down into pairs that scatter toward shelter: the rain breaks up kisses and conversation, turns laughter into shrieks.

Theda watches as the ants are cut off by spreading ice-cream. Another raindrop

lands, and the ants start circling frantically, butting into water and backing away and then trying again. She's shielding them from the rain, but their island shrinks as the water spreads; their circling becomes more urgent, the last paths that they might have followed to safety start to close up.

The rest of the square is empty. Where's everyone gone? Even the traffic's quiet. They must all know something she doesn't, there must be a secret retreat that's closed to the solitary. The ants are shut out as well, helpless without a link to the nest.

Theda pulls her legs out of the fountain and looks through her bag for an old postcard. It takes a while to coax the ants on, and some of them don't make it. A few more fall off as she transfers them to a crack in the ground. They stumble around the edge and finally inside, into somewhere dry.

She doesn't know whether she's helped. Maybe the space is already full of bigger grumpier ants with a link to their nest and a distaste for outsiders. Maybe she should have poked a stick in and wriggled it around and cleared everything out first. It's too late now.

The rain starts thudding harder, bouncing as it lands. Grass is brighter, tree trunks are a rich dark pink instead of grey. Lines and patterns suddenly cut deeper into the bark. Lamp-posts reflect the sky in dozens of mirroring poles. Now that she's standing up Theda can see through windows into coffee-shops: they're filled with steaming mugs and cosy lighting and slightly damp couples, crouched in artificial comfort. It'll still be raining when the shops close, she thinks, and the hot drinks cool down, and the couples dry off or fall apart.



Her postcard's wilted at the edges and the ink is running, words sliding off into illegibility. Into the bin, then, after the bottle she dropped in earlier. She walks out of the square through puddles, and it's almost a shame that it's raining; with her face this wet it's impossible to tell that she hasn't been crying.

## 12 ACROSS: What's this?

The shelves are filled with bottles. When sunlight comes in the walls are like stained-glass windows, segmented into deep reds and milky pinks and rainbow-edged blues. She finds what she wants by instinct and memory, but there are labels as well; she gives a half-turn to a bottle marked Fortification, sitting on a shelf with a dozen others in even darker shades of green.

Even the colours fade when compared to the smell. There's honey and lavender and peach and rose, thick and familiar, but others as well, more obscure: gingergrass, jojoba, aloe, neroli, orchid milk, vetiver. She recognises them all.

She's thin and dressed in black, and she's called Amaranth, because in this job she can be.

"Ylang ylang," she's saying, "and jasmine. And some other things. A bit of frankincense, believe it or not." She pulls a bottle from behind the counter, Revivification. It's a transparent golden brown, darker at the bottom. When she turns it top-down a slow bubble of air drifts upwards.

"I suppose it'll help." Her customer's feeling anxious and dumpy, peering sidelong at one of the dozen mirrors, lifting her hand to the back of her head where long red curls used to sit.

"Of course it will." Sounding confident is the most important part. "Give it ten days."

Amaranth transforms; she creates. Her elixirs defend against heat, they release shine, they clarify. They protect and nourish and restore, they balance or hold in

place, they rejuvenate and brighten, they enhance nature or defeat it. She doesn't have any newt eyes or blindworm stings, but she has exemplary sheafs of hair dyed to a hundred different colours, and she has a broom. Hairdresser bibs hang like bats from her row of hooks.

The next customer's five minutes late and blonde. She's carrying a book. Washes her hair every day, Amaranth guesses; doesn't wear it down in public, gets the ends trimmed every six months, wants to be someone else. The last one's a given. They all want to be someone else.

"Hi," she says. "I'm just in for a trim. Sorry, I'm running a bit late." It's not a question, but it sounds like one.

"You must be Melanie," Amaranth says. "Sit down." She flaps a bib off the hook and pulls it around the girl's neck, then untwists the hair from its clip. It's long and a bit frizzier than it should be, and other hairdressers probably tell her it's lovely.

"You could do with a better shampoo."

Melanie looks at herself in the mirror. "I usually buy whatever's on sale," she says; lying, Amaranth thinks, probably too embarrassed to admit that she tries for extra gloss or extra bounce and it never quite works out.

"It's good hair," Amaranth concedes, "so you can probably get away with it, but you'd be better off with... I don't know. Something that strengthens and brightens. Maybe a shampoo with cypress. Rose."

"I really just want it trimmed," Melanie says.

Amaranth goes over to one of the shelves and picks up a few bottles of dye. "No you

don't," she says. If she's wrong the girl might walk out now, but she waits ten seconds, and that's long enough to be sure. "Usually," she goes on, "I have to be careful about this. People want help, but they don't always want to admit it. Sometimes they don't even realise it themselves. You do, though. I can tell." She puts the bottles of dye down on the counter, between magazines, next to the girl's book.

"Burgundy," Melanie reads quietly, sitting still under the black bib. "Russet. Deep claret."

"We won't even have to bleach first, with your hair." Amaranth tilts her head and looks at the mirror. It reflects them both.

"I don't know—"

"Look," Amaranth interrupts. "What's this?" She gestures to the shelves around her, and the mirrors, and the sinks.

Melanie looks.

"It's your chance," Amaranth says. "Everyone wants to be someone else. Everyone wants to step into a different life. Look at the people on the other side of the window. They all wish they could come in and sit down and then walk out half an hour later and leave their old selves behind in the chairs." There was a man earlier in the morning who froze outside for at least a minute, and there's a woman there now, halting her stroller and peering in at the thousand coloured bottles.

Amaranth looks back at her. "See?" she says.

"I only made a ten minute appointment," Melanie says.

"That's okay. I don't have anyone else coming for half an hour."

"And it's just hair. It won't make me somebody else."

"If you really believe that then appearances matter more than you think."

"And I can't afford it."

"I'll turn you into someone who doesn't care whether she can afford it or not."

Melanie shifts in her seat. "I just don't think it would suit me."

Amaranth shrugs. "It might suit the person you'd become. But if you like, okay then, just a trim." She picks one of the bottles up.

"No," Melanie says. "Wait."

Amaranth sits the bottle back on its shelf; russet. "I don't want to waste time. If it's just a trim you want, we might as well get started."

"I'm not sure."

This is it. Amaranth picks up the burgundy as well. "If you take much longer we won't have time for a dye job anyway."

"And red... maybe brown?"

"I don't want to make you a brunette." Amaranth reaches for the last bottle on the counter, but Melanie's hand comes up and grabs.

"No," Melanie says. "Don't put it back. I'll have that one."

"Deep claret," Amaranth says after a moment. "Good choice. I think," she adds a few minutes later, trimming off split ends to get started, "you might need some shampoo to stop the new colour fading. And it's got a bit of bounce to it, this hair of yours. The right conditioner and you'd stop weighing it down so much, get some nice loose curls. I think that'd be good."

Melanie doesn't say anything. She looks up at the ceiling blankly while Amaranth clears her old self away to make room for the new one.

"Yes," Amaranth says. "Curls."

Later, when she dries the red hair, the new Melanie stares into the mirror, biting her bottom lip and looking down, embarrassed, and then up, then grinning, then starting all over again.

"I told you you'd like it when it was done." Amaranth unhooks the bib and shakes the last of the old hairs free. New Melanie stands up and looks at herself in the mirror, then takes a step back and tries flicking a strand of hair over her shoulder. She's still taking surreptitious glances at herself as she leaves, swinging a bag filled with new shampoo and conditioner.

"You've left your book," Amaranth nods towards the counter as New Melanie pushes open the door to leave.

Melanie reaches back and grabs it, bending the pages, then spins back to the door and walks out. When she passes the window she's not looking in wistfully, she's grinning at her reflection again from under eyelashes that she'd never really noticed before.

Amaranth sweeps up, half-filling a dustpan with thin blonde strands. She's almost finished when the next customer comes in.

"Hello there," says a woman with thick brown hair and very high heels. "Delia Ferguson. I'm in to get my roots done."

"I'll just be a moment," Amaranth says.

"I'm in a bit of a rush," the woman says. Amaranth smiles, and finishes sweeping up.

## **6 DOWN: What's my special drain name?**

Fiona eats the sausage as quickly as she can, biting and swallowing, licking sauce from her fingertips. It's not quick enough; she's pushing the last mouthful in when Julie runs up behind her and prods.

"Boo," Julie says.

"Hello," Fiona says once she's swallowed.

"Ooh, breakfast."

"There was a barbecue outside the museum. They had vegeburgers." It's not quite a lie.

They walk past the hospital together, then through the Botanic Gardens. Julie picks fallen petals from the grass and tucks them into her hair. She's wearing a camouflage-pattern singlet and a ridiculous petticoat that puffs out at mid-thigh, layers of green and black tulle. Fiona covets, indiscriminately: the skirt, the confidence to wear it, Julie.

"There's jeans in my bag," Julie says. "It was a bit hot to wear them on the bus. You said it's colder underground, though."

They reach the grass slope, and slide down into the empty streambed. "Mm. It gets a bit damper once you're in, as well," Fiona says. "But not much. If you're careful your socks might not even get wet." They round a corner, and duck under one low bridge. The tunnel's in sight.

There's a high ceiling at first as it passes under the road, graffiti scrawled across



both walls. Julie reaches up and traces some of the lines with a finger: 2003, 2001, 1994. Magus, Shark, Mondaine. "You must know all these people."

Fiona looks. "Only a few of them."

"Magus," Julie says, drawing the syllables out. "Hello, Magus," she tries. "Good morning, Magus. That wizard's hat certainly suits you, Magus," she adds as she takes a few more steps.

Once the tunnel's passed under the road it drops to a low arch, barred with a few thick pipes. "Careful," Fiona says, watching as Julie bends down. "There's some big puddles in there." She can just make out the wall at the back, where the path bends to the right. It's rough grey stone.

It's also getting brighter. It shouldn't be doing that. Julie doesn't seem to have noticed, yet, but another twenty seconds and it's impossible to miss; she stands up and steps back to the mouth of the tunnel, behind Fiona. A moment later Toby starts walking towards them, flicking his headlamp off as he rounds the curve into visibility.

"Hi," he says to Fiona. "Didn't know you were coming out today."

"No," Fiona says. "Hello." She didn't know he was going to be around, either. He wasn't supposed to be.

"Everyone's running late, anyway," he says, "I got a text from Shark saying he won't be around till eleven, and it's his party."

"I'm not here for the party," Fiona says. "I forgot that was today." Nobody

mentioned a party to her in the first place. "We were just going to wander a bit, maybe look at one or two of the side-tunnels." She doesn't need to explain herself to him, anyway.

He nods, and glances past her.

"Hi," Julie says in response. "I'm Julie."

"Toby. Good timing, anyway," he says, looking back at Fiona. "You can help carry the pizza."

"The pizza," Julie says, raising her eyebrows.

"It should be here soon." He grins and walks past them to the mouth of the tunnel, and then out into the sunlight. "I'll just be a minute," he calls back, clambering up onto the side. "Wait for me."

Fiona feels queasy. It was supposed to be her and Julie, wandering through tunnels in the darkness, alone. "Sorry about this," she says. "I forgot they were going to be around. We don't have to wait."

"No, it's great. Shark's party! You never told me you knew someone called Shark."

Fiona can't tell whether it's mockery or enthusiasm. She shrugs, embarrassed. "His real name's Dennis."

"That's even better then." Julie drops her backpack onto a dry patch of stone and slides her skirt off. Fiona looks away until she hears the zip of jeans being done up. It's only a few seconds later that Toby jumps back down into the streambed, arms piled with six pizza boxes. They teeter as he catches his balance on landing, but

they don't fall. "Here, take a slice," he says.

Fiona was supposed to be leading the way, but instead she follows behind, two of the boxes in her arms, torch grasped awkwardly in one hand, listening to the sound of chewed vegetarian pizza in front of her. Low arches, and a corner, and then a long narrow corridor. Grilles skylight the roof, and the sun shines through onto intricate blue graffiti. Julie switches her torch off, and brushes her hands against the wall, squatting to get a better look at some of the writing.

"Shark, Mondaine, 2B, Sashay, Crawler," she reads. "Newbies Expo 2005."

"Yeah," Toby says, "The spray-paint's not ours, though."

Julie nods, and stands back up. "What's my special drain name?" she asks. "Do I get one?"

Toby tilts his head and looks at her appraisingly. "Do you want one?"

"I think so," she says, pulling her ponytail into a bun with her spare hand and looking at herself sideways in the water. "What do I look like? How about Meander? Spiral. Mirage. Aqua Julia. Drainella. Tunnelerina."

"We've already got a Mirage," Toby says.

Julie spreads her fingers, and hair falls back down. "Is that you, then?"

"Nah, I'm Tunnelerina."

Julie laughs. They walk further in, switching torches back on as light from the last grille fades. It doesn't take long.

"Subteranneum," Julie tries out, swinging her torchlight over the ceiling.

"Whisper. ExploroGirl. What's yours, Fi?"

Fiona doesn't have one. She doesn't like nicknames; even "Fi" would make her wince, from anyone except Julie.

The ceiling rises and falls as they walk on; walls close in and then spread again.

The graffiti thins out.

"How often do you run into people you don't know, down here?" Julie asks.

"Hardly ever," Toby says. "You don't get anyone trying to live down here, for a start, they'd be rained out or killed by the storms. One of the drains up by the showgrounds, though, there's some sixty-year-old who walks his dog through every morning."

In the darkness, Fiona thinks, looking at something is active; it substitutes for fingers. When her torchlight slides along Julie's back it's like reaching out and touching. Her singlet's rough, and dusty from the walls. When Julie laughs Fiona can feel the light move, and she feels sick again; a moment later, she stumbles and almost falls over when Julie squeaks and drops her torch.

"Spiderweb," Julie explains as Toby puts his pizza boxes down to pick the torch up and wipe it dry on his trousers.

There aren't a lot of spiderwebs; it's too dark. They proliferate near the entrances and grates, and then thin out like the graffiti. A few more dangle from the ceiling, and sunlight shows in the distance.

It's a gutterbox. Julie tiptoes and peers out. "There's a car park," she says, voice hushed.

"We can get out here if you like," Fiona says.

"Wouldn't someone see?"

"Nobody cares," Toby says. "They don't do anything, they just look confused."

"Yeah?"

"Watch this," Toby says, and leans forward, mouth to the gutterbox hole. "You there," he yells. "Smoking stunts your growth!"

Julie leans back into the shadow, laughing. "Shhh," she says.

He keeps yelling. "And it gives you pimples!"

"Toby," Julie says, pulling his arm.

He relents, grinning. "They won't do anything," he says. "Better not climb out, though, they'll think it was you."

At the next gutterbox, he makes ghost noises. At the one after that, he goads Julie until she looks out herself. "Hey," she yells, then breaks down into giggles. "No," she says, "I can't do it."

Toby leans over her. "Hey," he yells. "Get a room."

At the next gutterbox they both lean out. Fiona tries to shine her torch into the gap between their bodies, but there isn't one.

"We should really get out here," she says, but Julie isn't listening, and then there's light and sound in the distance.

"Almost there," Toby says. "You're coming to the party, yeah?"

"Julie," Fiona says, loudly. It echoes. "I don't think we should stay." Toby stops walking, and Julie turns around, torch swinging with her and glaring into Fiona's eyes. There's the drip of water, and more faint voices in the distance.

"I'm leaving, anyway," Fiona goes on, when nobody else says anything. She can't make out their faces. Toby clicks his torch off, and it gets even harder.

"What about your friend's party?" Julie says.

Dennis isn't her friend; none of them are. She likes the drains but that doesn't mean she likes the people, or their shouting from gutters, or their smug underground pizza parties. That doesn't mean they like her. "I just think we should go."

"Are you okay?" Toby says. "I can drop the pizzas off and walk you out, if you like, you shouldn't go on your own if you're feeling sick."

"I'm fine," she says, and turns around.

"Fiona," Julie calls after her. "Come on. There's pizza. I have to choose a drains name."

She doesn't stop. She listens in the gaps between her footsteps, but she can't tell whether anyone's following, and she shouldn't turn around.



## **24 DOWN: Why did we have to come here?**

Leaves scatter. Something purple flies past, then catches in a tree. They don't want to spend the rest of the afternoon picking through mud and corpses, but the office is closed and the touchscreen lookup outside isn't responding.

"Give it a thump then," Li says.

"It's not a toaster."

"Maybe it is, maybe that's the problem. I bet you didn't bring any crumpets."

Graeme tries again, but it's stuck on the introductory screen. "No," he says.

"It shouldn't be that hard to find, anyway." Li looks out across the cemetery. "Most of the graves here are fifty years old. We just need to look for the new ones.

Danielle, sweetie, get down from there, you'll fall off."

"No I won't," Danielle says, and doesn't. "I'm keeping my shoes out of the mud, like you said. Why did we have to come here? You said we were going home."

"In a little while," Li says.

Graeme gives up on the touchscreen and steps down to the map. The plots are sectioned off like museum rooms: Ancient Egypt, Australian mammals, Islamic graves. "Where would he be? One of the main plots? Catholic section?"

Li shrugs. "How would I know?"

"He's your cousin."



"Second cousin," Li corrects. "And I don't even know what a second cousin is. I only met him once. We can probably rule out the Jewish section, anyway, and the Society of Friends. You go north and we'll go south? He's got to be somewhere."

"It means you shared a great-grandparent," Graeme says, but Li's already coaxed Danielle off the wall, and she's heading south. Graeme watches her as she walks past the graves, uneasy, then turns around. Somewhere within shouting distance there's Li's second cousin, one year into a fifty-year lease, freeing up a four-bedroom house that even Li hadn't never seen until she found out it was hers.

Under the pine trees, needles are lying on the ground so thickly that the headstones are almost buried, tips pointing out and names hidden. To the left, where the trees are sparser, the graves look new, so he follows the path and watches flowers start to appear: first a few poppies in a jar, most of their petals rained off, then a daisy, and then he turns a corner and the whole row's overflowing, half a dozen plastic colours on each grave, tulips and roses and strange alien growths of unguessable origin. Pools of real water well in their centres, refracting hard resin dewdrops.

They didn't bring any flowers, he realises. For a moment he squats down by a stock of plastic chrysanthemums and rearranges them a little, wondering whether one or two would be missed, but no, he can't do that. Further down some pink roses have spilled across gravel, so he picks them up and tucks them between an angel's feet.

The wind spins paper down pathways and into bushes, and an umbrella thuds out of a tree into one of the graves. He picks it up. It's patterned with cats, orange and green, and when he pulls at the fabric it tears loose, leaving a spider of metal with ridged legs. He tries folding the cats into a flower shape, but it doesn't work, so

when a pinecone falls with the next gust he picks that up as well and forces it onto the end of one of the spokes. A few of the scales fall off, but he keeps pushing, and it sticks. None of the other cones will, though, they're all too hard or too brittle, so fallen leaves go on the next spoke, and the one after that, then he catches an empty chip packet for the fourth.

Footsteps grow loud from behind and he turns around guiltily, but it's only Danielle. "Hello," he says. "Did you two find it, then?"

"No. The graves over there are all boring."

"These are a bit boring as well, aren't they?"

Danielle shrugs. "Mum's are just writing." She's looking at the rose-toed angel, and the flowers. "She said you had more statues."

"Okay," Graeme says. "I'm done here, though. Ready for the next row?" It can't be any of these: too many flowers. If there was anyone else to bring flowers, then Li wouldn't be getting the house.

Nothing down the next path looks likely, or the next. The path after that, the graves are newer, but there's a man in a suit kneeling on the ground in the mud, head in his hands, shaking. Graeme's embarrassed, for the man and for his own casual t-shirt and lack of grief; he hurries Danielle past.

He fills another umbrella spoke with a leaflet for discount air-conditioning, and another with an old bus timetable, and then the last two with more leaves.

"What're you doing?" Danielle says, picking up one stone from each patch of gravel and dropping it into the next.

"Nothing much," he says, looking down at the contraption. He can't take it back to Li. He hasn't found the grave, either, so he leaves it on a patch of empty grass, twisting it upended into the mud. The leaves and paper flap and the arms clatter, and for a moment he thinks it's going to spin like a washing line, but the handle's anchored too firmly.

"Should we go and see if your mum's found the grave?" he asks Danielle, and she nods, but when they find Li she's halfway back to the gates, picking her way between overgrown bushes and graves that are far too old.

"It's covered in ants down there," she says. "I didn't find it, anyway. We can come back again when the touchscreen's working."

"I don't want to come back," Danielle says. "I don't want to move either. Amy was good, though, with the flowers in her toes."

Graeme tries the touchscreen again as they pass.

"I bet Amy's house is good. I bet it has cats."

"Don't climb up there again," Li says. "Is it working yet?"

Graeme shrugs. "Doesn't look like it."

"We should leave a note. They'd have a sign out if they knew." She rummages paper and a pencil from her handbag, but when she tries to tuck the note under the office door it blows away, flattening against a gravestone for a moment and then on into the trees.

**13 ACROSS: What's the answer, if it's so easy?**

Her arms are lost under clothing, and her vision's blurring to close-ups (hair, eyes, a shoulder, a nose), and then someone shouts, Get a room, and they aren't as invisible as they'd thought.

He jumps backwards, and she laughs, looking around. Nobody. Cars drive past the end of the alleyway.

"We could, if you like," she says. "Get a room. I've got an hour left. There's a hotel round the corner."

"Yeah, go on then," he says after a moment.

She leans back a bit and looks at him. "We don't have to."

"No," he says, "that sounds okay."

He's looking over her shoulder, and she leans back further, into his field of vision.

"Sorry, not okay," he says, refocusing on her. "It sounds nice."

Check-in isn't till noon, but the attendant lets them up anyway. In the lift, she takes sidelong glances at the mirror and their meshed limbs, disentangling slowly when they reach the second floor. They hold hands along the corridor, then she squeezes and lets go so she can work the access card. The room's smaller than she expected, and brighter (sunlight through the window), and the bedspread's pink and orange.

She hears him shut the door.

They stand where they are, and look around.

"That's a spectacularly horrible quilt," she says.

"Mm. It matches the curtains though." He walks over to the window and touches them, and then looks out. From where she's standing she can only see blue sky.

She watches as he twists the curtain ties around his hand, and then untwists them, then she looks away when he turns around. "Not much here," she says, sitting down on the single chair to open drawers. "Bible." She stands up to try the wardrobe. "Spare pillows." The fridge has a jug of water and a carton of UHT milk, and the counter has teabags and instant coffee. "There's drinks."

"I'm okay," he says. "You go ahead though."

"Mm, I'm not really thirsty. And the coffee looks like it's up to the same standards as the bedspread," she adds, but she turns the kettle on anyway.

They haven't moved by the time it boils. She can't tell what he's thinking.

"So there are spare pillows," he says.

"Two of them."

"We could," he says, then stops and starts again. "We could build a fort."

"Yes," she says, quickly, and she grabs the extra pillows while he pulls the quilt off the bed, and then a sheet.

They skirt around furniture, staying on opposite sides, sidestepping when their paths cross, and she tries not to react when their hands touch. They tuck a sheet

behind the bedhead, then drape it over a chair that they've lifted onto the mattress. The curtains aren't long enough to be useful, not unless they're unhooked from the rod, but the quilt makes a tunnel between the fridge and the chest of drawers, with pillows upended as support beams, and then he suggests a trapdoor, and she suggests a turret, but they've run out of materials. It's not a very good fort.

They climb in over opposite drawbridging towels. He lies down on his side, curled around the chair to fit his whole body in; she sits up on hers, legs crossed, her head giving the tented sheet a second peak.

"There, it's better from inside," he says, sheet-filtered sunlight fuzzing over his skin. She almost reaches out.

"I don't remember what you're supposed to do once you've built these," she says.

"Maybe you read comics."

"Nobody reads comics," he says. "Don't be ridiculous. "

"I used to read comics," she says, raising her eyebrows.

"Weirdo," he says. "I thought everyone just watched cartoons."

"We didn't even have a television till I was fifteen, actually."

"You must have," he says.

"We didn't."

"That must have got you teased at school."

"As it happens," she says, "I was home-schooled."

"You weren't."

"I was too."

"Nobody's home-schooled."

"Well, I was."

They look at each other, then she laughs. "Weirdo," he says again.

"Show me what you normal people do with your forts, then," she says, wrinkling her nose.

"We check whether Transformers is on TV, and wait for somebody's mum to make pancakes."

"I don't think anyone's mum can get in here," she says. "We've got both the access cards."

"Okay then," he says, rolling onto his back, and the sunlight shifts, "we play games. I spy, with my little eye, something beginning with B."

She burrs air through her lips. "Come on," she says. "Give me a challenge."

"What's the answer, if it's so easy?"

She reaches through the chair to prod him in the side, and he arches his back to dodge, setting the chair wobbling. "Okay," he says. "I hear, with my little ear, something beginning with P."

She listens. An air conditioner; someone in the hallway. "People?"

"No."

Cars. Voices outside, chanting. "Protest?"

He looks theatrically downcast. "Yes." Then he perks up. "Okay, this one's good. I feel, with my little heel, something beginning with S."

She looks at his feet. He's still got his shoes on. "Sock."

"Oh. How'd you guess?"

She laughs and leans down a bit, resting on her elbow, enough to let the sheet stretch directly from the chair to the bedhead.

"Okay," he says, "now we do something else. Your turn to choose."

"We could have a drink."

"Didn't you say they looked horrible?"

"Yeah," she says, "but they're free. See how many cups we can drink in half an hour? Or you take the coffee and I'll take the tea. Race you to six."

"I think I like the Transformers plan more."

"We'd have to get out to find the remote control."

In the end they lie on their backs and look up at the sheet, hands not quite touching through the legs of the chair. "This still doesn't seem very structurally sound," she says. He shrugs, and the chair wobbles again.

The sunlight moves slowly, and they keep still, almost; just enough drift for the tips



of their shoes to touch. "You should go soon," he says.

"We should probably fix the room up, too."

It only takes a couple of minutes to dismantle the fort. When they've left and she's closed the door to the room from the outside they hold hands along the corridor; in the lift on the way down, they slide away from eye contact, and rest heads on shoulders. They separate when the lift stops.

Outside the hotel, stragglers from the protest march scoop discarded leaflets from the ground. "So," she says, starting the sentence without any end in mind, hoping for an interruption.

"Mm," he says.

"That was nice," she says, and it's half a question.

"Yeah."

"I should get going, anyway."

"Yeah," he says again. "Where did you say you worked?"

She nods across the road. "There, actually. Mondays and Thursdays."

"Oh, right. I'm around this part of town all the time," he says. "We could get some coffee or something. Or go to a park." He looks at her. "Do home-school kids go to parks, or do you just sit in the back yard wearing knee-high socks?"

"We go to parks," she says, and tries to poke him in the side again.

He catches her hand. "They're better for eye-spy."

They don't look away as quickly this time; they pull each other into another blur, just for a few seconds, and then they separate and walk away, trying not to look backward over shoulders and not quite succeeding.

### **33 ACROSS: What is a cemetery, anyway?**

Max believes in determination, but determination works best against deadlines and opponents and strategies, not against food poisoning. He stops to lean on a wall. The nausea swells and the world diminishes to a buzz; a minute later, or ten minutes, the sounds grow clearer again and he pushes himself back to standing.

Okay, not determination, then, but maybe perseverance. The air's doing him good, he's sure of that. He could have stayed at the hotel with Dan, but he'd just be lying on the carpet and fighting over whose turn it was to hold the bucket. This is much better, this is the way to do it: he's moving, he's getting his legs to do as they're told, he's working the toxins out. He's almost falling over, and when he ends up against another wall with his eyes shut it's time to admit that perseverance isn't the way either. He stands for long enough to cross the road to the cemetery, where he might scare passing children if he faints but at least he won't be run over.

It's wet and muddy. There's a bench, but he doesn't sit. He'll have to walk back to the hotel soon, lie in a corner somewhere, maybe have a turn with the bucket, and if he sits down he won't want to stand up again. He'll just walk around a bit more, he decides, maybe lean against a tree or two, wait until he's feeling a little better and then start back.

He's only a few blocks from the hotel, and it's confusing how far that seems, now. This must be what it's like to die: the sudden bewildering difficulty of each step, of getting your eyes to focus, of listening to the world without letting it distort into overwhelming white noise. Successive functions switch off until you're left at the centre, and even there your brain's fuzzed and heavy. Max's limbs are slow and difficult to control, but it's more than that. He can't even muster the certainty to

decide what he wants them to do, and when he tries he's startled to find himself kneeling on the ground, leaning over, his hands resting in mud, his head dropped against the stone of a grave he hadn't even noticed. But this suit's rented, he thinks, he can't get it dirty. He wonders how that works with the dead, whether you can rent a suit for the open casket and then take it off before you're buried. The buttons, though, imagine trying to undo those with stubbing corpse fingers; he's not dead and even his hands are cold when he pulls them out of the mud, and red where the skin shows under the brown, and he can barely loosen his belt.

Deep breaths again, he can manage those at least. Death must be much worse than this. Even the air must be thick and unmanageable. His hands sink further into the mud, and he pulls free and moves them forward to rest on the clean edge of the gravestone. There's wind, and footsteps, and he hopes nobody's going to notice him. Maybe he's taking up somebody else's grave. He must be, of course, they don't just put the stones down at random and hope that a few of them end up over corpses, but he can't focus on the headstone to read the name, even though it's clean and sharply chiselled. Someone who's only been dead for a little while.

He wonders how long it takes to remember that you've died. It could be years: it must be so much harder to form new memories, when your brain's been called to a halt and the only changes are decay. You must spend months blinking in confusion, and finding even that almost too much, your eyelids damp and uncompliant. Dislodging old memories would be hard too: habit and loneliness propelling you toward the streets to work, to your house, to warm beds and slippers, to buses you've caught two hundred times a year for half your life, that you'd keep on catching for ever if only your legs were strong enough to carry you that far. What is a cemetery, anyway? They're always walled, fenced off, but the

walls are too low to keep out anything living. Cats can leap them, small children can clamber over, possums vault in and out and in, ants swarm. It's only the sick and the dead that can't get past.

He wonders what it's like to die after months in hospital. How gradual the change must be; just a slow trailing-off of the visitors who bring you flowers.

It can't last. Thousands of graves filled with confused dizzy people, not understanding why it's so hard to stand, stumbling along pathways with slowly degenerating convictions about what they're supposed to do, welling behind cemetery walls and building up, and up. There are so many of them, each generation stored by the living and then joined by them a few decades later. He pushes himself up into a kneel, for a moment, until nausea overcomes him again and he doubles forward, and even with his misbehaving eyes he sees too many graves to guess at the number. Half of them are hidden under lichen or crabbed branches. What are the dead supposed to do when they manage to walk a few steps, turn a corner or two? They won't be able to remember how to get back to their graves, and the helpful maps and touchscreens are designed for living eyes and fine motor control. Give it long enough and they'll all reach the walls, pushing forward while hundreds more crowd behind them. Eventually, maybe not for centuries but eventually, they'll overflow, flooding onto the footpaths, into the streets and buildings they've been kept from, back to their places among the more obliging bodies of the not-yet-dead. They've done it once before, here, when the cemetery was new and it rained for months and there were floods. You can't build a reservoir without an outlet and expect it to last for ever.

The wind's cold. Max leans over again and coughs, and suddenly his mouth is

warm and sour and overflowing, his lunch just missing the stone and pooling on top of mud. It's too viscous to sink in so it flows slowly toward him, and he moves his hands, then shuffles back on his knees, swearing and coughing. He's feeling better. After he coughs a bit more and spits a couple of times, the fuzziness of his limbs starts to clear away. The air thins out.

He's eaten bad food before, and he knows this sudden clarity won't last for ever, even though it feels like it will; and there's the state of his suit, and the orange taste in his mouth, and the muddy handprints on the white gravestone, all reminding him how bad it was just thirty seconds ago. He should get back to the hotel while he still can. He'll be okay for a few blocks, at the very least, and then he'll be somewhere safe when his legs start collapsing again, and his vision blurs, and he can't hear anything except buzzing and silence.

### **34 ACROSS: What are those little plastic dishes called?**

Clothes arrive in loose bundles, scattered through with teaspoons or Monopoly hotels. Magazines shed grocery lists from between their leaves, and a suitcase hides underwear in its secret compartment. There's a whole shelf in the back room dedicated to unfinished embroidery kits, their needles still threaded and their threads still tangled.

Gus takes the boxes of other people's lives and disinfects them, stripping them of dirt and personality until they're fit for sale. Occasionally it's easy: mugs that somebody's soaked in disinfectant for hours, books with their fly-leaves clipped to hide an old inscription. Usually, though, the mugs are still ringed with faint coffee; the books spill open with receipts and photos, tissue paper, sticky notes, the jack of diamonds.

Gus separates a business card from its trouser pocket. The trousers go into the laundry pile, and the business card into the bin, landing on top of a wedding invitation and three chipped marbles and a papier mache balloon painted with a clown face. It annoys him that people treat the shop like a rubbish bin, and then feel virtuous about donating to charity: children's school projects, an uncle's collection of 1968 chocolate-bar wrappers.

The next box has a toaster. He adds it to the bin (they haven't taken electrical goods for years) and crumbs cascade down, filtering through odd socks and soiled blankets. Presumably Lily abandoned her toasters and wedding invitations at a charity bin in California, or maybe she paid someone else to do it instead. She's late, too.

He keeps sorting, picking through a carton of toys until he hears her in the front of the shop, asking Tess where the back room is. When she comes in, she's carrying a box. "Hello," she says.

He looks up. "An incomplete deck of Go Fish cards—rubbish bin or the twenty-cent bargain box, but I'm not sure which."

She puts the box down. "Sorry, I've no idea."

"And you brought a present," he adds. "Gosh, you shouldn't have. Some baby shoes, how cute. Three Nancy Drew books, and this one looks like it might have all its pages. A little straw hat with a ribbon, too. Oh dear, I hope you kept the receipt, though, it doesn't look like it's my size."

"They're not for you, they're for the shop," Lily says. "I left a pile of boxes at Mum's when I moved to Oakland, and she pulled them all out again last night. A lot of it was just garbage."

He stands up to get a better look. A book of logic puzzles under the hat; a stuffed elephant.

At the bottom there's a chemistry set. He should put rubber gloves on and throw it away; there's a policy document up by the back room door, and handling chemicals is item 9b (9c covers medicine, 9d is other hazardous material, 9e is radioactivity and a joke). It's gorgeous, though, two shaded rows of test-tubes, white through to black on the top and red to purple on the bottom. He slides the box open.

"I brought some cookies as well." Lily pulls them out of a plastic bag. They're nestled in wicker and cellophane and ribbons.



"Ah, sorry," Gus says, pulling the safety glasses out of the chemistry set and putting them on, "the shop doesn't accept food. Official policy item 9a."

"They're not for the shop, they're for you," she says with conspicuous patience.

He twists the test-tubes around so he can see the labels. "Oh," he says. "You've used all the Sodium Bicarbonate. Still, maybe I can use the Sodium Carbonate and just put in twice as much." He picks a few of the test tubes up and holds them to the light; thousands of tiny crystals.

"I like this place, anyway." Lily looks around.

"We do our best. This Potassium Hexacyanoferrate sounds fun, too. I wonder what it does." He shakes the tube gently, and the crystals rearrange.

"I'd forgotten how wet it gets in Adelaide."

"Potassium Permanganate sounds ominous, I'm not sure why." He puts it down on the table and takes off the safety glasses to adjust the strap. They're a bit tight.

"But it's nice to have a change," Lily says. "And it's good to see you and Mum again."

They're silent for thirty seconds while he looks through more tubes, and then Gus hears her pull out a chair and sit down.

"The Potassium Hexacyanoferrate, it's used in photography I think," Lily says. "I can leave if you like, and get dinner on the way back to Mum's. Or we could just have a coffee and see if you feel like eating something afterwards."

In the coffee shop he balances a few grains of sugar on the back of his spoon. Lily breaks a piece off her lamington. "I suppose you're going to wear those goggles all night."

"Not if you want a turn." He passes them across, and she slides them into her handbag. "Ah," he goes on, "keeping them for later, in case you need to do science on short notice. Cunning."

She picks off another mouthful of lamington. Desiccated coconut falls across her plate. Gus doesn't have a lamington; he has the chemistry set instead, spread out across half of the four-seater table. He lifts the spoon gently to his face and smells the grains. "What are those little plastic dishes called? Pass one over, would you?" He's quiet, careful not to disturb the sugar by talking too loudly. When Lily doesn't pass him anything, he just waits, spoon poised, until she does. It only takes a minute or two.

"Bonnie seems well, too, better than last time I visited," Lily says.

Gus tips his grains of sugar into the dish, then adds a few drops of coffee. He reaches for a lid and seals them in. It's like clearing postcards from a donated book, or pulling handkerchiefs from the bottom of a chest of drawers: sifting out the personalities and abstracting everything down to nice clean fundamentals. Coffee and sugar, sealed in plastic. "These are good."

Lily smiles tightly, and he grins back, slipping the dish into the bag with the chemistry set.

It's raining again when they leave, and Lily says something about an umbrella. Gus

catches a few drops of water in another dish and looks around. "Are you coming over for dinner or not, then? We'll have to get the bus, there's no parking near my place." It's not quite true, but he likes public transport, and he doesn't like being driven places by Lily, especially not when she's spent the last six years learning to do it on the wrong side of the road.

They arrive at the stop as one bus pulls away; twenty minutes later they miss the next one as well, distracted from the road by a girl offering apples. Gus takes one, and wipes it free of raindrops on his shirt.

"You're not actually going to eat that, are you?" Lily steps back further under the bus shelter.

He puts down his bags on a dry patch of footpath and sticks his fingernail in through the apple skin. "Not yet," he says, picking a chunk of the flesh free and then squatting down; into another dish with it. "Now, though," he says, and takes a bite. It's a bit sour. Not too bad. "And we'll have to walk," he says after he swallows, gesturing with the new dish at the back of their disappearing bus.

"I rented a car." Lily's beginning to sound exasperated.

"I told you, there's no parking. And it's only a twenty minute walk. Look, the rain's almost stopped." It hasn't, not particularly, but he's buoyant and cheerful and he strides off without waiting, and a few seconds later he can hear her rush to catch up.

"This science stuff," he says, "is brilliant. I should have taken it up ages ago." He bends down to seal an ant in the next dish, and puts a twig in the one after that

while he's there. He can see a bus ticket as well, but a man walks by dialling a mobile phone and almost trips over him, so he stands up.

"Putting a bit of apple in a plastic dish isn't science," Lily says.

"Of course it is," he says, "I bet it's what scientists do all day. Except with a bigger budget, so they're really huge pieces of apple. Laser apples. And the dishes are made of diamond instead of plastic, but we all have to start small." He bends down and scoops up a leaf.

She's striding ahead now; he waits till she walks too far down the street, then calls after her. "This way," he says, nodding across Hurtle Square. There are trees, and a scruffy man with a CD in his hand, but they're all too big to fit in another dish, and Lily's walking even more quickly now. He must have been rude.

"Lily," he calls, and she stops. He catches up.

"What?"

Yes, she's upset; he can hear it. And he's feeling guilty. That's not right, surely?

"Here." He picks a thread of cotton off her coat. That'll fix it, he thinks, careful with the thread between his fingers, and he reaches into the bag for another dish to put it in.

## **29 ACROSS: Where's he gone?**

The passengers on the bus are too loud for Megumi to fall asleep, and in any case, nobody sleeps in public here. She's noticed the windowsills, spiked with metal to keep everyone off, and the benches, segmented, too narrow to lie on. Sometimes, if she walks through the university, she'll see students curled on lawns, resting their heads on piles of books or on other students' stomachs, and she'll feel homesick.

She gets off the bus after two stops, pushing through backpacks and children to the door. She's tired, and she wants to go home, but the noise is too much; she'll get a coffee and catch a later bus.

The coffee shop's no quieter. The tables are surrounded by earnest conversation, and the cushions and sofas are wasted on wide-eyed magazine readers. She takes her cup outside and keeps walking, past laughing schoolgirls and rubbish bins, past a man who obviously can't even see but who keeps his eyes open anyway, crossing into Hurtle Square and listening to the cars as they blur through the puddles. The benches are wet, and the grass is too, but she finds a patch of dry ground at the base of a tree and sits.

The square's nearly empty. There's a man on a bench across the road, unfolding a timetable, and someone walking a dog down the other end. She leans back and wonders whether she should have stayed on the bus, and whether she'd be home by now, but then the timetable flaps past. When she looks across the road, the man is leaning his head backward, mouth half-open. He's asleep.

She smiles, and wishes the dog would stop barking. It might wake him up. It gets louder, and she leans around the tree to see what's happening. It's circling a

flowerbed, trailing its lead behind, but she can't see the owner, she thinks; where's he gone? Oh: he's in the flowerbed, lying on his back, displacing the petunias and almost hidden from sight. After a moment he rolls over onto one side, and then back again.

She leans against the tree and looks around. In the coffee shop, just within sight, people shut their magazines and nuzzle into cushions. In a nearby restaurant, and then another and another, waitresses tiptoe around their customers, lifting plates from under bowed heads and piling them in the kitchen next to curled-on-the-floor chefs. In a theatre on the other side of town, audience members sink down in their chairs, leaning on other people's shoulders while the actors slide towards the ground.

Seagulls edge closer to half-eaten afternoon teas. Art-gallery attendants are straight-backed in their chairs, and visitors stand below marble statues with heads tilted back, but nobody's moved for half an hour. Anaesthetists slump over their dials in operating theatres while insomniac nurses lie down with the patients and close their eyes.

Megumi listens. The traffic's motionless, the motors rising and falling with enormous snoring rumbles; she can see half a dozen cars, stopped in front of red traffic lights, the drivers asleep before they changed back to green. A cyclist leans against a telegraph pole. On the river, hidden behind a dozen intervening streets, ducks circle a drifting paddleboat, and now even the waitresses sit down, the last few plates finally cleared away. Only the bus drivers and the railway attendants are awake, steering their passengers in gentle loops around the city.

## **28 DOWN: What're you doing tonight?**

Jasper's bored in the coffee shop, running out of newspaper before the world runs out of rain, so he starts a game on his phone and waits for the last of the drizzle to end. His stool's facing into the street, but he can see outlines of the people behind him reflected in the window, and if he times it just right he can drop a block into place at the same time as a new customer sits down on a chair. A bit more practice and he can pay attention to the shop counter as well, so he adds another rule and only finishes a line when someone's collecting their order.

When he leaves, he keeps playing, sidestepping across the almost-empty footpaths whenever he needs to dodge. He's getting the hang of it now. At the pedestrian crossing he pretends the don't-walk beeps are a sound effect; if he doesn't reach twenty thousand points before they switch, he loses the game.

He manages it, then another thousand, and then the phone rings, an ominous tune of enemies nearby. Alan. He doesn't have to answer it if he can make another four lines before the lights change: one, two, and then a double, just in time.

He crosses another street. If he gets the new blocks into position quickly enough he can look up from the screen for a second or two while they fall. It's not long, but it's enough for him to check that the road's really safe, and to make sure he's not going to slip over on a damp catalogue or a milk carton. Bonus points if he can pick the rubbish up and drop it in a bin before taking another move, instead of just dodging.

He stops at the cash machine. One press of a button on the phone, then one on the machine. It takes a while, and some people come up behind him, but he's halfway

there, he can't stop now. He makes another line, timed perfectly: the screen flashes momentarily in triumph, and his money slides out of the machine. Maybe he'll get extra cash if he can make another line quickly enough, but no, it's just a receipt.

At the next corner he turns left, complying with the blocks that are piling up high on the left side of the screen, and the phone rings again, a fanfare; Dylan. Jasper decides he's only allowed to answer it if he can make two more lines before it stops. He drops the next blocks into place quickly, and pauses the game to answer as soon as the second line flashes.

"Hello," he says, fitting in his earpiece and then unpausing the game. He reaches another corner; the blocks are higher on the right side of the screen this time, so right it is.

"Hi," Dylan says. "What're you doing tonight?"

Another corner up ahead, but he doesn't want to turn here. He tries to level out the blocks before he gets to the junction so he can go straight ahead. "Nothing much," he says.

"D'you want to come and see a movie? Yvonne's got some half-price voucher for... wait a minute." His voice fuzzes, and Jasper can hear him call out, Vonnie, what're we going to see again? He makes another line, then another. If he makes an even number before Dylan gets back, he'll go; if it's an odd number, he won't. Vonnie, he hears again.

"It's to see—" Dylan says, getting back.

Eight lines. "Sorry," Jasper says, "It turns out I can't."



He's startled by how easy it is, much easier than deciding whether the movie sounds any good. Another corner, and he's not sure whether to head home or stay in town, but the screen makes the decision for him, piled up high on the left and turning him left as well, back towards the city centre. He passes shops and restaurants, and dodges a man squatting on the footpath, looking for a lost coin or a contact lens. When he finally loses the game, five minutes later, he's standing outside a pizza shop, so he goes in and eats dinner while he plays again, one bite for each line he completes.

It's beginning to get dark when he leaves, but the phone glows up at him, and he's had enough practice now that he barely needs to glance at the footpath to keep going. He adds new rules: any time the blocks pile up past the mid-way point on his screen, he has to pause and reply to a message he's been putting off, or makes a phone call. No, I can't look after Adrian next week, he texts, after the next falling block decides it for him; an L-shape or a zig-zag is a yes, anything else is a no. Yeah, Tuesday sounds good. No, sorry, I don't have her number. He phones his grandmother and asks how her birthday went, and apologises for being late. He discovers that he doesn't really need next week's dentist appointment, so he deletes it from the calendar.

Back on the game screen he dies again, and restarts. There's a man in a doorway, wrapped in a blanket, just as Jasper passes ten thousand points, so he pauses to fish ten dollars out of his pocket and hands it over. He wonders for a moment whether that's cheating, whether it should be ten thousand dollars (ten thousand four hundred, by now)—he's got just enough for it in the bank—but there's no point in getting carried away.

The street-lamps start to come on. There are pubs and restaurants, a couple trying to get their car started (the game tells him not to help), a woman with a camera, a driver who swerves into a puddle and covers him in water while he shields the phone (it tells him not to shout after the car as it drives away). He answers more messages. There are only a few left now, and no more phone calls to make, except to Alan. He's fumbling with the keypad, and piling up the blocks faster than before, but it doesn't panic him: he's almost looking forward to it, a conversation where he doesn't have to think about his responses, with a supply of simple yes-or-no answers to all the questions about his birthday party and his cat and returning that DVD he borrowed.

He's down to one message when the battery runs out, but nothing's going to stop him now. There's a public phone around the next corner, and he calls anyway, watching the bricks in the footpath, searching for blocks shaped like the answers he wants to give.

## **19 DOWN: How do you get a colour like that?**

No cameras, and the curved mirror in the corner works both ways: an upward glance is all it takes for him to be sure that nobody's watching. He can see the counter (bald man choosing tissues), the door, even the passers-by outside: brown, brown, red, grey, blonde, brown.

He adds them to the tally. A hundred and ninety since he left the office for lunch, not counting the men and the children and the greys, and he must have lost track once or twice but he's pretty sure that at least seventy of them were blonde. More than a third, for a hair colour that comes naturally to three per cent of the world's population. Maybe it stretches to five per cent in Australia, call it ten per cent because summer's just ending and he's generous, but that still means most of them are faking it. He bets the shop assistant's dark brown is a lie as well; it's not just the blondes you can't trust. There's Cerise from admin, for a start, pale with the light brown eyebrows of an obvious liar, tube-squeezed black hair sheening blue under fluorescent lights. He's spoken to Human Resources about it, and they won't do anything, not even when her own hands prove the dress-code violation, sticky with unwashable guilt under her fingernails.

The door beeps someone in, and he picks a box from the shelf, pretending to read the back while he glances up again. The room bulges in miniature from the mirror. Near the front there's a woman browsing the cough medicine: another brown.

Brown isn't too bad. Red is the worst, that dark bright red: worse than the deception of blonde or black, or the open fakery of purple and green, just close enough to the clean beauty of nature to remind him what it's a corruption of. Dress code enforcers pretend it's natural, but there's never been anyone with that kind of

hair from birth. Even the boxes lie, call it ruby or sunset or camellia, but rubies and sunsets don't look like that. Nothing does, not flowers, not crushed beetles or ground earth, not stewed coral or anemones. How do you get a colour like that? You need blood from a thousand peacocks fed on strawberries, you need a million chemicals with tri-partite names, you need a cauldron.

He pulls the first syringe out of his pocket and flicks open the bottom of the box, slides the tube of developer from where it's nestled between warning sheets and instructions and the bottle. A spot near the bottom is best, just next to the seal. He's practiced this at home half a dozen times, and there's no need for his hands to shake, he can do it without looking, but he looks anyway, just in case, and then back up to the mirror. The bald man's leaving. Beep. Beep again, and the brown coughing woman leaves too.

The chemicals are expensive, so he's only got four syringes, enough to treat eight tubes. He goes for two Warm Chestnuts to start with, fumbling with the second and knocking it off the shelf. Two Ruby Sunsets after that. Deep breaths. He panics for a moment when he looks up and the shop assistant's not at the counter any more (maybe she's behind him, maybe she's phoning the police), but before he can run for the door she steps out of the back room, oblivious. It's still okay. Hurry up.

A Deep Cherry, then a Geranium. One syringe left; two doses. He's only tested this with shades of red, and he isn't sure whether the chemicals will work on anything else, but you have to take risks if you want to make a difference. Half of the last into a Starlight Jet, then, and the other half into a Golden Fields, and he's done. He's not safe yet, but he's on the way. A packet of jelly beans as he leaves, to allay suspicion: he smiles at the girl behind the counter, and maybe her hair's genuine

after all, and he almost can't contain the excitement of it all.

At the door his chest splits open and leaves him room to breathe at last, and he's out.

He drops the empty syringes in a rubbish bin: it's a waste, but he's already done his bit to make the world green, and he walks on, grinning at passers-by, even Cerise from the office, even the women with red hair.

### **39 ACROSS: Forest?**

She follows snapped twigs and the sound of distant shouting, then a constellation trail of broken glass. The stars grate under her feet, and the sky is clouded yellow-brown like dirt. She stops and listens. There's water running under the ground, and a dark huddle of conversation on the other side of a bench, then a crash from the east, where the trees grow denser and burrs pull at her trousers. This isn't parkland any more, it's something else: forest? Fairy-tale?

On the far side of a dozen branches she stops, balanced at the edge of a footpath, midway between two street lamps. Polka-dots of red and green shine from each distant intersection, but there's no traffic, just a faint white blur of perpendicular cars. She crosses and accelerates into trees on the other side, over vines and through spiderwebs, and she can still hear them running when the wind's blowing back towards her, irregular drumming that sounds like the opening drops of another storm.

When the drumming stops she thinks she's lost them, but inertia carries her on for a few slowing paces and the trees open in front of her. In the distance, silhouettes are piling against a tall fence and tumbling over, the first to go pulling the next after until they all disappear into the Japanese garden. She can see the tops of the trees, outlined against the muddy sky, and she's breathing too loudly to hear what they're saying but there's shouting and whistles, and before they'd all climbed over there'd been steam piping out of their mouths. She hadn't realised it was so cold. She doesn't feel it. Her hand scrapes along the wood as she follows the fence around, and the gate's locked (of course it is, the council workers lock it at sundown), but she wedges her foot between vines, dislodging a misplaced petunia,

and pulls herself over, twigs and leaves showering from her clothes as she lands on the other side.

Inside the garden there are no voices, not even far away. She walks along the dark path and everything's empty: ripples in the pond still washing against the edges and back in, deer-scarer clacking to a halt. Shards of glass fall from the soles of her shoes as she crosses the bridge, trailing like breadcrumbs when she looks behind her.

On the other side, the raked patterns of the stone garden have been covered in scrawls and denting footprints, curved lines that look like bicycle tracks, stone angels from arms and legs swept in arcs, a dozen wide-lettered messages that she can't read. It could be English, but it's too dark to be sure.

She crouches by the pebbles to catch her breath and listen, but the sounds don't come back. Out on the other side of the fence (and it's harder to climb now), there's still nothing: cars in the distance, a brief siren. The trees grow sparser again.

She's almost given up when metal slams against metal in a gust of wind. She pulls hair out of her face and there's a gate, hanging open, rattling back in the wind. On the far side she can see swings moving like pendulums, and see-saws like levers, and tunnels and benches around them, and a tree with such thick roots bursting out of the ground that she hardly notices the stepping stones behind it, or the long-legged shadow-puppet figures rocking back and forth, perched on playground animals. The gate shuts behind her and she can hear the clanks and laughter.





## **20 DOWN: How do you know?**

They pick a table outside, under a square umbrella, where Mark stubs out the end of someone else's cigarette and leans back to wait for coffee. Patrick shifts an empty cup and watches criss-crossing twigs on the other side of the canvas, outlined by sunlight.

"You'll be disappointed," Mark says. "They're completely just like muffins, except they're smaller and dearer and they don't taste as good."

Patrick shrugs. "I have to try something I can't buy at home, and as far as I can tell it's a friand or a vegemite sandwich."

The waitress has just made it to the door, coffees in her hands and cakes on her forearms, when she disappears behind sudden pedestrians, at least a dozen of them plus cameras and children. They separate to flow around the umbrellas, and then reform on the far side. One of the women leans across their table as she passes and drops her cigarette in the ash-tray, murmuring apologies.

The group stops twenty metres away, turning to cross the road and take photos of a building that's exactly the same as every other building on the street, as far as Patrick can tell.

"They'll be back this way in a minute," Mark says, stubbing out the new cigarette as well.

"How do you know?"

"Historical walking tour. Runs every Thursday."

"Historical walking tour." Patrick scoffs with the authority of someone whose childhood scars were etched by seventeenth-century cobblestones. "Here. I suppose everyone wants to photograph the ancient 1963 office blocks."

Mark slides a column of sugar into his coffee, and taps the paper to shake the last few grains free. "1963's a lot more significant than 1563. What's the point of something that was built hundreds of years ago?"

Patrick hands over his tube of sugar as well, watches Mark tear it open. "Context," he says. "And gargoyles, you don't get enough gargoyles on modern buildings. But mostly context."

"Context that doesn't mean anything," Mark says, waving the hand with the sugar tube and scattering half of it across the table. "Context that depends on people you don't even know. History. History's what you have to make do with when you don't have continuity. See that building over there? That's where my best friend's dad worked when I was six. There used to be a rubbish bin just down the block a bit, and I hit my head on it once. They took it out a few years ago, there, see, where the concrete's a different colour."

"You'll excuse me if I don't put up a plaque." The table next to them's empty, with clusters of plates and the cup they moved earlier: there's another tube of sugar as well. Patrick reaches across and picks it up, to see what happens if he moves it onto their table. Mark bites the top off and adds it to his cup.

"That's the point," Mark says. "I don't need a plaque. If you need a plaque to tell you why something's important, then it just isn't."

Patrick reaches back for another tube of sugar; there's only one left, and it's half empty. He passes it over, and Mark pours it in and stirs his coffee again.

"Is that even dissolving any more?"

"When I first tested how much sugar you can dissolve in one cup of coffee," Mark says, "I was fifteen. My girlfriend was sixteen. We were sitting in the McDonald's on Hindley Street, which is maybe a ten minute walk away in that direction. We put a dozen packets in and it was going to spill over the edge, so I had to drink half of it to make room."

Patrick's trying the friand. "Do I dip this in coffee?"

"No, that's how it's supposed to taste. I did warn you."

"That's where history comes in handy, then. Hundreds of years to establish cakes that actually taste like cake." He forks off another piece; icing sugar clouds from the top, and crumbs fall around the tines.

"You don't need hundreds of years of history for that," Mark says. "You need personal experience. You should know which cakes are good because you've been eating them since you had teeth. When we're born our eyes open onto a thousand local colours, and those are the colours we can see for ever. I've been to the US and England and Wales and Japan and Slovenia and they all looked the same to me, the same trees, the same sky. I'm not trained to tell the differences. I'm only trained to see here. I could walk to every house I've ever lived in from here in an hour and a half, and you think I'm missing out on history?"

"And yet there are tours." Patrick nods at the group rounding the corner down the

block.

Mark shrugs. "For tourists. My mum's secretary used to work with the bloke who runs them and apparently he moved away to Sydney for twenty years. He's just trying to catch up now that he's back. It's too late, though. That's what happens when people move. That's the problem with your lot, too, one town for your childhood, one for university, another one to work in, then another one when you move in with someone and then you have to move again so there are playgrounds for the children. Here it's ten hours drive just to get to the next capital. There are six cities in the entire world in our time zone, and this is the only one with more than twenty-five thousand people in it. Half the time when you move house in Adelaide you don't even change bus route."

Patrick scoops up crumbs. The historical walk's headed back at last, on the other side of the road. "Where do you sign up for the tours?"

"I already told you," Mark says, "it won't do any good. The tourist information centre in Rundle Mall, though. My cousin works at the flower stall next door."

"All right," Patrick says. "And your second-year school excursion stopped outside it for lunch once and a friend of yours got lost, and now she's a police officer who arrested your uncle for burglary just down the road."

"Year nine," Mark says. "Not second year. But something like that, yeah. You asked how I knew about the tour, and that's the answer, years and years and years of familiarity. You know how sometimes you'll get people who say they can read each other's minds? Maybe they even believe it, but it turns out they just know each other too well. They can pick up on all the hints that nobody else sees, without even

noticing that they're doing it. That's what it's like, it's an extra layer of awareness and memory, it's knowing exactly where you are and where everything else is and recognising someone every time you walk down the street. Without it you're back to just sight and taste and smell and I don't know, the other two. Touch."

"And hearing," Patrick says.

"Mm, that one. It's not really good enough. No wonder you want five-hundred-year-old churches." He swallows the last of his coffee.

Patrick looks around at clouds and windows, tree trunks, dark circles of chewing gum on the footpath. Maybe Mark dropped the gum there, decades ago. Maybe there really are secrets in the graffiti and the salt shakers. "What time does your plane leave?" he asks.

Mark shrugs. "Something impossible. Quarter past seven maybe. I think I'll just stay awake tonight, and sleep on the flight." He sits forward in his chair and rests his head in his hands.

"Sometimes social workers find an old man who hasn't left his house for years," Patrick says. "There'll be piles of newspaper in the spare room, and a thousand empty cans of tuna piled up against the wall. The men don't want to leave, usually, they just want to rearrange the tuna cans."

"Yeah," Mark says. "And then we assume we know better, and try to force them outside, and pretend we're doing good. We don't think that maybe the house is full of details that our eyes are too coarse to pick up on. We don't think about the years the old man's spent watching the sun rise across the same carpet, and learning

where the ants get in, and exactly how long it takes the oven to bake a tuna casserole. We don't think about how he can walk through every room in the middle of the night and know exactly where he'll land if he falls over."

Patrick watches him. "Want another coffee?"

"Not really," Mark says, and leans back. "Their hot chocolate is pretty good. Order from the blonde girl if you can, she'll give you an extra marshmallow."

## **18 ACROSS: Why a thump?**

The toilets are empty and glowing purple, but Jess takes a cubicle anyway and bolts the door.

"Besides," Chloe says, "blondes don't look Scottish," taking the next one down and sitting to pull off her uniform.

"You aren't blonde," Jess calls back through the wall.

"Am too." She squints at her wrist. "Golden Fields, a warm sunset blonde, it says on the packet. I should stop off at the chemist and get some more, actually, I need to fix my roots. Oh, you can see your veins in here."

"I haven't looked," Jess says.

"I can, anyway. I thought the UV fluoros were supposed to stop people shooting up. You could just draw a line over your veins with a biro before you went in, anyway, or one of those UV-sensitive textas. I suppose you could put sunscreen on your wrist, and then you'd be able to see it better, too."

"No you wouldn't."

"Maybe you'd be able to see it worse, then. You'd think it'd be one or the other, anyway."

"You do realise you can't actually see ultraviolet light," Jess says. "Ultra as in beyond the visible spectrum. If you can see it at all, it's just V."

"I spy with my little eye, something beginning with V." Chloe pulls on her jeans

and turns around. "Hey, the paper's glowing, it's like a little phosphorescent jellyfish in the toilet bowl. Give us your phone."

She hears the door next to her unbolt. "Not if you're just going to take a picture of someone else's wet toilet paper."

"I'll flush it and put fresh paper in if you want." She does up her belt and opens the door. "Go on."

"I think," Jess says in white shirt, tartan skirt and green beret, "I'm doing enough for you today already."

"Nobody's looking," Chloe tells her reassuringly as they walk through the square. "It just looks like a uniform. And it suits you, honestly. I swear, there's no way I'd fit into anything from primary school these days. I was in Kookai the other day and I couldn't even get the skirts over my thighs. I ended up in Witchery pretending to believe the labels when they said I was a twelve, but I know it's lies really. Here," she adds, pulling an elastic band from her hair, "stand still and let me put your hair up. It'll get in the way. Squat down a bit. Maybe I should do plaits... no, okay, there we go."

They wait at the crossing and Chloe fluffs out her hair with fingers. "Maybe I should have plaits," she says. "Put on another five kilos, dump Matt, start going out with someone tall and gangly from the chess club. I could wear those socks with individual toe-partitions that they make for recovering goths."

"You'd have to give him his speakers back." Jess presses the crossing button again,



and then again in time to the beeps until it changes.

"I bet we make enough today to buy our own. I wonder if they've brought them out in purple yet. I suppose you can't paint them, you'd just clog up all the holes. I painted my calculator when I was in year five and that worked, though, it looked great. It kept telling me that seven times eight was minus three, and I hadn't even done minus numbers, but we weren't allowed to use calculators for maths tests anyway so it wasn't like it was good for anything except upside-down spelling. Shell oil. Lilo. There was a girl in the class called Hollie, too, she was unbelievably smug about it."

They stop at the edge of the square, and Chloe pulls her lunchbox out to throw the leftover apple at a nearby bin. It bounces off. "Here," she says, digging in the bottom of her bag for change and dropping half of it into the lunchbox lid. A couple of passers-by have turned to look at them, but nothing more, not yet. "Seeding the pot."

Jess pulls the bagpipes out. The duct tape along the back has peeled off, and tissues are falling out; Chloe turns away from the footpath to shield them as she pushes the stuffing back in. She pokes her finger through the hole in the front and checks for the buttons. "Okay, that's all set."

Jess shifts the beret back on her head and takes the pipes, flipping the extra tubes up straight. They wilt, and she tries again.

"You look fantastic," Chloe says, backing away. "When you're ready."

Jess puffs her cheeks and pushes a finger through the hole in the bag, and then the

sound of bagpipes is rolling out around them. She's brilliant, Chloe thinks; hands on the little flute, fingers moving in time to the music and everything. Everyone in the park's turned to watch. A girl under a tree in the other half of the square opens her eyes, pedestrians all down the block turn around, a dog starts barking and pulls at its leash.

She's not supposed to just watch, though. She walks down the block to the corner, then turns around and counts to thirty. Fwaah, fwah fwe-fwaaah, Jess plays in the background, getting louder as Chloe walks back towards her and leans over to drop twenty cents in the lunchbox. It doesn't look like anyone else has paid up yet, but by the time she's taken another half a dozen trips out of sight and back, there's at least five dollars, and when a tour group trails past they up it another twenty.

Jess's cheeks have puffed down a bit, but she's still in time, the extra tubes poking up and the bag unsplit, duct tape safely hidden away. Fwaaah, fwah fwe-fwaaah (thump) fwaaah (thump).

Why a thump? There isn't supposed to be a thump. People are still just walking by, maybe they haven't noticed, but there shouldn't be drums. Jess must have heard them as well, now; her eyes are open wide and for a moment she lets the blowpipe fall out of her mouth. Chloe looks around. Drums. There's the bin, but it's ten metres away and bolted down; a tree? A plastic bag? And ah, a building site. She runs across the road, past beeps and screeches, and ducks under orange bunting to grab a bucket, glancing at the scaffolding above her. "Hey," someone calls out, but she's already gone.

Back on the other side of the road she stands next to Jess and sits on the wet grass, hitting the bucket in time to the thumps.

"How did that happen?" Jess hisses down at her when the song finishes.

"Sorry," Chloe says. They'd downloaded half a dozen albums of bagpipe music, but she'd sorted through them all, and told the music player to pick the solos.

When the next one starts there's no drums. Instead, there's a flute. Jess stabs her finger through the hole into the bag, but nothing happens. "I can't stop it," she says, pulling her mouth from the blowpipe again and then putting it back. The passers-by are stepping wider around them now, and a few of them have stopped to watch. Chloe tears through her bag to find a biro, then pulls the ink tube out and holds the case to her mouth as she starts wagging her fingers. Thirty seconds later she remembers to purse her lips.

"It still won't stop," Jess hisses again when that song ends. They've got an audience of a dozen now, and more passers-by turning their heads.

The next song, the drums are back. Chloe thumps again, and when the flute starts up as well she stands so that she can stamp on the bucket with one heel while she holds the flute in her hands. It's only when another dozen bagpipes start up in the background that she lets the biro fall and pulls Jess behind a tree. They rip the duct tape off the back and pull out tissue after tissue until they're kneeling in snow, and then at last they can get to the speakers and the mp3 player.

There's an alert on the screen, and the off button doesn't work, but Jess pulls the speakers loose and suddenly the huge rich roar of bagpipes (and a choir, now) drops to a mosquito fwaaah. When Chloe pulls the batteries out as well, there's silence.

Jess's beret is gone and her ponytail's falling out. They're both out of breath. The tissues around them are disintegrating on the wet grass. There must be forty people watching.

Someone claps uncertainly, and then someone else joins in, and for a moment Chloe has visions of life as a clown — cartwheeling through the streets, white make-up and curly wigs, poking at passers-by with a styrofoam umbrella while coins shower to the ground around her; Jess is half set for it already, pale with her nose red, in a skirt that doesn't really fit her any more — but the applause falls away instead of building, and by the time she's on her feet for a sweeping bow there's nobody left to see it.

## **21 ACROSS: What is this place, anyway?**

Usually he does radio voiceovers and boyfriends, making the ex jealous or putting off curious workmates (he's got the right sort of untidy hair for it). He's had a few husband-for-a-night school-reunion calls as well, but Sarah's been passing him over for fresher faces lately: in a city the size of Adelaide, there's only so many women you can pretend to be married to before someone notices. He prefers jobs that don't involve lying to jobs that do, anyway, though there haven't been many of either lately.

"You must be Cerise." He stretches out his hand. "My name's Hector, and I'll be your baby for this afternoon."

"Hello," she says. She looks nervous. "I should let you know this wasn't my idea."

He'd known that. He launches into the preprepared spiel: "I understand that you're probably suspicious, but whatever your husband's told you or told himself, this absolutely isn't about persuading you that you shouldn't have children. It's about simulating the experience of parenthood, to give you as much information as possible before you make the decision for yourself."

"What is this place, anyway?" She's turning around, looking at the photos on the walls, trying to see back into the welcome area, the receptionist's desk. "Nobody could sustain an entire company by hiring out imaginary babies."

"Actually this is only my second time as a baby. We do all sorts," Hector says, and smiles his friendly smile. "Advertisements, children's parties. I spent two hours outside Harris Scarfe last week reading the sales on dinnerware and manchester

over the PA. People phone Sarah to ask for a magician or an MC or somebody to dress up as the March Hare at their Alice in Wonderland party, and then she contacts someone appropriate to see if they're free."

"And she asked if you could pretend to be my son for an afternoon. I hope you aren't expecting me to change your nappies."

"No," he says. "No nappies, I promise. If I do need to use the toilet I'll start crying about it, and it'll be up to you to work out what's going on and take me to a bathroom, but of course you can wait outside once you've taken me to the door. And by crying, I don't mean I'll embarrass us both by screaming out 'mama' in the middle of the street. I'll just quietly say 'waah' or 'moan'." He opens his clipboard and runs down the checklist. "Now, will Greg be joining us later on?"

"No," she says. "I want to stay home with my child for the first year, and Greg thinks it'll give me a more realistic idea of how that's going to feel if I'm on my own. He set an alarm clock to wake me up three times last night as well. I don't suppose that was your company's idea?"

Hector turns his laugh into a sympathetic grimace. "No," he says. "He must have come up with it on his own."

He keeps his friendly smile in place as Cerise looks at him. "All right," she says, smiling for the first time and standing up.

He hasn't finished the spiel. "Now," he says, following her out, "I want to help you make the best decision you can, but I can't do that unless you give me a chance and take this seriously. My part of the deal is that I'll stay in character, and try to give

you a truly useful motherhood experience. But in exchange, I need—"

Her hair flicks behind her as she turns around to look up at him, three steps below.

"Once we're outside this door you have to be quiet, yeah?"

"That's right. So—"

"Well, then." She steps backward and waits. He follows, confused, and when he's within reach she holds her hand out, takes his, and pulls him onto the footpath. There. He looks startled, so she leans in. "Now, Hectie darling, we've got a busy afternoon ahead of us."

"Gurgle," he says after a moment.

"That's a good baby. First Mummy's going to take you shopping, to get a few things for dinner. Maybe some baby potatoes, all teeny and round like you, with their little eyes."

He'll only move when she's holding him, he'd explained in the office; he's playing a six-month-old, not a toddler. She keeps her hand around his arm and walks down the footpath. "Gurgle," he says again as he follows. The pale blue shirt and the jeans remind her of the growsuits she's been looking at in shops.

"And your little potato eyes are a lovely right colour," she says. "All my nephews have just that shade of blue, you know. Greg's are brown, but I looked it up and there's still a good chance our baby will have blue or green." She reaches out to pinch his cheek. "The stubble doesn't help though, sweetums."

"Whimper," he says quietly, and stops walking.

"Oh shush," she says, pulling his arm again. "We can stop to have something to eat in a little while." She's enjoying herself, now that he's quiet; now that he can't move without her say-so. "Am I supposed to find this frustrating? Because I've only been at it a couple of minutes, I know, but it's the best fun I've had this week."

He cries as she leads him through the market but she smiles at him again and gets on with her shopping, pulling him past fruit stall attendants and a man who's trying to buy rotten fish. It's difficult to keep hold of the bags until she realises she can hook them over his arms: "Pretend you're a stroller handle."

After ten minutes there's a crash, and when she looks around he's dropped one of the bags: a bottle of wine. The glass hasn't broken through the plastic, though, so it's easy for her to carry it to the bin, pulling him along after her and tutting while he cries.

"Just for that," she says, "I'm tempted to take you to buy clothes," but she relents when he starts sniffing loudly and wrinkling his nose again. She carries him into a cafe instead. He can have some apple juice; she doesn't know whether he likes it or not, but she's not giving a six-month-old coffee. Or a muffin, for that matter, just one for her, full of pear and cinnamon.

It takes three journeys to get everything to a table at the back. "If you were really a baby," she says, "the nice lady behind the counter would have offered to carry this out for me."

"Waah," he says, looking around the cafe, refusing to meet her eyes.

"Oh, don't sulk." She takes hold of his chin and turns him to face her, then smooths



out his forehead with her fingers. "Apple juice, sweetcorn."

He makes eye contact but doesn't pick up the bottle; maybe he's not old enough to manage for himself. She gets a straw, and holds it up to his mouth. "Come on," she says after he's been sipping for a couple of minutes. "Suck it down. My coffee's getting cold."

Hector pulls away from the straw and sprays apple juice from his mouth, over Cerise's black top and the tabletop. She looks down. "Missed," she says, and picks up the dry muffin to put it out of range.

"Whimper."

"But no more apple juice for you, Mister Grotty." She leans back in her seat and looks away from him. The woman behind the counter is reading a magazine; the man who was trying to buy rotten fish is drinking coffee and writing in a notebook. Nobody's even watching them.

The baby's grumbling again, so she breaks a corner off the muffin and pops it in his mouth. "Just a little bit," she says. "Open wide."

He spits it out onto the ground; she picks it up and offers it again. "There you go."

He spits it out again, so she picks it up and eats it before wiping his face off with the napkin. "What is it you want, then, grumblenappy? If it's more juice then you should have thought of that before you spat on me. Or maybe you're sleepy? Well, so am I, but that's what happens when you wake me up three times in the night. Maybe you won't do it again."

"Louder whimpers," he says insistently, but she just laughs and fluffs his hair.

"This is just the same colour as my dad's used to be," she says. "I don't know if my real baby will have it as well. Sometimes I hope he won't, because I'd have to dress him in clothes that match, no pink or yellow or purple or red. That gets tricky with school uniforms, of course. You'll have to tell me what school you went to, when you can talk again."

He's looking grumpy still, cheeks chubbed with worry. "Calm down," she says, shifting her seat closer to him and putting her arm around as he declares another whimper; he looks away, and she leans closer. "Mummy's here, cabbage. We'll get a loaf of bread and then go home, shall we? Have a little nap and then watch playschool. I'll puree some apples for you too."

She leans back to look at him. He's quieting down, and when she clucks her tongue he turns his head to look at her, blinking, querulous. "Maybe you should stay for dinner, until Daddy gets home," she says. "We can afford another couple of hours, and he'll be so sad to have missed your pretty little nose and your pretty little eyelashes, and your fingers. I bet your toes are even cuter, aren't they?" She watches for a reaction; his eyes are wider than ever but he doesn't look away.

On the walk out of the market she pulls him closer. They pass a juggler, and then Reg from her work leaving a pharmacy. She smiles at them both, and feels like she's the sun, beaming out at everything around her. Maybe Reg will tell everyone else he saw her, and they'll ask about the baby when she gets in tomorrow. She'll take some photos just in case.



## **23 ACROSS: Street?**

Anthony knows more local history than he can keep inside his brain, so he takes visitors on long walks around the city, ten dollars a head or twenty-two for a family. He used to do it for free, but people kept confusing "free" with "worthless": leaving the group the moment they saw a cafe they liked the look of, falling behind and never catching up. At ten dollars each, they pay attention. They take photos, they listen, they follow, they look wistfully at other people's coffee as they pass but they stay with the group anyway, and they do as they're told.

Sometimes. They won't step out into the rain, though. Instead, they're crowded under an office building's verandah, aimless and circling. Across the road, sparrows hop the dry patches under parked cars.

"Oh, come on, don't be such a bunch of wusses," Anthony calls over the rain.

"There's only four streets to go. It'll be over in half an hour. It's not all that wet. Average rainfall in March is only twenty-two millimetres, that's barely enough to get your shoes damp."

The old man tilts his head towards his son for a translation. One of the women leans against the wall and lights a cigarette. "Hey," the man in the green shirt says. "You don't want to get wet either. Just wait and see if it quiets down. There's no rush, it's not like it's a big city."

His wife takes a photo. "I think it's cute."

"Sure it's cute," her husband says, "but we can see most of it from here."

Anthony sighs. They do take coaxing sometimes; maybe he should increase his

prices again. "This street," he says loudly, and checks whether they're listening.

They're not. The leaning woman is looking at the sparrows under the verandah roof; she blows smoke towards them. "We're running out of space on the camera," the woman with the camera says to her husband. "I'll delete the protest."

"Maybe the Botanic Gardens. We got bigger trees than that back home."

"This street," Anthony says again, patient.

"Street?" an old man asks. His son leans over and translates.

"This street," Anthony repeats once last time, "was named after Edward Gibbon Wakefield." He skips the joke about gibbons to make up for lost time. "Wakefield's an interesting one, he was born in England and at one point he abducted a fifteen-year-old girl, took her to Scotland, married her, and ended up in Newgate Prison for it. But that's not why we named a street after him. Does anyone know why?" Usually someone would at least have a guess. "No? It was because he did a lot to encourage people to come from England to settle in South Australia. Don't do that, please," he adds, turning to the old man's granddaughter, who's squatting on the footpath and feeding biscuit crumbs to the sparrows. "They're pests."

"They're just hungry," says the woman with the camera, squatting down to take a picture.

Tourists, he thinks; they do mean well, feeding sparrows, giving money to buskers, but they have to be told. "They're not natives. Someone brought a few of them over in 1869, and nested them in the Botanic Gardens. By the 1870s they were everywhere. They do not even furnish us with a song, while their size precludes the

use of them in a pie', the newspapers said."

The old man leans over again, and his son murmurs: something something passero something. Most of the group's paying attention again. The sparrows are hopping, bulbous, pecking, though the girl's stopped dropping crumbs and is sitting back on her heels to listen.

"They shoot them on sight in Western Australia," Anthony says.

"The poor sweethearts," says camera-woman to her husband.

"In fact," Anthony says, "for a while there was a bounty. You could collect it at the post office. Sixpence for each sparrow head." He's caught their attention now, and he strides toward the end of the verandah, the building's automatic doors sliding open as he passes. The path's like rubber, bouncing sparrows away from his footsteps. Most of them roll back in once he's passed, but a few get through into the building.

"Now," he goes on, "we're heading towards Victoria Square." He doesn't look behind to see if the group's following; don't let them see your fear. As he steps out into undiminished rain, though, he hears the clatter of footsteps behind him. "Also known as Tarndanyangga, which means "red kangaroo rock". Don't get your hopes up about seeing any kangaroos, though. There used to be a rock there shaped like a kangaroo, and that's where the name comes from. I do run tours of Cleland Wildlife Park on Mondays if you're set on seeing a real one, though."

When he gets to a pedestrian crossing he finally looks back, and he's lost a few, but more than half of them have followed, hair matting against scalps, the Italian still

murmuring translations to his father, the woman with the camera shielding it under her jacket to keep the rain off.

"We'll see the Victoria Square fountain too," he calls out, happy. "They turn it off during storms, but a little drizzle like this shouldn't stop them. There's also the town hall and the Supreme Court, where most of our murderers have been tried. I do run a tour of our best murder sites on the first Tuesday of every month. And soon we'll be coming into sight of the post office, where you can turn in any sparrow heads you might be carrying." The crossing starts to beep, and he turns around and leads them triumphantly west.

## **22 DOWN: What am I?**

Hello everyone. Hello. Your attention please. We're all gathered here today for a very special reason. Yes, that's right, it's the free drinks. But it's also to celebrate the marriage of our good friends Geoff and Gretel. There they are. My name's Robert, and I've been a friend of Geoff's for many years now, and since the best man Dan who you met earlier is unfortunately feeling unwell at the moment, I'm going to be your Master of Ceremonies for the remainder of the evening. So first of all I'd like to call on a man who most of you will know, he's a television pundit, a successful publisher, his company regularly puts out some of the best-selling books in Australia, but today he's here because of perhaps his greatest achievement, as Gretel's father.

Thank you Mr Patterson for that speech. Leslie Patterson there, from Patterson Books.

Now, for the next step in the proceedings it's traditional to call upon the groom to say a few words of his own. This seems a bit risky if you ask me. I was at school with Geoff, and once he'd started talking there was no way to get him to shut up, no matter how many times you told him you were trying to work on your novel. But it's his day, or his and Gretel's, so I suppose I can't stop him. Will you please give Geoff a hand.

Thank you Geoff. Now I picked up Dan's notes from him, dodging the vomit, and it says that next up it's the best man's speech. Of course, I'm not really the best man. I'm not even the second-best man. What am I? As far as I could tell, until Max and Dan started feeling queasy during the entree, I was just here so the third bridesmaid had someone to walk down the aisle with. Geoff was going to buy a



shop mannequin and pull it along on rollerskates but that turned out to be too expensive. I'm much cheaper. They only had to buy me half a suit, for a start, as the people standing on the other side of me can see. I already had my own shoes and socks and rollerskates, too, and everything else was easy. See this handkerchief? Not even a real handkerchief. It's made of tofu.

So no, I'm not the best man, or even the first stand-in, but it still falls to me to toast the groom and his lovely bride. As I say, I hadn't been expecting to give a speech, so I don't have anything prepared, but there is one speech that I happen to know by heart. "Let tyrants fear; I have always so behaved myself that, under God, I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and good will of my subjects. And therefore I am come amongst you at this time, not as for my recreation or sport, but being resolved, in the midst and heat of the battle, to live or die amongst you all; to lay down, for my God, and for my kingdom, and for my people, my honor and my blood, even the dust. I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart of a king."

No, it doesn't quite work, does it? That was the speech of Queen Elizabeth in 1588, to the English army, when the Spanish Armada was attacking. I'm very familiar with the speech, in fact the novels I'm working on at the moment are historical fantasy, and this speech comes at the climax of the first volume. It's a great speech, but maybe not very good for today's purposes.

Never mind, you can't expect a dead queen of England to think of everything, and I'm sure I can come up with something myself, I've been to a few weddings lately and I've seen how it's done. I'm supposed to mention that I'm nervous, for a start. Well, as you'll have gathered I've been working with language for some time now.

Nothing too impressive of course, nothing published as yet, but I feel it's helped me to become more comfortable with public speaking than a lot of you might expect. I'm also supposed to say how honoured I was to be asked to be Geoff's best man, and I'm sure I would have been if he had asked me, but second reserve isn't something I feel like I really need to be proud of, and it's obviously complete chance that Max and Dan happened to get the bad salmon; if it'd been me then I'd be in the bathroom now and they'd be up here talking to you. I'm also supposed to thank the bridesmaids, but despite the dictates of tradition they showed absolutely no interest in having sex with me out the back of the church, no matter how often I suggested it, so I think I can skip that bit as well. Ha.

Now when Erik of Sweden asked Elizabeth to marry him, in 1560, which corresponds to chapter three of my current work, she tells him she is grieved that she cannot gratify his Serene Highness with the same kind of affection that he feels for her. Geoff's no Erik of Sweden, but luckily Gretel's a bit less picky than Elizabeth, or we wouldn't be here today. Then in 1566, when a parliamentary delegation urged Elizabeth to marry, she said, and I quote, "I will marry as soon as I can conveniently, if God take not him away with whom I mind to marry, or myself, or else some other great let happen". And I'm sure you'll all join me today in relief that no such great let happened here to prevent the marriage of these two wonderful people.

A few people have suggested that a trilogy about a virgin queen isn't going to sell very well in today's climate, but I should point out that it's a historical fantasy, not straight history, and that the bulk of it takes part in an alternate universe in what I feel is a very marketable manner. In particular at the end of the first volume, Elizabeth not only declares that she has the heart of a man, but actually becomes a

man, and remains one for the second volume, indeed she can only convince parliament that she is still Elizabeth by the scar on her forehead. Then by the final volume of the trilogy she's transformed into a synthesis of both sexes in a single form. It's a bit Orlando, maybe, a bit Tolkien, in some ways it's even a bit D.H. Lawrence, wild and untamed. Like some of Lawrence's works, it's also particularly relevant to Australia. The bulk of the second volume does take place here, following King Elizabeth as he sails the world with Sir Francis Drake, so I feel that the trilogy as a whole might be of particular interest to a local publisher.

I'd just like to read to you now a passage from the third volume, in which Elizabeth addresses her suitors. "My beloveds," zhe says, that's z-h-e, I know gender-neutral pronouns aren't popular these days but I hope I manage to ease the reader into them gradually, "ask ye that I should choose among thee? And yet each one of you sparkleth so brightly that I weep when I see you not for a day. How should I then relinquish any one of you to win unto me another? You, stubborn Will, with your nightingale's tongue, should I cut it out and clutch it to my bosom when I can have the rest of thee no longer in my chamber? Or thou, my brave Walter, or even you, my beloved Mary. Nay, it is an offence unto nature that I should choose: I shall gather ye all unto my heart, and unto my body. Am I not Queen, aye, and King as well? Am I not even the world, its wide rivers and its deep earth? I can encompass ye all, and more, and in our multitude shall we find true joy." For Geoff and Gretel it's a bit different, in fact they've decided to cut off the multitude altogether, and for them I'm sure that's the right choice. In their anti-multitude may they too find true joy.

Geoff's gesturing at me that I should wrap it up, and I haven't even covered half of the points tradition demands, so to cut the rest of it short: he's fat and he

masturbated a lot as a child, Gretel's going to turn into a sex-withholding nag now that they're married. Aisle altar hymn, engagement ring wedding ring suffering, she looks stunning he looks stunned, his ex-girlfriends were all cows, raise your glasses, and Mr Patterson, if you'd like to talk to me about Elizabeth Rex I'll be over at the bar.

## **14 ACROSS: Where be our friends?**

They spend all night in the forest, which is authentic, and then catch the first bus back into town, which isn't. Annika's looking at the twins' camera, flicking through dozens of pictures and stopping at the ones with her, so Iain ends up next to the man in the wide-brimmed hat and the blue cape.

"It's true," the man says, "that plants grow from the earth, but that doesn't have to mean that the plants are made of earth. It may be earth that holds them together, but since they grow upwards, we can see that they must be part air and fire."

"Yes," Iain says. "Okay." He looks at the window and watches his reflection.

"And see how plants grow sideways, reaching outwards from their core. They can only derive this from water — and there's no reason to doubt that plants have water within them, for it flows out when you crush them in your hand."

It's still dark when they get off the bus to walk down West Terrace, and without his modern-framed glasses Iain can only make out the fading streetlights. He listens instead: birds, occasional cars, loud clanks from the other side of the road that he can't identify. He's lagged to at least a block behind the others, and Annika's dropped back to keep him company, but she's impatient: skipping ahead and turning around to wait, skirts swirling after her on a one-second lag, a blur of red petticoats and a corset worth more than his car. To be fair, his car isn't running these days.

"Look," he says. "I've got work this afternoon. I should have a nap first. I'll leave the keys in the peg tin so you can get in without waking me up, if you want to stay."

He's spent half the night standing behind a tree with a sheet over his head, taking his turn at "monster", and he wants to go home.

"Oh, go thou not so soon," Annika says, taking his hand and pulling.

"It's been ten hours."

"Faith, sirrah, thou cans't not know that." She stumbles over the consonants and tries to spin him around. "It was gone Vespers when we left, and I've heard no call of Matins. Surely thou hast snuck no watch along with thee." He can tell she's been awake too long.

"Okay," he says. "It's been six hours, two hours. I'm tired, anyway." The blurriness doesn't help. He'd assumed that where there's a rule against jeans and buttoned shirts there's a rule against glasses as well; he'd only been in the forest thirty seconds before realising he'd made a mistake, when five of the eighteen players had gleamed moonlight at him from their reflecting lenses. Still, he could have asked about the glasses instead of assuming. He could have taken someone up on the loan of a proper doublet instead of standing around in plain trousers and a dark t-shirt, so maybe he's only got himself to blame for feeling bored and out of place.

"We'll sit down soon and rest our weary feet," Annika says, pulling again, plaintive, and he resists for a moment then follows, trailing behind like her petticoats.

By the time they reach Light Square the others are sprawled on the grass in a circle, unevenly distributed around the circumference to fit into the first bars of sun. They're huge, all of them, their cloaks and enormous skirts even wider on city

grass, the golds and purples brighter than they were among trees. The man with the blue cape is lying on his stomach, poking at something; the man with the beard and the spare doublet's sitting against a tree. Annika's skirts puff red around her as she kneels down between them.

"Come along, sirrah," she says, looking up at Iain. He sits down and crosses his legs, and she grins.

"And see," blue-cape man's saying, "when we lift a few small grains of earth, they fall back to the ground. If the world were flat, surely it would fall through space like these grains, being heavy and made of earth; and yet we can see from the constant distance of the stars that it remains in place." On the other side of the circle, the twins are leaning over a game-board. "You can't have 'network'," one of them says. "It can't be more than a couple of hundred years old."

Iain doesn't have a watch, or his phone, so he doesn't know how long he sits there, listening to edges of conversation about why people don't have horns (conclusion: because then they'd have no way to put their weapons aside to make peace) and whether you can spell "wherefore" with only one "e" (conclusion: yes, probably, which is why the invention of Scrabble postdates the invention of stable orthography). After a while the footpaths around the edge of the square begin to fill. He doesn't recognise anyone, but then, he wouldn't, not without his glasses, and sometimes there's a posture or a laugh that seems familiar — maybe that's Colin, maybe that's Isobel. He moves back, into a different patch of sun, further from the others. Maybe passers-by will think he's on his own.

He's almost fallen asleep when Annika gets up and runs over to him. "Wait for me, my love, for all eternity, and also while I go to the toilet," she says, "there's one

across the road." After she's gone the man with the beard comes over too: "Hey, we're off to the supermarket for water and something to eat, if you're hungry."

Iain is, a bit, but he wants to talk to Annika. Perhaps if everyone else is at the supermarket he'll get the chance. He stays, and something red stumbles back out of the doorway to the gym and skips toward him, jumping off of the kerb as it starts to cross the road and then sharpening into familiarity. "Sooth," Annika says as she stands above him, blocking out sunlight and looking down, "there was a woman in there who was most startled by my mode of dress."

"I'm sure there was."

She kneels. "But faith, sirrah," she says, taking his hands and pulling him forward, "where be our friends?"

"Over there somewhere," he says, pulling a hand free and gesturing north.

"Your manner of speaking is strange to me my lord, I understand you not." She pokes him in the stomach reprovingly. "Surely they are rather—"

"No," he says, pushing her hand away. He hasn't said "thou" or "whither" since leaving the house, and he's not going to start now. "They're not. They're just over there. In the supermarket. Buying bottled water and chocolate. If you were really being authentic medievalists you'd just drink from the pond, you know. And we'd have gone home when I said we should or I'd have beaten you."

Annika leans back. "Sweetie," she says, "this is Australia. If we were really being authentic medievalists we'd be hunting kangaroos and maybe teasing Dutch mariners. We aren't going for authenticity here."



"Right," he says.

"Oh, come on," she says, laughing. "Wasn't the dragon a bit of a giveaway?"

"I must have missed the dragon."

"You can't have! With the sparklers?"

He hasn't noticed the others getting back. Beard-man drops a plastic bag on the ground and Annika grabs it. "You two okay?" he says.

"Sounds like yellow bile to me," blue-man says. "That's what you get when you eat too many hot dry foods full of earth. Have some ice-cream. Water and air. Also, chocolate." He holds out an unopened Magnum. "I'm supposed to be meeting someone for lunch in an hour or two so I shouldn't really be eating now anyway."

"I'm fine," Iain says. "I think I should just go home and get some sleep. Are you coming?" He looks at Annika. She's frowning, but then he blinks and she's back to normal, tearing open a packet of tim-tams.

"My lord," she says to beard-man, "what splendours thou hast wrought. Surely no human cook has conjured such delights as these. Hast thou been stealing from the very gods?"

Right. "Okay, I'll put the keys in the peg tin. Have fun."

He'll have trouble with the bus numbers on his own, he thinks as he walks out of the square, but he'd rather buses than dragons. Choler and bile fall behind him, and water and fire; every step he takes another element sprouts back into existence, five of them, six, a hundred and six, hydrogen and oxygen running over

his fingers as he splashes his hand through the pond on the way past. He can hear someone laughing, back where the grass is made of earth and fire.

## **17 ACROSS: What do you think this is?**

Pigeons take off behind her as the kettle boils.

"David, how lovely," she says. "I've just made tea."

"I wish you'd keep that fire out during the day," he says. He looks sweet when he's annoyed, all strong and young and petulant.

"You needn't worry, dear, I have a fire blanket," she reminds him. An extinguisher as well, just in case, though she doesn't mention that; the office workers would never have used it anyway.

"Mrs Coningham," he says, sitting down on a milk crate. There's only one chair, and he's always far too polite to use it himself.

"You're a young man, not a child, David, I've told you this before. My name is Violet."

"Violet. They're going to take the scaffolding down next week."

She pegs the teabags on the washing line to dry out. If the scaffolding's going down then she can't afford to be wasteful. She's prepared, though. Another few weeks might have been nice, but they certainly aren't necessary; she has shelter, she has a garden, she has rainwater stored in huge plastic barrels that used to hold cement powder. "That will be fine, dear," she says, and gives him his tea. She should tell him to take his hat off, really, but it makes him look so builderly and competent, with concrete and blue sky behind him, and steam rising from the mug in his cupped hands.

"So you're going to have to leave," he says. "I can tell the foreman you're up here and we'll all help you move your things. We can find you somewhere to go."

"Oh, David, you don't mean that. No, don't make stern faces at me, you know you don't."

He isn't drinking his tea. "You can't stay here."

She looks around. "Of course I can," she says. "It's all self-sustaining. I'll miss your visits, dear, but I have plenty of books to amuse myself with, and this is my home now."

The shed took the longest, one pipe or girder or iron sheet at a time, chosen from the renovation debris at night and carried up stairs and scaffolding. The garden wasn't quick, either, one bucket of dirt from each journey, gradually eroding the flower-beds in the square, but now it's flourishing, cress and zucchini and strawberries and tomatoes and herbs. With the shadecloth it's even safe from the pigeons, which are surprisingly tasty cooked over the fire with basil. She has a six month supply of tinned food, stacked out of sight behind an air duct, to carry her through the lean times. She has four boxes of soap. She's ready.

"I shall be like a god in the desert," she continues. "The views from here, David. You should come up for breakfast at sunrise, before it's too late. I almost left it too late myself. Forty-three years, fifteen of them working just below our feet, and I was certainly in the office by dawn more frequently than I care to remember, but I never once thought to see what the roof was like. I suppose I ought to be grateful that the world is oblivious to the plains that rise above it. I would hardly be able to remain here so comfortably otherwise."

David sighs, and leans forward to put his mug down on the concrete. She does wish he hadn't found her; it torments him so.

"David," she says, trying another tack. "It's a social experiment. I am a pioneer."

"What do you think this is?" he says. "It's not a desert island with a million-dollar prize, it's not a laboratory. It's just a rooftop. And you're a trespasser."

"I comply with the regulations and wear boots and a hard hat during working hours, which is more than I can say for many of your coworkers, and even for you, sometimes, I'm sorry to say." He does have wonderful curls. "Yes, I notice," she tells him. "I see many things from up here. A girl stole a bucket earlier, you know, and then there was that young woman defacing the property with posters. I didn't see you telling them they'd have to leave. Is it my age that concerns you so? It needn't, it simply means that I will die soon, and rest here for ever, among my garden and my pigeons. I am, after all, too old to continue climbing down scaffolding for much longer, so even were it to remain in place my position would be no different." She's lying, just a little; she may be as comfortable without the scaffolding, but there will be a difference. It will make it more difficult for anyone else to climb up. The rooftop will be more readily defensible. A flat top and cliffs on four sides: no military commander could have asked for a better stronghold.

"No," he says, standing up, leaving his cooling mug on the concrete. "I'm sorry, but there could be a fire. You could get sick. It'll be winter soon, and you'll be stuck up here, and what are you going to do when you change your mind? Jump up and down on the edge of the roof and hope someone notices before you fall off?"

"Oh David," she says, standing up as well, "no, please, don't. I have a torch, you

know, I could send a morse-code message to the ground if I needed to, I'm quite proficient."

"Nobody would understand it," he says. "People don't know morse code any more."

"I could write you a postcard every week," she says. "To let you know that I'm well. If I buy enough stamps then I'll be able to drop one off the roof every Monday, and someone will pick it up and put it in a postbox. And it's always nice to get mail, don't you think? No, don't leave. You haven't finished your tea. Sit down and look."

From here she can see so many other rooftops, filled with air conditioning ducts, pot plants, old chairs, corrugated iron. They're stepping stones, stretching across the city. When it's dark she feels like she could stride across them if she wanted to, one foot on each, while the cars and trees and people crowd underneath her. Forty-three years moving further and further away from traffic and conversation, up the office block, and now at last she's at the top.

"Look at the flowerbeds," she says, drawing David closer to the edge and nodding down at them: wide circles, half obscured by trees. "And the roads; they're so much prettier from up here, and so much more orderly. Imagine how beautiful this must be at night, and think about how carefully I've prepared, and how little there is to interest me down there nowadays. Would you really make me give up my home?"

She watches him as he squeezes his eyes shut and opens them again. He's a builder, after all, he must understand what it's like to have this view of the world.

"Yeah, okay," he says.

She beams, and takes his hand in both of hers to squeeze it. "I knew you would

understand."

"But I'm leaving my mobile phone," he says. "And you have to keep it turned off so the battery doesn't run out, and put it somewhere dry. Wrap it up in a plastic bag in the shed. I'll bring a spare battery tomorrow. And I'll give you my number, so you can phone me when you want to get down and I'll contact building management. Actually, I'll get a permanent texta and write the number on the shed, okay? So you can't lose it."

"My dear," she says. "I should be delighted."

"But you can't just phone me to ask about the weather forecast. You have to conserve the battery."

"Of course, David, just as you say." It's a beautiful golden day and from up here she can tell that it's going to rain, soon. Her tomatoes will be watered. Maybe she'll climb down once the builders have left and go to the library one last time. They won't be able to fine her for overdue books if they can't find her. It's such a relief; she was so frightened she was going to have to push him over the edge.

## **5 DOWN: What's this placard he's carrying?**

Scott's never been to a protest before, and the vast mechanical physicality of it alarms him. Two thousand yellow flyers litter the streets, wind-tossed like summer's ending, organic; but an hour ago they were bundled up in groups of fifty with thin rubber bands, and a few days before that he was pulling a heavy box of paper out of Gwen's car. Yesterday he was sitting in Chad's garage, disassembling that box and stencilling a message on one side, taping the other to an old broom-handle. He remembers biting into the tape and then tearing it, his fingers red with smeared paint; and the burr and reflected heat of Gwen's friend drying the sign with a hairdryer.

They're walking slowly, but the placard's heavier than he'd expected, and he's hungry. He should have bought a sausage this morning after all. Too late now, anyway: he could duck into a cafe and then catch up with the protest afterward, but he'd have to manoeuvre the placard through tables, keep it away from light fittings at one end and other people's plates at the other. Jostling protesters plant new bruises on his arms, his fingers are sore from where he's chalked messages on the footpath with a shrinking nub of chalk. This shouldn't be the way to change the law, he thinks, this unwieldy mob of legs and mass and paper. You should be able to do it online by now: everyone sending an email at the same time, government websites with "what you want" and "when you want it" dropdown lists.

Voting isn't much better: pencils that somebody has to sharpen; heavy electoral rolls with hundreds of thousands of names, and lines drawn along a ruler through each one; tally-rooms with huge stacks of paper shuffled around and around. And for the winner, the election is only the start, with so many boxes of paper to follow.



They pass hotels and offices, windows momentarily filled with curious faces and then emptied again. From this side of the glass he dreams of the wireless networks and freefloating information inside, but he knows it wouldn't be like that if he went in. Even accountants can only deal with the abstraction of numbers through a big pile of paper and metal.

He's always thought of politics as backroom deals and eminences grise, but this is just stuff, piles of paper like homework, and what's this placard he's carrying? Inscribed with the block letters they practiced ten years ago on projects about Chinese New Year, drawn on with the same brand of texta. People are looking out of windows at them, at him, and he shrinks beneath the realisation that the sun is bouncing off him on its way to their eyes, that the air is full of the floating skin of his fellow protesters, that even if his placards convince people he still has to carry them back to the car and get them home and dismantle them with sore fingertips.

Chad is handing out leaflets and persuading passers-by to join the protest (by making the air vibrate, Scott thinks, and imagines he can see the tiny molecules banging into each other, waves passing through them like the staggering motion that bumps through the crowd when someone stumbles). Lona is sticking pages to blank walls, or folding them in half to tuck under windscreen wipers. Builders look down at them, swinging casually up ladders or walking along scaffolding, peering from rooftops.

Chad runs out of leaflets and drops back into the body of the march. "Hey, give me a go with the sign."

Scott hands it over. "Help yourself. Next time, can we protest for the abolition of corporeal existence?"

"What you need," Craig says, "is a girlfriend and a pizza."

"That's not a solution," Scott says. "The girlfriend would break up with me sooner or later, and I'd eat the pizza, and then I'd be back exactly where I started but older. We need to do away with all this physicality. Aging, too."

"I like having a body," Craig says. He steps up momentarily onto the kerb, and runs along for three steps, then drops back down into the street, dodging the other protesters and turning back to grin at Scott.

"That's easy for you to say," Scott says. "Your socks aren't all bunched up."

"This is what you've got to do if you want anything to change," Craig says. "You can't just hope, you have to actually touch things and shove them and make noises with your real little mouth."

He's right, Scott thinks, but he doesn't want anything to change that much.

**38 ACROSS: Where do they lead, these paths that stretch out in the wrong direction?**

They draw the edges of their new world slowly, by consensus, spreading in a thousand different directions until one of them leads somewhere useful. The return journey is the message; food here, come and take a look. If there's no return journey then that's a message too: enemies, emptiness, here be dragons.

The rain has changed the contours that they mapped last night, but they wouldn't have remembered them anyway. Each moonlit landscape is new, the stones and scraps and rain or heat appearing like the beginning of another world. They move over hills, around oceans, sometimes; through brush, briar, slowly. Each explorer has seventy nights before she dies, and sometimes a whole night passes in futile search. The individual failures don't matter, as long as somebody gets somewhere, and returns to call the others on.

Sometimes branches get in the way, or stray boots, or a blown plastic bag.

Sometimes there are deserts and cliff-edges and buildings, too huge to be a hindrance: their size makes them irrelevant, like the curve of the earth, just another surface to brush with a thousand explorers who spread from the centre, the legs and antennae that carry and guide each one.

The last drops of water have fallen from the trees, but the ground is still thick and muddy. Lucky, then, that the first explorers are only a few stones and diversionary twigs from the nest before they find themselves mounting huge apples, already half dismantled by their daytime rivals. Soon the scattered paths converge, not on the most provably efficient route but on something that works, well enough; something that the ants can follow and return from, confirming its efficacy, as

longer and less successful journeys fade away in the wake of unreturning pioneers.

Even the more distant explorers should return eventually, but some of them get trapped, or killed, or just keep on going. One of them follows the canyon between two concrete slabs, then runs up against a vast body of water on the other side. She circles it, still heading outward while her sisters carry their apple back to the nest. Something's fallen apart inside her, the indication that it's time to head back, that out here it's too far from home to be worth the journey even if she does stumble across a serendipitous island.

She reaches out further, and further, along twigs, ignoring the faint trails of previous explorers. Where do they lead, these paths that stretch out in the wrong direction? Not home, certainly. They trace the borders of new seas and stranger islands, exploratory and aimless, by puddles and gravestones and trees and enormous flowers. She stumbles across some crumbs but doesn't turn around, moving brokenly onward, and she draws out purposeless lines that will define the very furthest edges of the world, at least until daylight.

## **7 DOWN: What is it?**

Every repetition is an accretion. When Karen was four, her father told her not to make faces: if the wind changed, she'd be stuck. She was twelve when her mother told her the truth behind the lie: each line on a scrunched-up face overlays the lines that went before, and deepens them. Ration your frowns and your laughter or you'll be old before your time. So she frowns and laughs more than anyone she knows, but it's a different expression every time, never the same smile twice.

Every repetition is an erosion. The first bite of an apple is as delicious as every other bite combined. Karen leaves her sandwiches half-eaten, exhausts every suburb of its secrets and moves on; borrows CDs from each new best friend and listens through and gives them back; drops a television show the moment the audience laughs at a catchphrase. She sees her family every few years, for each new cousin or nephew, but never at her mother's place, where nothing ever changes.

This year her new best friend is Nathan. Each time she gets another temp job she smuggles him toilet paper and stationery, and each time she loses it he buys her lunch with piano scholarship money until she finds another. She likes music students; she knows she'd never be able to bear to practice, that she never even managed "Greensleeves" on the recorder at school, so music astonishes her as a huge external force, inexplicable and overwhelming. Everything works on her, from opera to advertising jingles to bounce-beep pop in supermarkets, where she abandons trolleys to the aisles if something too familiar plays, and dawdles while she pretends to read the back of orange juice cartons when it's something new. Being friends with Nathan (or Lori, or Alex, any of them, all the way back): it's like having access to locked doors and secret tunnels, a way in to the mysterious

controls of her brain.

They're supposed to be meeting in the bookshop on Hindley Street, but when she walks up a sidestreet she can hear buskers, the same passage repeated twice, three times. Lori used to play it on the piano. She turns a corner and circles back into silence; there's no rush.

"You don't say," Nathan says when she phones him to say she's running late.

"The bus just stopped for ages, I don't know why. See you in quarter of an hour though."

"I thought you were in town already for your Zutti work this morning."

"As of yesterday I don't have Zutti work ever again."

Nathan's sigh comes out of the phone in a burst. "You always do this," he says, but she's hanging up.

She leans against a wall and waits. She only heard the music for thirty seconds, but it's enough. She remembers the last time it played where she could hear it, a couple of years ago now, an ad on TV: soap or chocolate, a woman in a bath with lots of dark velvet. The time before that had been the very first: a wooden bench underneath her as she waited for rehearsals to finish; clouds, cold wind, someone throwing misshapen Smarties at her mouth from the next bench over; a late-night walk through the parklands, stumbling and laughing.

She circles in toward the bookshop, and backs away when she hits the music again. She can't afford to keep remembering.

She doesn't hate the past. She loves it, everything she's ever done, the tears she cried out on childhood playgrounds, the boys she kissed in other people's wardrobes during party games whose rules she never understood, the multicoloured filing system in the first of so many briefly-held jobs. It's because she loves it that she can't bear to dilute it. Each perfect meal can never be repeated in case she weakens the memory, each time she falls in love she refuses to let the first month of wonder be overlaid with anything else. She remembers the best things that ever happened, and never stays around long enough for the worst.

The wind changes direction, and she can hear the music again, but it's in her head now and it's too late to move. What is it? She remembers the context but not the name. The notes rise and fall, minute variations over and over again, never quite the same.

The phone rings again.

"Where are you?" Nathan asks. The music plays behind him; she still can't remember what it's called, how the patterns work.

"On the bus."

"Your bus just drove past me."

She shifts against the wall as the music falls momentarily silent, and tiny hooks in the rendering pull like Velcro on the back of her shirt. "Checking up on me?" she says.

"Didn't think I needed to. Walking up to meet you, mostly."

She hangs up. It's a bad time to lose friends, but it's never a good time, and sooner or later she'll have to do it anyway, so she pushes buttons through to the directory and deletes his number. It's always a relief, once it gets to the point where she knows everything is going to go downhill.

The phone rings again so she turns it off and waits as the music gets louder, trying not to let the sunlight obscure memories of that colder night and the conductor's baton; but when she wipes away sadness and happiness, she's left with the fear that the next time she hears the music she won't be able to remember anything except standing here, sunlight patterning red through her closed eyelids.



### **35 ACROSS: But both at once?**

By the end of the drive, Lizzie's ready to sell her car and fly back straight away. The building's dark brick with 80s arches, and already filled with relatives: by the time she and Tara get to their room, she's been stopped three times for conversations she doesn't understand.

"I have no idea who that was," she says after the third, pulling her suitcase along bright bumpy carpet, carrying Tara's apples.

"It was Carol! I know, I hardly recognised her either. I can't believe how much weight she's lost. Wait till you meet her new man friend, too, he's about twenty-five and he's taller than traffic lights. If Terry isn't careful I might steal her diet tips and hunt out another one like him myself."

Lizzie still thinks of Carol as an eight-year-old with headlice, but they're at their room now, so she unlocks the door and pulls her suitcase to the foot of the far bed, over near the window. She lies down. The ceiling is textured with thick plaster curves.

Tara's already swung her bag onto the other bed, and zipped it open. She shakes the fold-lines out of a dress and hangs it up.

"I need something to drink," Lizzie says, but she checks the fridge and it's empty. She never used to mind the tap-water here, but she's not used to it any more, and when she pours a glassfull in the bathroom it's undrinkable.

When she comes back into the bedroom Carol's at the door. "You have a kettle," she's saying. "I'll be dropping in here a lot, then, I can promise you that."

"No tea or coffee yet, though," Tara says. "Or milk."

Carol raises her eyebrows. "No tea, you say," she says, and pulls a tupperware container from her enormous handbag. "I don't have any milk, though," she admits. "But... biscuits." She pulls out another container: individually wrapped mint slices.

"Ohh," Tara says, hands going to her bottom. "I shouldn't, really. I've been so bad this week."

"Come on," Carol says. "Special occasion. You're going to have to get through a lot of cake at the reunion, you know, you might as well get started now. Besides, if you don't grab a couple while Perry's gone then you'll miss your chance. I buy them individually wrapped to slow her down, but she's spooky, she can unwrap them in complete silence and then I turn around and they're gone."

"Still, teenagers," Tara says. "You can't really do anything about it. I wouldn't eat broccoli till I was nineteen."

"No!"

"Ask Mum," Tara says, turning around to bring Lizzie into the conversation.

Lizzie still hasn't taken her boots off, and she doesn't want to listen to this. "I'll go for the milk," she says. "There must be a supermarket around here somewhere."

"It's okay, Mum," Tara says, poking through the sandwich bag. "There's blackcurrant tea, you don't need milk for that."

"Strawberry and vanilla, too," Carol says.

Lizzie would rather have the caffeine. Out on the street she breathes familiar air and feels the street-grid stretch around her. There was a corner shop nearby, twenty or thirty years ago, and she remembers how to turn and walk there; she shuts her eyes and the city around her makes sense for a moment, but then she stumbles into a man in a suit and has to start looking again.

The corner shop's gone, of course, replaced by a whole new building, but she finds a tiny supermarket a little further along, and she laughs for a moment at the racks of iced coffee next to the plain milk.

When she leaves the shop she can't remember which direction she came from. There's no clues: just street lamps that flicker on in puddles, and identical sets of traffic lights. Still, she's bound to find it eventually, regardless of whether she wants to or not. If she misses any exciting news then no doubt Tara will fill her in.

Forty years ago she got through big family events with a sheepish smile at every accusation that she'd grown. It was awkward enough then, but now, on the other side of the line, she doesn't know how to behave. She still remembers deciding, on her twenty-first birthday, that she'd never be the boring conversation-making aunt. She reminds herself of it every time she wants to marvel at tall chubby youths as they tower over her, their hair unmanageably thick, their grins embarrassed. She won't bring up movies or music or school either, and that doesn't leave much.

Surely no other method of assembling a group of people could be so arbitrary. Other school administrators, other people her age, other amateur dahlia growers, other women who use the same shampoo that she does, they'd all have given her a place to start. Other people with her genes, though: no wonder the conversation reduces to how's the baby, how you've grown, your hair looks great. They'll only

talk about what they're made of, kidney stones and colds, because what they're made of is the only thing they share. She's always hated compound words, ginormous cyborgs, sporks, but it's all families are. Disparate elements are broken in half and thrown together to create a child. They're all around her, too. Two parents walk by with a small daughter, laughing. The menu she's passing has a "brunch" section, there's a multiplex down the road, and Starbucks must have made it to Adelaide by now so presumably she can get a frappucino as well.

She turns a corner, and she's lost control of the subtleties of right angles now; she's not sure whether she's heading back to the supermarket or away from it, and she doesn't know which would be better anyway. She doesn't really want to find her way back to a daughter who's never lived in Adelaide but who's so much more comfortable here than she is; or to corridors filled with relatives she can't remember; name-tags and fruit tea and, tomorrow, hours in a big church hall crowded with the strangers she grew up with and their strange children.

A bad idea all round, she thinks as she thinks as she turns another corner and recognises the buildings in front of her at last, and they're as hideous and mismatched as all the rest of it. Motoring: yes, fair enough. Hotels, certainly. But both at once? It's no better than smoke and fog, or the fragments of half-people jammed together to make more.

## **10 DOWN: How do you tell when spaghetti's done?**

Alan turns another glum page then wriggles back to lean against the tree. "It could be worse," he says.

Gaurang raises his eyebrows and tilts his laptop screen back a little. "I suppose we could have half an hour left to learn it all, instead of an hour."

"Think about it," Alan says. "If we were cakes they'd be poking us with a skewer."

Tess and Gaurang laugh. "Fair enough," Gaurang says.

Melanie never skewers her cakes. You can just look at the sides, and press down on the top. They go back to their revision, but Alan keeps turning pages with attention-grabbing loudness. "Even that's not the worst, anyway," he says eventually. "How do you tell when spaghetti's done? You basically have to break it in half, or eat it, or throw it against the wall."

"Yes, Alan," Gaurang says with ostentatious patience.

"Which is pretty incredible, I mean how do you come up with 'throw it against the wall' as a serious part of everyday cookery? Just start a lot of fights in the kitchen and break them off every thirty seconds to see if you've made any culinary discoveries? It would explain the bit where you have to punch down bread dough."

"Yeah," Gaurang says, "maybe you could practice your stand-up cookery later, instead of in the middle of prime studying time?"

"Maybe I could investigate it as an alternative career if I fail today," Alan says. "I could wear a big chef's hat. I'd mix up cookies during the first act, then I'd cook

them over the interval and everyone could have one when they came back in.

Maybe not, maybe that would seem like a desperate plea for indulgence. I could eat them all myself, or poison them and hand them out to hecklers."

"Maybe we should vote," Gaurang says. "I want you to shut up. Tess, do you want him to shut up?"

Tess is gathering her notes. "I'm going in now anyway," she says.

"Sounds like a yes to me. Mel, do you want him to shut up?"

Usually she just tags along. "Um," she says.

"Okay," Alan says, "okay, fine." He leans back with a dramatic sigh and shuts his notebook.

When Melanie looks up a few minutes later he's stretched a thick rubber band around his folder, and he's writing on it in tiny black letters.

"What's that?"

Gaurang looks up. "Oh, come on, Alan, you're not fourteen any more."

"If I can't learn through comedy," Alan says, "then I'd rather not learn at all." He pulls the band off the folder and the letters shrink as the rubber contracts. They're still indecipherable as he pulls it onto his wrist. "Charming fashion bracelet," he says, then pulls one side out to stretch the letters into legibility, "handy personal note system."

"Take it off," Gaurang says.

Alan lets it snap back into place instead. "Ouch," he says, and pulls it out again.

"Maybe meringues would be better than cookies. They make no sense at all, which is always a good starting point for jokes. How did anyone ever come up with the idea? You've got these round things that come out of chickens, okay, and you try eating them because you'll die if you don't, and they don't taste too bad, and one day you drop them in the fire and you find out that if you make them hot then they'll taste nicer. So far so good. But then you think, okay, let's take the clear bit away from the yellow bit. And this is before electric mixers, so then you have to think right, let's stand here with a fork or, I don't know, when were forks invented? Okay, let's stand here with a slightly frayed stick, because we don't have forks yet, and let's stir around the clear bit really fast and then mix it up with some of that incredibly rare and expensive sugar, and then keep stirring it for hours and hours put it in the oven, because who knows? Maybe something exciting will happen."

Gaurang's gone back to his notes. Melanie tries to follow, but she can't help looking up when the speech finishes.

"I've got a spare rubber band," Alan says to her, "if you want one."

"You can't wear it in," she says.

Alan looks down. "Why not? Too obvious with a t-shirt? You might be right."

Melanie isn't sure why not: the chance of getting caught, the injustice of it, the days she's spent writing out colour-coded notes and memorising them, the enormous weight of wrongness.

"I suppose I could go for the old inside-of-the-drink-label trick," Alan says.

"Everyone's bound to have a bottle of water with them in this weather. And I thought of an advanced version that I haven't tried out. You use coke instead of water, and then there's no way they'll see the writing, and you just drink down to reveal the notes after ten minutes."

"Today's only worth ten per cent," she tries. "That can't be worth the risk of getting caught."

"Oh," Alan says, "but the risk is the best part. The thrill of putting yourself in danger and winning through. Ever since I grew tired of skydiving into dormant volcanoes, the only thing that's been able to satisfy me is low-tech cheating."

Gaurang's laptop makes shutdown noises, and he closes the lid. "I'm going."

"You'll get caught," Melanie says.

"Never have before."

She wants to ask how often he's done it, which subjects, how much; but more than that she wants him to take the rubber band off. "Someone's bound to notice."

Alan stands up. "Shouldn't think so," he says. "Not unless you tell them. You're not going to tell them, are you?" He stretches, facing her.

"Of course she's not," Gaurang says, walking ahead, but Melanie hasn't stood up yet. She's not good at making friends.

"I don't know," she says. "I might."

"Rightio then," Alan says amiably, pulling the band off and throwing it toward her.



She catches it. "I won't take it in. But don't let me catch you using it with your sneaky long sleeves."

She stretches it out as he walks ahead of her. "Meringues," it says in distorted, semi-legible block letters. "Eggs. No electricity, forks not invented sticks? Sugar expensive."

## **15 DOWN: You know what your problem is?**

"You know what your problem is?" Clemens says, as another drip rolls off the brim of his hat. There's room for him under the verandah, and he's folded his inexplicable blue cape on a dry chair to keep it safe, but he won't move.

Benedict is alternating gin with glasses of Fanta. He finds the sticky bubbles delicious for the first half a glass and then disgusting for the second; it slows him down. The latest glass is empty, and he picks it up, passes it from hand to hand, taps it with his fingernails. Maybe the world will be more interesting through the drops on the side. He peers until they fold the light behind them into a dozen tiny hemispheres. Bringing the biggest one closer to his face he can see poles bent into curves: pedestrian crossings, street lamps, a bus stop.

Suddenly Clemens leans down into the field of vision and his face looms huge, too enormous to comprehend, the bulge of a nose, the red-cornered white of an eye. Benedict shifts his focus back up to the full-scale world. "No," he says. "I don't."

"Neither do I," says Clemens, "but it may be related to an excess of black bile, which comes from the spleen. Traditionally it's treated with warm moist foods, or with music and dance. You should come to my Thursday foxtrot group, we always need more men."

Benedict's problem is that everything is exhausting and not very interesting, including foxtrot, music and dance. It's also too warm for warm foods, too moist for moist foods, and too late to go somewhere dry and cold for lunch.

"Musical therapy, it was all the rage in the seventeenth century," Clemens is

saying. "That and the leeches."

"I don't really want a course of leeches either."

"Oh no, not leeches any more. Something different. Worms, sea-cucumbers. Salmon. You can't expect to find any power in leeches, not after they've been used for centuries."

Benedict settles on the sausages for lunch. "I'm more of a stick-with-what-you-know boy, I'm afraid."

Clemens scoffs. "No wonder you're sick of everything."

"I'm sick of the new stuff too."

"That's why you need me to cast a spell with sea-cucumbers."

Benedict doesn't quite follow this argument. "I'm not sure," he says, "there's even an argument for me to follow."

"It's not because sea cucumbers are intrinsically powerful, it's just the novelty. Listen, magic is the opposite of science." Clemens leans forward, eager to explain. "A superstition only exists because it worked, once, but the world isn't a set of buttons, press to summon attendant. It's a one-time pad, and when you've used a code then it's dead. Watch how things work, okay, see whether walking under a ladder brings you bad luck, but the most you can gain from that is a knowledge of the form of the code. Once somebody's walked under a ladder then the bad luck's theirs, and that page is torn away, and now everyone else is safe until they walk under a staircase, or over a ladder."

Benedict turns over the menu again, flipping drinks to food to drinks, considering a burger instead. "So what you're saying is that superstitions work, but in a completely untestable way."

"Once upon a time," Clemens goes on, "there was a song that stopped the rain, so now it's still there in the playgrounds, rain rain go away. It doesn't work any more, but that doesn't mean it can't help us. It shows us what the new passcode might look like. Rain, rain, please subside," and his singing voice is deep and off-key, "come back when we've gone inside." He keeps his arms on the table, leaning forward, waiting expectantly. Maybe the downpour eases off a little.

"Okay," Benedict says. "It doesn't seem to have had any actual effect, but say it did. What if someone else was singing the opposite thing at the same time?"

"Then it might not work," Clemens says. "The world won't always change just to suit you. Asking it to do something only works as long as you're willing to accept the refusal."

"So," Benedict says, and he flips over the menu again: burger, sausages, burger.

"It's untestable and it only works so long as you don't mind when it doesn't. Maybe I'm missing something here, but isn't that logically equivalent to not working at all?"

"Does it matter?" Clemens takes his hat off for a moment and shakes it free of drops. "Give me a hair," he says.

"What for?"

"I'm going to make it into a new type of knot," Clemens says, "and ask the world to

bring you to foxtrot lessons with me on Thursday evening."

Benedict smiles reluctantly, half charmed.

### **30 DOWN: What are you waiting for?**

Mandy answers the phone quickly when his name flashes up, but whatever he says, it disappears in transmission.

"Speak up, I can't hear you."

"I'm ready!" he says, still whispering, louder.

She looks around. "Okay, just hold on ten minutes. I'll call you back."

"What are you waiting for? Look, I can't hold on any longer. I can't. You have to get back here and help me clear up."

"Albie," she says, but it's too late; he's hung up. Damn.

If Katrina had just turned up on time it would have been fine, but she's still not here, and she's not answering her phone. There's no way of knowing whether she's a minute away or an hour. There are crowds in the distance and passing strangers but she can't depend on them to remember her, not unless she tears her clothes off and starts turning cartwheels, and that wouldn't be unsuspecting behaviour. She could ask for directions, if only she didn't know the area so well.

Complain about Big Brother but when you actually want 24-hour surveillance you can rely on, there's nothing. She finds a CCTV camera and stands in front of it to smoke a cigarette while she thinks, but for all she knows it's a blank, slapped up to provide an illusion of security, nothing but moth eggs inside.

Okay, she thinks, deep breaths. One thing at a time. It's been an hour since she left work, and it only takes forty-five minutes to get home, so she needs something else

to prove she's still in the city. Maybe there's someone left at work.

The stairwell echoes more than usual in the twilight, or she's treading heavier. Geoff and Hannah will be in, won't they? They were still working when she left, she's sure of that.

Once she's through the door the bright lights at the other end of the office give her hope, and she forces herself not to run, but it's just the the empty kitchen and the bathrooms. The meeting room's empty too, and she remembers sitting there months ago while they decided not to bother installing the sort of swipe-card entry system that would save her now. The bored doodles she'd spread over her notes from the previous meeting are probably still in her desk somewhere.

There's plenty of time. She can afford another ten minutes, easy. She puts her bag over her shoulder and runs down the stairs, out onto the street: not dark yet, but dimming, and still there's only people she doesn't know, someone walking a dog, a girl leaning back on a tree with her eyes shut. There's a woman with a camera, squatting down to take photographs of puddles or footpath or the streets, and Mandy tries to get in the way, walking into what must be the camera's field of vision, but the photographer looks up and meets her eyes, then thrusts her camera into a bag and turns around.

There's another CCTV camera perched high on a lamppost, and Mandy stands in its line of sight and reaches for another cigarette. Casual, she thinks, she needs to look casual, but her hands are pale with dappled red. Two cameras is a better bet than one, but it's still no guarantee. She walks down the block and ash drops behind her, floating on puddle-tops momentarily and then sinking to hide her passage. She should have planned this so much better.

There's a deli still open, and she stubs out her cigarette to go inside. No visible security camera; the nearest shop that has one that she's sure of is up on North Terrace, and maybe she could run there in five minutes but she doesn't know whether the footage is stored or not: it could just be a high-tech version of a curved mirror. She can't spend that much time on an off-chance. Maybe if she buys all the smarties in the deli it'll help the assistant remember her, but she doesn't have enough cash on her. God, she hates Eftpos.

She grits her teeth and gets on with it.

"That's a lot of smarties," the assistant says.

"Yes," she says, and stabs in her pin number. Maybe she could get herself thrown out of a pub for smoking. Maybe she could run to the hospital and try to get herself admitted on the grounds of a panic attack.

It's not till the shop assistant hands her card back that she realises the transaction's gone into a far-away computer, and that the time and date are on the receipt. She looks at it, tucks it into her purse. She smiles.

"Thanks," she says. "Thank-you." She's trembling, she realises; she hadn't noticed before.

Back outside Katrina rushes up to her, twenty-five minutes late. "Hey," she says.

"Sorry I'm late. Too complicated to explain but honestly, a really good reason, I promise. What in the world are those? Amanda sweetheart, what do you need forty packets of smarties for?"

Mandy opens her mouth, still shaking, as Katrina pulls the bag away from her and



looks inside. The smarties bounce off each other inside their packets, rattling, clicking. A cake, she thinks, maybe she's going to decorate a cake. A party. A dare. A joke. She was hungry.

"I don't know," she says, and starts to cry.

## **25 DOWN: What's the other thing?**

Deirdre's eyelids block out the moon. After a moment she lifts them open, and light slides across the landscape, summoning back trees and distant houses as it comes. She yawns and moves in towards Adam. They're in a gap between trees, and the sky is intermittent on the other side of the branches. They'd planned for the middle of the racecourse, but even the best rubber-backed picnic blanket has its limitations.

Occasional cars pass, over to one side. They've still got food in the picnic basket, but the thermos should keep the coffee hot for at least another hour; there's no rush. In any case, it's a while since they've been out on their own, without Jesse there to pull and nudge and guide.

Deirdre shuts her eyes and lets the world shrink again until there's just the pillow of a shoulder, and the stone-bumped mattress of the ground-plus-rug, and the sound of breathing. "I still can't remember what the patterns are supposed to be like," she says. It's the eighth time they've done this, every year since the first, and every time she looks up and it's just dots.

"Tell me about them, then."

Trees and city lights are hiding all but the brightest stars, but she'd been too tired to drive into the hills; even driving through the city she'd envied restful cafes, a girl asleep by a tree. "There's, I don't know. There's three or four bright ones. They're in a kind-of big triangle."

"Okay," Adam says.

"That's about all at the moment," she says, and she wishes she could see more.

"Maybe when this cloud's gone by. Here." She sits up to reach for the basket. "Have some coffee."

There's no mugs, and she picks up an empty glass, wondering if hot coffee will crack it. She rolls it between her hands to warm it up first, and it doesn't break.

"Here."

Adam pushes himself to sitting. "Thanks."

"Wine glass," she warns as she holds it out. "I forgot the mugs."

They stay sitting up to drink, and she's cold enough to notice the air on her legs but not cold enough to mind. She looks at her coffee, steam swirling off it and fogging the lip of the glass, lit from one side by the city.

Later, when the glasses are empty again, they lie back down. Deirdre looks around for the moon, and finds it, higher than it was before, blurry behind a screen of air and water. There's rain from the grass on the side of her face as Adam slides an arm under her neck.

A paper napkin flaps. Someone runs by. She shuts her eyes, and feels the tug of her hair caught against fabric as she shifts her head.

"Tell me what I should be looking for," she says. "I don't know why I can never remember. It's not that it isn't interesting." He doesn't say anything, so she goes on, saying anything. "Tell me how many moons Saturn has, I can never remember. And what they're named after. Tell me what the difference is between meteors and comets, and what's the other thing? Dinosaur-death-rock."

"Sounds like a music genre," he says, and hoarsens his voice. "There's evil in the room, there's an evil evil doom, it's a creature causing wrecks, it's Tyrannosaurus Rex."

"And which order the planets come in," she says.

Adam sings. "We feel the end, we feel the night, we never ever feel the light. You're trying but you can't ignore us, we're the evil brontosaurus."

"Nice," she says, then lies silent for a few minutes before taking a turn. "I like devouring all that's nice. I don't need pepper, salt or spice. Catch me and I'll eat my captor: I'm the grim..."

"Velociraptor," Adam joins in. "Wonderful."

"Get back to the stars and the rocks and the extinction," she says.

He shrugs. "It hasn't changed since I told you last year. Have the clouds cleared up at all?"

She can't really tell, but she says they have, a bit, and closes her eyes.

"Tell me," he says.

Her eyes are still closed. She's remembering a day eight years ago, walking along near ducks on the late summer river, talking about the evening sunlight, describing the source of every slanting shadow they walked through: plane tree, tree she didn't recognise, woman wearing bike shorts, old man with a bag of bread. She thinks about how desperately she'd wanted to distill everything she could see into something she could press into his hand.

"I don't know," she says, and opens her eyes, and looks up. If she concentrates she can see a few more stars behind the brightest. "I can't tell where one constellation ends and the next one picks up, anyway. There's a shape like a question-mark," she adds; she can't quite make it out but she's sure she remembers it from last year or the year before.

"Tell me?" he says again, a little later. She feels the weight of her eyelids resting shut. If she doesn't look she can't know it isn't true. "The clouds have cleared up a lot," she says. "Loads of triangles, I don't know what the constellation name is for a primary school orchestra."

"One of them might be Musca, he's pretty triangular. A fly. You'd think the Sails would be too, Vela, but they're shaped like a big blob."

"Can't imagine that catches the wind very well."

"They goes with Puppis, which is the poop deck, and Carina, which is the keel, and Pyxis, which is the box. It's supposed to be the Argo, as in Jason and the."

"The Argonauts, famous for their box?"

He shrugs. "Apparently. I've never been a classicist."

Later she opens her eyes after all, still lying down, and reaches out to pull her handbag over and look at the time. She wonders whether he's awake; he hasn't moved for a while, he's breathing slowly. Maybe asleep. Probably asleep. She opens her mouth to say something else, and then he moves.

"How are the clouds going?" he asks.

"A few left," she says after a moment. "Mostly off to the side, though. So much sky."

She sits up and he follows a moment later. They lean into each other, and she tries not to flinch when his hand brushes past a bruise that he surely isn't aware of.

"You okay?" he asks.

With her eyes shut there's just them again, for a minute. "Mm," she says, and his hand slides again past the bruise he can't know about. "Just a bit cold."

## **26 ACROSS: What are you reading?**

You can't transform your body and keep the person inside it, not even if you're a god: change into a swan and you're a swan, a bull and you're a bull. You can create a daffodil in your wake, but you've got to die to do it.

"I imagine you didn't like getting your period either," says Norma, who loved it, and loved pregnancy more, and menopause even more than that.

"That's none of your business," says Perry, still unbleeding at fifteen.

"In any case," Norma says, "you're certainly wrong. Think of Superman."

"Same thing." Perry counts waltz footsteps: one two three, right two three, then stops to glare at two men outside a pub. On the far side she starts again: left two three. "Kent never gets anything from saving the world, he just disappears for a few hours. When he comes back he's still wearing glasses, and there's Lois For Superman graffiti in the toilet with lovehearts all around."

Norma keeps up, just. "I'm sure I wouldn't turn down the ability to fly. I don't think I'd mind too much if I had to do it in disguise."

"And even if the change lasts," Perry goes on, "it doesn't matter. There are already six billion people who aren't you. I don't see why you'd want to get rid of yourself to create another one."

At the end of the street they hit the square and pass trees, fallen leaves and trunks fading slowly back to grey from the streaks of pink and green and yellow where they were soaked with rain. Perry walks over the chessboard inlaid in the grass,

and her shoes stop squelching and start to squeak.

Norma sits on a bench and opens her book again.

"You'll get wet," Perry says, hopping from a black square to a white.

"I won't melt." She turns a page, and looks up to see Perry spin around aimlessly on one foot, kicking the other out into the air. She turns another page.

"What're you reading, anyway?"

"You won't like it," she says, holding it out, and Perry steps off the chessboard to look.

"And now their legs," Perry reads out loud, "and breasts, and bodies stood crusted with bark, and hardening into wood."

"I said you won't like it." Norma wriggles her fingers expectantly, and Perry pushes the book into them, grumpy. She steps backward. On the board again, she hops another square forward.

Her hair's fuzzing loose in the damp and the occasional late raindrops. She runs her tongue along the inside of her teeth. "Watch out," Norma says behind her. "You know what happens if you reach the end of the board."

She does; Norma taught her, years ago. She prefers Scrabble, anyway. She hops forward another square, and looks: three more steps to the end.

"It'll cost thousands of dollars," she says, "and I don't even want straight teeth. I don't like smiling. I wish they'd just give me the money and let me buy what I want,



or put it in the bank or something. Get dad's car fixed properly."

"Your mother was very keen on braces," Norma says. "She wanted to be the first in her class. She was very keen on earrings as well, though I suppose not until she was a little bit older. I don't think we let her get her ears done until she was sixteen. It'll save you thousands more than orthodontic costs if you manage to keep off the jewellery."

"Nobody would think it was okay for her to force me to have my ears pierced," Perry says.

Norma watches as her granddaughter hops sideways, one foot to the other, changes of direction that skirt the edge of predictability. The crooked teeth are invisible from here. Ten years from now they'll be straighter and whiter, she thinks, and probably Perry won't use them to bite her fingernails any more, and she'll have dyed her hair away from pale brown. She'll have degrees and suits and shoes with heels, and she'll be happier as well, but now she's turning faster and faster and her sneakers thud into the chessboard as she spins close to the end of the board. Norma looks away, back to her book, not wanting to watch for the inevitable slip.

## **8 ACROSS: What does he think he looks like?**

Arnold stamps his heel, and a lever flips up to hit the drum with a heavy off-centre thod. He reaches behind him to adjust and tries again: thod, thod, thod, thud, and that's better.

On the other side of the road a woman opens her cafe doors, nudging them with a hip as she hoists a sign onto the footpath. She smiles at him for a moment. Once she brought him a sandwich and a slice of cake at lunchtime, to say thank-you for the "beautiful music", but that was a good couple of months ago. He hasn't had much encouragement lately, from her or anyone else, but he has to keep going.

He's tired, and too hot in the suit already, but he tells himself that it's a good sign: as long as it stays warm it's bound to be a lucrative day. Nobody wants to carry around heavy bags or backpacks in this weather, so they just grab their purses, keeping them close to hand, and that's what he needs. It's not enough to be worth money. He has to be worth time as well, the five or twenty seconds it takes to dig out a coin. Hindley Street is handy for that, lots of women in jeans, lots of men, not so many unwieldy shopping bags.

He flips the bassoon into place and out again, checking the tuning; then the clarinet. The arm squeaks as it swings, and he makes a mental note to oil it tonight. The blonde violinists walk past him, cases in hand, and they're not the donating sort, but people with instrument cases rarely are; and they smile at him every time, which used to be almost as good as a coin. He likes it when legitimate musicians enjoy him.

For Arnold, legitimate musicians are the ones who get paid by silent electronic

transfer, lighter than air; maybe a cheque, at a stretch. Undergraduate string quartets are a step down, with their tiny bundles of rustling notes, handed over by the best man. He can tell that busking is the lowest form of music because the pay is so concrete and so loud: coins clinking underneath the high notes, bouncing out of the open case, rolling down the footpath. There's so much left to his takings that he sometimes can't bear to carry them home. Instead he bundles them up and hides them around the city, ATMs for the bankless: there's close to a hundred dollars buried in loose dirt in the parklands, another fifty in the cracks of a yellow carpark wall. Sometimes the money goes missing, of course. He slipped an hour's takings into the plastic of a bus timetable once, and that went, and his stash on top of a university roof disappeared behind a locked iron grid across the top of the ladder. He thinks of the losses as the bank fees he reads about but never experiences first-hand.

It suits the job, anyway: unpredictable, unreliable. Successful busking isn't just about being good. If people have already dropped fifty cents on the cutely incompetent Suzuki-method five-year-olds, then he'll be out of luck. The competition can work in his favour as well, a few decent players down the road kicking people into the feeling that they should give someone something, but there are never any guarantees.

He starts a waltz as a child walks past, holding onto her mother, and they stop. Parents are usually a decent bet. They're walking slower than other people, so they've got more time to reach for a coin, and they want to encourage their kids to be generous and kind-hearted. The mother pushes some money into her daughter's hand and nudges her forward, but the child shakes its head and buries its face in its mother's trousers, so she has to take the coin back and drop it in herself. Arnold

nods in acknowledgement.

The short cellist walks past and smiles as well. They had a conversation once about how Arnold learnt to play, and how many days a week he comes out, and whether he does parties. Later that afternoon he'd taken a break and walked down the alley, and stood under a window, listening to everything inside. Someone had leant out the window to smoke.

"I mean, what does he think he looks like?" the someone had said. "And why doesn't he just go and play somewhere else? Does he think we're going to run out and ask him to take over when someone's sick? Oh no, the conductor's fallen ill, only you can save us now!"

"I dunno," someone else had replied, and he'd tried fitting all the faces he'd seen to the voices, tried to remember what the short cellist sounded like. "Phone the council if it bothers you that much. It can't be legal to busk there, not as much as he does anyway. Plus if the police come he'll run away in a one-man-band suit. You've got to admit it'd be picturesque."

The smoker had seen him when she'd flicked her butt onto the ground, and she'd gasped, pulling her head inside and giggling. He finishes the waltz and rotates the flute-hat to the recorder side, and he wonders how many of the others she's told. He'd been planning to find a new space before long, but he can't, now. He's stuck here, or they'll think he ran away out of shame. He plays as loudly as he can: maybe they will call the police, and give him an excuse to leave. He won't try to run if they do, he'll just keep playing until he's dragged away.

## **1 ACROSS: Where is she?**

She spends the night walking the city, up and down sidestreets, running into the blank edge of parkland every mile and turning around. There's an alleyway or two that she never knew existed, and she stops at every 24-hour supermarket for a bottle of water or a bag of chips, any pretext for entry to a world that's not so empty. Sometimes she talks to the assistants, but they've always got half-read magazines behind the counter, or shelves to restock.

With all that water the toilets in Victoria Square become the centre of her world for a night, and she spends hours circling them, coming in from different angles, building up momentum to send herself out of the city. While she waits, she walks through a thousand ghosts: classmates from school, her sister's exes, dozens of friends and family members who want to know how she is and what she's doing and maybe tell her that they like her shirt. They're all asleep, now, or awake in a distant timezone.

Eventually she breaks free of the centre and curves out into parklands. They lead her all around the city, and then again. Occasionally it's too dark to see where she's walking. Occasionally the sudden smell of roses makes her turn around in amazement. Sometimes she has to detour around a fence and or a locked gate. Even the zoo is quiet, and by the river a row of dark regular mounds confuses her; she squats down to look and one of them unfolds himself laboriously, lifting his pelican beak from where it's nested between wings and lumbering away, down to the water.

She's not sure how many times she circles, but when she sees the first hint of a lightening sky she can't walk any further. Where is she? Trees, fences, the not-too-

distant city a loud shout away: behind the railway station, maybe. Not far from work, either, and there's so much to do tomorrow, today, so much more than she has time for. From here she can ignore it all, but it's waiting, and it won't stay dormant for ever. The air's warm even now, and it's going to get warmer. There must be messages from Andy, butting against the plastic of her mobile phone, waiting for her to switch it on.

The day's first trains roll out while it's still dark, to Grange and Outer Harbour; there'll be light over the ocean by the time they arrive. It's a shame, she thinks, that they stop short of the seashore, but where they stop the footpaths stretch onward, and where the footpaths end there are still jetties, spreading out further still, over the water and into the air.

She squats behind the fence and rocks forward on her toes as the trains move past, huge in the quiet morning, and her fingertips brush against dry ground. Twenty-five minutes until the Belair train loops into the hills, pulling away to look down on the streetlights as they start to go out.

She can't remember how the city works when it's awake. Walking the empty streets has overlaid them on her daytime memories. She thinks of busy shops, but she can only imagine them with portcullis doors locked down; every flower in the parklands in her head is a hundred shades of grey.

She stands up and dusts hands on jeans, then bends down again to pick up a thin leaf. There's a hint of green in its grey; colours are returning to the city. It'll be flooded soon, every piece of rubbish and painted wall, every flower, every crate, and it's too unruly to think about. She can keep the monochrome world in her head but the mess of bright reds and blues and yellows is too much. When she turns her

phone on it glows colours too, so she throws it away, across the tracks in front of her. It bounces and the clatters die down, and she can't tell where it fell, but then it beeps from its indeterminate distance: missed calls, messages, everything she didn't want to know about.

If she stands in just the right place she can pretend she's in the middle of nowhere, just a few trees in front of her and tracks stretching away in either direction; but when she shifts her head the buildings flare up again, their windows bright, tall behind occasional cars whose headlights flick in and out of sight on the other side of fences.

She doesn't want to see the sun come up, and there's nowhere to go that can block out all the light, so she steps across the railway; towards her phone, maybe, though she doesn't know where it landed.

# ANSWER GRID

T E R M I N A L    B A R B E C U E  
R            C            J            C            A            U  
O R C H E S T R A    C H A I R    R  
L    A            E    I            E            D    Y  
L    N            S A L O N            B E D  
E    O            T    E            T            O    I  
Y O N D E R    A R K    M E S A    C  
S            N    D            E    R    R    E  
      A G E N C Y            S T R A D A  
W    R    U    E            P    O            A  
I    O V I D    A T M    D R E A M S  
N    O            A    E            D            L    T  
D A M            P E T R I            I    E  
F    S            P    R            S            B    R  
A    M O T E L    I N C O G N I T O  
L    A            E    S            O            I  
L A N D M A S S    W O O D L A N D



## SOLUTION

Early-morning contrails are bright against the sky. Mark leans forward in his seat on the wrong side of the plane, and tries to look out. The houses are smaller and smaller, every glimpse he gets; office buildings in the city centre jut from distant tree-tops.

By the time he comes back, the constant slow-moving cranes will have dismantled the offices and rebuilt them to a new skyline. Buses will run at different times or stop at different corners. He can feel it all shifting underneath him, the changes built in from the start, like cogs or codebooks: a million people throwing out furniture, cutting off their hair, looking at other people's children and planning their own, painting over old graffiti and then adding another coat over the painted-out patches. The slow churn of novelty is going to take the city away from him. There are foods he'll never eat again; statues will go up in parks and then get taken down and he'll never know they were there. Jet-lag takes a day to get over for each new time-zone, but city-lag takes at least that long for every day you're gone.

He shuts his eyes and pretends he's sitting on the 145, but the arm-rests spoil the illusion. He wonders how long until he can't remember for sure whether Adelaide buses have arm rests, before he has to look online to find pictures.

They're flying backward through timezones, chasing darkness and sleep, but beneath them the day is getting brighter and brighter. A woman squats by her potplants on a rooftop; later she'll drink tea and watch the walls of the buildings below her. A man will strip sheets from a hotel bed, and look out the window. A schoolgirl with green hair will stand at a pedestrian crossing, surrounded by men

in suits. Night-time creatures that haven't made it to safety will lose their way in the sun. Yesterday's rain will run through the drains on its way from the hills to the sea.

It'll be a week before Mark switches his phone from Adelaide time; his box of cherry ripens and tim-tams will last a month before he eats them all in one nauseous homesick afternoon. A year after that he'll get another box in the post, but nothing will taste as good as it used to, and he'll put it all in a kitchen cupboard and forget. In Adelaide, the streets will still be there, drifting further and further from the overlay of his memories. A three-year-old will figure out the child-proof lock on a playground and burst out, running from tiny bridges and swings through waist-high grass that catches on his bright red trousers. New plants will twist around the straight lines of stobie poles and flowerbeds. Old trees will die. Sunlight through panes of glass will cast gridded light across piles of bagpipes and boxes.

He'll lose the language, too, eventually, and remember it in momentary bursts: slides used to be called slippery dips, felt-tipped pens used to be called textas. If he moves back in ten years, or twenty, the familiar angle of the shadows in the late afternoon will feel exactly right, but the buildings that cast the shadows will all be wrong. He'll visit every year, he thinks as the seatbelt sign turns off, he'll go back before it's too late, he'll keep up with the news, but he knows it won't be enough. He'll lose the words, and the context, and what will he have left when he comes back? Memories, and a few constants: the shape of streets, decades-old graffiti in dark tunnels, the ring of parkland, the feeling that this ought to be home.

**EXEGESIS:**

**PLACE, PLAY AND ONLINE FICTION IN PRACTICE AND  
THEORY**

## 1.0: Introduction

This exegesis examines the elements that distinguish online fiction from offline fiction (whether paper-based or electronic) by looking at the differences in how readers encounter and interact with these works. It considers what this indicates about the creative and commercial possibilities of online fiction.

### 1.1: About the Creative Work

It is dependent on the creative work, *Sixteen Across*, which explores the characteristics of online fiction through practice. The format of *Sixteen Across* seemed well-suited to an online environment: in particular, the "check answers" function was only possible through an online presentation, as was the capacity to deliver a final story only to those readers who solved the puzzle.

Additionally, the online presentation made it easier to display the stories in a manner that supported their content. Adelaide is a planned city, built under the command of Colonel Light to the utopian principles espoused by William Penn: full of open squares and gridded streets, surrounded by parklands. Outside the parklands, the roads extend less tidily, but some suburbs, like Colonel Light Gardens, build on the model of the city centre; and even the suburbs that were planned less fiercely are still primarily built to a pattern of uniform squares. For those who grow up in Adelaide, these grids can become internalised as the way a city is supposed to work; the strange unplanned angles of other urban areas are aberrations. Murray Bail's *Holden's Performance*, for example, views the different shapes of Sydney and Canberra through the lens of Adelaide, where Bail was born and the novel opens; it follows the removal of Adelaide's "industrial paraphernalia" of tramlines (1), and the grooves and straight lines the city embeds in the minds of

those who live there. The stories of *Sixteen Across* depend on their context within specific Adelaide spaces, but also on their relationship to each other and the patterns of the city as a whole.

Because the stories all take place on the same day, in a relatively small area, there is considerable overlap in the events they describe; and where two clues overlap, there is an intersection between their respective stories. There is therefore no order in which the stories are intended to be read. Instead, there is a collection of intersecting characters and places and times, which can be read in whatever order the reader chooses: exploring Adelaide from the north-west corner to the south-east (roughly following the chronology of the day), dipping into a familiar street, looking at stories whose answers intersect stories already "solved". Presenting the stories in a sequential, offline format makes it more difficult to see the connections between the stories, to move from one to another in an exploratory way, and to maintain awareness of the work as a crossword puzzle as well as a collection of short stories.

By writing a work of online fiction that incorporated many of the features that I saw as characteristic of the medium (like brevity, episodic publication, and interactivity), I hoped to test whether these characteristics really did work better in an online medium, and to see whether there were any unexpected directions or results that sprang from writing online rather than off. Some of these directions did only become apparent after *Sixteen Across* was well underway—for example, I only made it possible to check whether answers were correct when an email from a reader suggested that it would be useful—and are explored further in the exegesis.

## **1.2: About the Exegesis**

Where *Sixteen Across* examines the possibilities of online fiction through practice, this exegesis does a similar thing in a more methodical way. It looks at the fears that the growth of the internet has provoked, theorising that the early panic caused by a new medium is often a useful indicator of where the strengths of that new medium lie. It also investigates the changes that have been made to a number of offline works in order to make them effective in an online medium, and vice versa, arguing that if there are changes that have been made repeatedly over a number of different works then these changes will reveal the areas in which online fiction is distinctive. The individual characteristics that emerge from this process are then examined in more depth, and the exegesis concludes with a consideration of the commercial and creative possibilities of online fiction for the future.

Because my concern is with the internet as a medium for written work, I only consider fiction that is primarily text-based, except when other forms (flash cartoons, videos distributed online, online games) illuminate the problems of text-based fiction. This doesn't mean ignoring text-based fiction that makes heavy use of non-text elements, but it does mean dealing with these works as text fiction, rather than as movies or games. Furthermore, because I'm examining what publication online means for the style and content of a work, as well as for its presentation, the essay primarily considers English-language fiction (again, except where examples from other languages are particularly relevant).

## **1.3 The Relationship between Exegesis and Creative Work**

I had chosen a structure for *16 Across*, and completed more than half of its component stories, before beginning work on the exegesis, which is therefore a

response both to the assumptions I had made about online fiction before starting the creative work, and the further discoveries I made during its course.

The exegesis examines the wider field of online fiction, its history and possibilities for its future, but it is also an attempt to explore and explain some of the choices I made in *16 Across*: the close ties to specific locations within Adelaide, the playful structure, the use of present tense, the episodic presentation, the tendency to move between genres. These things seemed like obvious decisions to make, natural (though not necessary) for a work of online fiction in the same way that chapter headings are natural (but not necessary) for an offline novel. However, at the time I made these choices, it was not clear to me why they seemed so natural; and so I embarked on the exegesis hoping to use it to explore and explain the unconscious reasoning.

Other aspects of *16 Across* developed over the course of writing, as I expanded my understanding of how fiction works in an online context: the possibilities intrinsic in an interactive medium (in the case of *16 Across*, something as simple as allowing readers to check whether their answers are correct did not occur to me initially), the extent to which the importance of an online work for its writer can be independent of its readers. These realisations, too, I aimed to consider in a more analytical way within the bounds of the exegesis.

## 2.0: Definitions and Context

This essay will treat a work as "online" when it requires an internet connection for the reader to approach it as the writer or distributor intends. This excludes electronic fiction distributed on CDs, DVDs and in other tangible forms; it also largely excludes fiction that is downloaded to run as a standalone programme. It includes email-based fiction, collaborative role-playing chat, fiction within online games, and most particularly fiction accessed through web browsers.

"Fiction" is another potentially contentious term, particularly online, where it can be very easy to present a fictional life as a real one. Many of the most widespread forms of online fiction originally developed as non-fictional forms—weblogs that tell the story of invented lives rather than real ones, collaborative encyclopedias full of articles about imaginary worlds—and there is often no way for online readers to tell how truthful a particular work is.

This situation is not, of course, unique to the online world; James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, Forrest Carter's *The Education of Little Tree* and Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* were published as memoirs and later revealed as inventions (Frey's work had even been initially submitted as fiction, and turned down by its eventual publishers). Online, however, this effect is exaggerated, and for the purposes of this essay, it has been impossible to draw a clear-cut division between online fiction and non-fiction.

This impossibility is itself a demonstration of what I consider online fiction's defining characteristic: a widespread and necessary blurriness between categories that are important in offline fiction. The bookshop or library distinctions of "fiction" and "non-fiction" may require some arbitrary decisions, but the decisions



are still made; there is no equivalent organising principle online. This blurriness, or lack of clearly delineated categories, extends to other areas which tend to become unclear in online writing, like the traditional division between writer and reader. Given a bundle of paper, nobody considers that annotating or altering the bundle make them a co-creator of the work itself, since every other copy remains unchanged; but equivalent online responses or alterations to a work are often visible to other readers, and another distinction, between "person who wrote this" and "person who reads it", is worn away. Other divisions—between work and leisure, legality and illegality, story and social event—are similarly affected. I find this breakdown of divisions the most exciting characteristic of online fiction; and in order to see which areas it occurs in, it's necessary to compare online fiction to offline, both paper and electronic.

## **2.1: Electronic Fiction**

Online fiction is a subsection of the larger field of electronic fiction. Offline electronic fiction has different limits on its contents, since it reaches the screen from a disk or a download rather than constantly requiring an internet connection; and it often runs on programs with different capabilities to the programs generally used to access the internet. It ranges from critical editions of out-of-copyright works on CD-ROM, with searchable text and integrated criticism, to programs designed to create stories randomly or to generate simple plotlines. The forms that have been most widely distributed and which intersect most heavily with online fiction are three: hypertext fiction, interactive fiction, and ebooks.

All three of these terms are unfortunate. The word "hypertext" refers to any text which includes links to elsewhere in the document, or to other documents, and an

inbuilt way of accessing the linked text. However, although most web-based fiction is hypertextual, the term "hypertext fiction" refers to a specific genre of electronic fiction primarily written by academic critics like Michael Joyce and Stuart Moulthrop (it may be the only genre in which its most prominent practitioners are also its most prominent critics). Although interactive, it is distinct from "interactive fiction", which is a genre that encompasses the text adventure computer games popular in the 1980s, and also a variety of later work moving away from the adventure form. Finally, "ebooks" are not simply any electronic book, but rather electronic books downloaded or bought as a whole, to be read (at least potentially) independently of an internet connection. These three terms will be used throughout this essay as labels for the specific genre or method of distribution to which they usually refer, rather than to indicate the wider category of works implied by a literal interpretation.

### **2.1.1: Interactive fiction**

The oldest of these genres, interactive fiction (or IF), dates from the 1970s, and involves the reader in a constructed world (a cave, a spaceship, a nineteenth century office) through which he or she moves. The reader directs a character within the story, usually described in the second person:

You don't exactly remember where the day went, but as you listen to Rob rant on, bits of it start to float back to you: a day on the slopes, the brisk February wind against your face; polishing off a keg back at the lodge; those two girls you and Rob had hit it off with, the ones who'd given you their address in town. (Cadre)

The reader, or player, is then given the chance to direct this viewpoint character through the world by typing in commands at a ">" prompt and waiting for the world's preprogrammed response:

A loose rock lies near your foot.  
>get rock  
Taken. (Short)

The first interactive fiction, called ADVENT (short for the ADVENTURE that was too long for a file name) was written by Will Crowther in 1975, based on a Dungeons and Dragons scenario. It quickly spread among other computer programmers and gamers, and by 1978 a version of the game had been released commercially. From the late 1970s to the mid 1980s, works of IF (more commonly known at the time as adventure games, or text adventures) were published with great commercial success; Infocom, the most famous of the many companies then selling IF, expected sales of around 50,000 for each of its titles (mostly within the US, with 75% going to adults and 90% of those to men) during its peak years of 1983 to 1986. The most popular titles sold up to a quarter of a million copies, despite a cost of US\$40-50 (Montfort 119-168). By the end of the 1980s, however, with the growth of graphical computer games, IF was becoming less commercially viable; by 1988 expected sales of new Infocom titles had fallen by more than half, and most publishers had folded or moved to the creation of non-text games. IF was shifting online. In 1987 the newsgroup alt.games.int-fic was established, focused on the creation of IF. In 1995 the first annual Interactive Fiction competition began; since then it has become the most notable event of the IF year, a popular way for readers to discover new interactive fiction, and for writers to get their work to as wide a readership as possible. Entry to the competition requires that writers make their work available for free—no hardship, given that IF is now effectively unsaleable.

### **2.1.2: Hypertext**

The next genre of electronic fiction to receive widespread attention, hypertext

fiction, originated in the 1980s. Writers used programs like Hypercard to develop forms that involved the reader in motion between many different moments of story, or lexias, along multiple possible paths (moving forward by, for example, selecting a certain word in the narrative, with different words connecting to different lexias). By 1987, J. David Bolter and Michael Joyce had developed Storyspace, designed for "authoring and reading such fiction" and were suggesting that hypertext fiction

in the computer medium is a continuation of the modern 'tradition' of experimental literature in print. However, the computer frees both author and reader from restrictions imposed by the printed medium and therefore allows new experiments in literary structure. (41)

As this suggests, hypertext fiction writers and critics were quick to consider the parallels between hypertext writing and the view of traditional writing held by critics like Barthes and Derrida. The term "lexias" is taken from Barthes' *S/Z*, which divides Balzac's short story "Sarrasine" into "brief, contiguous fragments", "units of reading", and adapts the word "lexias" to describe these fragments (13).

In the 1960s and 70s, Barthes and Foucault were envisaging texts as networks of linked passages, full of references to themselves and other texts, to be pieced together unauthoritatively by the reader. Independently but concurrently, computer scientists like Theodor Nelson (first user of the term "hypertext", in 1963) were developing non-sequential, network- and node-based methods of writing and navigating texts. Nelson saw linear writing as an uncomfortable intermediary: a writer would develop a complex information-filled structure in his or her mind, then have to dismantle it into linear form for a reader to reassemble at the other end:

Hypertext can include sequential text, and is thus the most general form of writing. Unrestricted by sequence, in hypertext, we may create new forms of writing which better reflect the structure of what we are writing about; and readers, choosing a pathway, may follow their interests or current line of thought in a way heretofore considered impossible. (Nelson 03)

In hypertext writing, the process of moving between nodes and constructing a narrative becomes a physical process, practice and theory converging, as Bolter and George Landow have pointed out repeatedly: "What is unnatural in print becomes natural in the electronic medium and will soon no longer need saying at all, because it can be shown"(Bolter Writing Space, 143).

Landow further argues that hypertext fiction instantiates the characteristics of Barthes' ideal "writerly" text, forcing active reader engagement in the construction of the narrative. Modern hypertext fiction exists at the convergence of critical theory and computer science, after decades in which the two moved in parallel, each largely oblivious to the other. Landow also maintains that hypertext fiction is about hypertext fiction and the process of constructing a story, containing both a work of fiction to be discovered and a commentary on the nature of that discovery. Hypertext fiction can thus be seen as a realisation of critical theories, and also a way of testing them, making literal the idea of mutable texts, with no authoritative reading, no "ultimate meaning" (Barthes "Death of the Author", 147).

One of the earliest and most-analysed works of hypertext fiction, Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, A Story*, opens with an invitation, "Do you want to hear about it?", and then moves to a possibility: "I want to say I may have seen my son die this morning". From this opening, the work encompasses the story of a car accident as observed by the central character, Peter. The reader can follow the default connections from lexia to lexia that Joyce provides, and experience a fairly

straightforward narrative (though one which doesn't cover all the lexia that make up the work). Alternatively, he or she can choose to explore in different directions, and take in a multiplicity of other possible narratives: things that could happen or could have happened, shifts of narrative viewpoint, different perspectives on what the car accident could mean, fragments from Peter's past. Many of the paths lead back to the start, the node called "begin", with the question still there: do you want to hear about it? Perhaps the story will be different this time.

*Afternoon, A Story* was released in 1990 by Eastgate Systems, who publish most of the genre's major works, including Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* and Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden*. They are available on CD-ROM, ordered direct from the publisher, with prices between \$25 and \$40, firmly out of the path of the casual reader. Given that the genre is primarily one of experimental fiction, testing the claims of literary theory, availability to casual readers is rarely a priority, and many hypertext fiction writers continue to publish on CD-ROM even now. There was, after all, a busy hypertext fiction scene well before the internet became established as a possible medium for its distribution; and the early internet lacked many of the features available in Storyspace. Even now there is no built-in way to provide a conditional link (its direction depending on what the reader has already seen) in a web browser, and nothing available to writers that would allow them to do it as easily online as they can in Storyspace.

### **2.1.3: Ebooks**

The next widespread form of offline fiction to develop was the ebook, a term generally used to refer to a book (often a book that started off as paper) made available in a downloadable format, to be read either on a computer screen, a PDA,

or an ebook reading device. Many ebooks require specific software that runs independently of an internet connection, and they can be heavily encrypted to prevent piracy. eReader formatted books, for example, usually require a key of the full name and credit card number of the purchaser, in order to be readable.

## **2.2: Reactions to Electronic Fiction**

It's useful to examine online fiction within the context of the wider category of electronic fiction not just because it provides the necessary historical and cultural background to see what online fiction has developed from, but also because the distinction between online and offline electronic fiction is one that is so rarely made. The initial reactions of paper-fiction readers on encountering electronic fiction, in particular, tend to conflate all electronic fiction into one. In the mid-1990s, this took the form of a panicked idea that electronic writing might herald the death of paper books, a fear dealt with in growing numbers of books like Sven Birkerts' *The Gutenberg Elegies*, Richard DeGrandpre's *Digitopia* and Barry Sanders' *A is for Ox: Violence, Electronic Media and the Silencing of the Written Word*. Myron Tuman is typical, fretting that the "ascendancy of hypertext" would result in literacy being reduced to "information management" (Tuman 78).

The entry of new technologies into the production or reproduction of creative work is traditionally greeted with nervousness, and anxieties about a new medium can be one of the clearest early indicators of the strengths and weaknesses of that medium—see, for example, scribes taking legal action against early printing presses, worried (quite justifiably) that their prices for reproducing a text would be undercut.

Looking at nineteenth- and twentieth-century anxieties about the media then

developing, it becomes clear that more recent concerns about electronic writing in general, and the internet in particular, contrast sharply with earlier worries about new forms of mass media and reproduction. Specifically, the development of the mass-market newspaper in the late nineteenth century, and of the spread of mechanization and photography in the early twentieth, provoked fears that were widely focused on homogeneous suburban masses, whereas fears about electronic writing and the internet tend to see it as a cause for disintegration and fragmentation. The fear, as articulated by Birkerts, Sanders and others, is of texts and culture fragmenting; literacy receding under the perceived decline of attention spans and the assault of icons and visually-based navigation of texts and the growing ease of incorporating video and images into texts. With a web-based model of distribution this fear is heightened, as niche interests are catered to increasingly easily, and there are fewer cultural touchstones to hold a diffuse group of readers together. The sites with most visitors, like Youtube, Facebook and Myspace, contain an enormous variety of content, no one part of which is seen by the majority of users. (This can alarm marketers even more than it alarms cultural critics, but the marketers can be soothed by the realisation that niche interest groups are an ideal audience for tightly-targetted advertisements.)

The development of the internet parallels in some ways the twentieth century's growing ability to recreate artworks mechanically, making it possible for people who are neither professionals nor dedicated amateurs to create their own art through, in particular, the medium of photography. It can be useful to look at the internet as another step in the process of easy reproduction; in the same way as the printing press, the home camera, and mechanization, it decreases the production costs of an individual instance of a work of art or fiction. However, as Walter



Benjamin argues in "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", mechanization can increase, rather than decrease, the sense of a valuable original; the "aura" possessed by the work of art that is reproduced a million times is undiminished by those reproductions:

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership (220).

Online, this is no longer the case. There are no chemical analyses that can distinguish one instance of some digital information from another. Anything that can be seen online can be copied perfectly, and the only way to keep an original distinct is to keep it off the internet, in the way that most professional photographers will put only low-resolution versions of their work online.

This difference, that the idea of an original or "real" copy becomes meaningless online, leads to another concern that has sprung up around the internet: the fear of piracy. Many writers have declined to release commercial ebook versions of their work, for fear they would be quickly pirated. This is certainly a valid fear; there is currently no ebook format that cannot be easily converted into a distributable form, and file-sharing networks are full of commercial ebooks with their piracy protection broken. Offline works can be scanned in, and many very popular books are—the sixth Harry Potter book was online in a pirate ebook edition within 24 hours of its paper release—but less popular work may escape pirate ebook editions by sticking to paper (though whether pirate editions affect sales adversely is still a contentious issue).

If fears of the internet present it as a place of short attention spans, fragmenting audiences and piracy, then this is where many of the distinctive characteristics of online writing are to be found: brevity, relative freedom from copyright and intellectual property laws, lower production costs, and a context where writing with niche appeal can proliferate.

### 3.1: Comparing offline and online electronic fiction

The main physical difference between online fiction and other forms of electronic fiction is that of access, and in particular the difference between accessing information that is already present on a computer or ebook reader, and information that needs to be downloaded. For both, there's a limit on how quickly the work can be made available, but this limit is much stricter for online fiction, and a new connection has to be made and new information downloaded at the end of every page or section.

The second difference comes with the capabilities of the programs used to read them. Hypertext fiction and offline multimedia fiction traditionally run from CD-ROMs; IF or ebooks tend to run in interpreters or other programs specifically designed for the purpose. Online fiction, on the other hand, is usually written to be read by a web browser, an email client, an RSS reader or an instant messaging client. The differences between the capabilities of these different programs are immense, and, on the whole, the programs used by online fiction are more restrictive. An email message, for example, requires a certain context that standalone programs don't. It can't exist independently of a sender, return address, time and date.

Examining electronic works which have appeared both online and offline shows these differences clearly. During the early stages of planning *Sixteen Across*, it seemed like it would be sensible to make the work available on CD when submitting it for examination; there would be a paper version as well, of course, but surely a CD would be able to house a more complete version of the work, with little effort? However, as work progressed it became clear that this was not the

case. *16 Across* is dynamically generated, using scripts that run on a server, to allow readers to fill in their answers and move easily from one clue to another. In order to run locally on a computer, it would need to be rewritten entirely; and without such a rewrite, the advantages to presenting *Sixteen Across* on a CD as well as paper would be purely cosmetic.

This should, perhaps, have been unsurprising: it's relatively uncommon for writers to shift their fiction from online to another, offline, electronic form, because the effort required isn't rewarded with commensurate advantages. The change allows people to read the work without a connection to the internet—but online fiction can often be read offline anyway, since the reader can save local copies of html or flash files, or download their email to an offline email client. For fiction whose presentation is dynamically generated, and whose features are dependent upon interaction with the reader, translation to an offline-readable form is often more laborious than the original online form, or simply impossible.

Fiction that doesn't depend heavily on links or interaction from the reader can be turned into one of the many offline formats readable by electronic reading devices, and there is some demand for this. Cory Doctorow's *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, initially available in paper form or online, has been converted into several dozen formats suitable for reading on different devices. Eric Brown's *Intimacies*, a story told through a program that simulates email, web pages and instant messaging, is available as a free download which runs as a standalone program, or alternatively on a five-dollar CD, and although 99% of Brown's readers have chosen the download, there have been a few sales of the CD.

Electronic fiction that moves from online to offline, then, gains portability and can

be read in a wider range of circumstances, but loses a degree of interactivity. When the transition goes in the other direction, the work is also likely to suffer: the web adaptation of Stuart Moulthrop's "Reagan Library", for example, is far less successful than the CD-based original. The work is heavily graphical, and movement from one lexia to another is frequent. As a result, even on a high-speed connection, every fifteen or twenty seconds an online reader is confronted with the brief flash of a screen showing a Quicktime loading symbol, and then a blurry image that sharpens a moment later.

### **3.2: Comparing paper and online fiction**

The differences between online and offline electronic fiction are relatively subtle, revolving around access and the capabilities of the programs used by readers. The differences between online fiction and paper fiction are much more obvious.

Most unmissably, online fiction is read from a screen. Sometimes this screen is on a mobile phone, sometimes attached to a PC, but it's always a screen, and this has direct physical effects on the way the work is perceived. People read from screens more slowly and with lower retention rates than they do from paper. Indeed, studies have found a reading speed difference of up to thirty per cent when comparing on-screen and off-screen reading (Mayes, Sims and Koonce). Although this difference decreases with increasing screen resolution and text clarity, the increasing popularity of internet access via mobile phone or PDA means that the tendency towards higher resolution on desktop and laptop machines may make little difference in the immediate future.

There are some compensating advantages to reading from a screen. It's generally easier to locate information on a screen than on paper, given that most programs

designed to display online text have a search function. It's also significant that many readers have to use screens for their work, so fiction can become part of their working environment in a way that a paper book can't. This is the flip side to the disadvantage of impatient readers: there may be a dozen other web pages and documents and friends and workmates beeping, but online fiction naturally places itself in these contexts, even if it doesn't always win the battle for attention.

Apart from the direct physical effects of reading from a screen, there are also effects of context. It's common for critics of electronic literature to complain that it's incompatible with the "four B's": bed, bus, bath and beach (De Abrew). There's no reason to believe that it will always be difficult to read online fiction in these contexts; after all, books that you can read in the bathtub (instead of at the local monastery) are a relatively recent development. Similarly, the problems (like slower reading speeds) associated with screens are likely to decrease with technological advances, as they have done over the past decades, while wireless internet access continues to become cheaper and more widely available. Indeed, recent e-reader devices like the Kindle are much closer to the traditional book in reader experience, as well as allowing internet access, so that it can be used for some online as well as offline electronic fiction.

That the decreasing failings of current technology needn't limit the future success even of online fiction, let alone of electronic fiction as a whole, doesn't change the fact that these logistical problems affect how readers consume online fiction now, and how writers approach its creation. There are no individual works of online fiction that can rival television, movies or high-selling paper books as mainstream, mass phenomena. The most popular examples of the last five years, like Doctorow's *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* and the most successful

webcomics, top out at a million or so readers, while the average work of online fiction will be lucky to reach a hundred regular readers.

### **3.3: Transitions**

One way of looking at the differences between online and paper fiction is to look at works that have appeared in both forms, and to see how they changed when they shifted from one medium to another. Gutenberg.net is home to a hundred thousand texts that started off as paper, then fell out of copyright and were scanned in; elsewhere there are thousands and thousands more, some of them put out by publishers or writers, others pirated by readers.

The creation of electronic editions based on paper books rarely requires many changes to the content of the work. The physical form will be lost, and this is not insignificant; Mark Demarest argues that "much of [printed books'] significance derives not from the text within them, but from the container itself: the typography, the binding, the material inserted by the publisher before and after the text itself, the dust-wrapper, the marginalia of previous owners", and all this can be lost in the conversion to online text.

The writing that therefore loses the most from a transition online is writing that actively depends on its physical form, its existence as an object, something to be handled rather than a mere carrier of information. Queneau's 1961 *Cent Mille Millions de Poemes* consists of ten base sonnets using the same rhyme sounds; the sonnets are bound together but the individual pages are cut between the individual lines, so that individual lines of the sonnet can be turned over, creating new sonnets, allowing the reader to combine them into the cent mille milliard poems of the title. There have been several online adaptations, but selecting lines

from a web-based interface gives only a limited sense of the billions of poems that can be assembled from the component lines; and the physical thinness of ten pages together is lost entirely, diminishing the reader's sense of vast possibilities emerging from such a small set of choices.

Tom Philips' 1970 *A Humument* is also available online. A "treated Victorian novel", *A Humument* is the result of Philips' experimentation on many copies of the 1892 *A Human Document*. Philips obscures most of the text of the novel with collages and patterns, selecting just a few lines or words from each page to tell a new story (hence "A Human Document" becomes "A Humument", losing half its letters behind Philips' ornamentation). The online version provides gorgeous images of each page of the work, but without a physical object associated with the images, the sense of a narrative discovered inside another, of parallel stories repurposed, is reduced. Although a reader of the work online can have an intellectual understanding of how the work was constructed, the fact that the images are mere images means that it's difficult to grasp the immutability of the underlying text that Philips worked with.

Many other works of paper fiction have been put online with more than cosmetic changes, whether necessitated or enabled by the move away from the work as a physical object. Jim Munroe's *An Opening Act of Unspeakable Evil* is a 2004 paper novel which takes the form of blog entries written by a young woman sharing a house with, possibly, a demon. After the publication of the book, the individual entries were posted online by Munroe as "Roommate From Hell", one entry a day until the novel was complete, augmented with photographs (the prohibitive expense of colour printing prevented these from being included in the original paper version; the physical incarnation acting as a limitation, in this case).



Munroe also added a poll for readers, who were asked to give their opinion on whether the goth roommate really was a demon (he reports that 55% of the 500 voters said yes).

In many respects "Roommate from Hell" was simply a straight transferral of the offline content into an online context. The entries on the completed site are displayed in chronological order, one at a time, like the book but unlike almost all blogs, in which newer entries are posted at the top of the page (to enable readers to see recent updates quickly), and multiple entries are visible on one page. No changes were made to the text of the work. Even so, the experience of reading it was altered. Munroe reports that "people seemed to enjoy reading a section a day, some even missed it when it was over", a legacy of the episodic presentation: readers are far more likely to miss a work that has become part of their daily routine than they are to miss a novel they picked up a few days ago and whose end they have now reached.

Work that has moved in the other direction, online fiction to paper, is also extremely common, whether from writers who bring out a paper copy of their own online work—becoming more practical with the decreasing expense of print-on-demand technology—or from work picked up by a publisher as a result of the attention it received online (like John Scalzi's *Old Man's War*, Cheeseburger Brown's *Simon of Space*, and David Wellington's *Monster Island*).

Douglas Cooper's "Delirium", which came out online in 1994, was one of the earliest works of fiction to move from the internet to paper. Originally published online in regular installments, it invited a degree of participation from readers, all of whom had to decide for themselves on an order to attribute to the events the

installments portrayed. However, it was left incomplete, and has now disappeared from the web; direct comparisons to the 1998 paper edition are therefore impossible (this incompleteness and fleeting existence is at least as typical of online fiction as its episode-based publication). One aspect certainly lost in the transition was the unordered nature of the stories. The stories of *Sixteen Across*, similarly, had to be given a specific order to appear on paper; though unlike the sections of *Delirium*, the stories of *Sixteen Across* were published episodically, providing a readymade arbitrary order for the transition to paper rather than requiring a decision to be made at the time of the shift of medium.

Geoff Ryman's "253", another early work of online fiction, was published in 1996 as "a novel for the Internet about the London Underground in seven cars and a crash" and then in 1998 by Flamingo as *253: The Print Remix*, not the work itself but a variation on it. *253* in either incarnation consists of 253 vignettes: one for each passenger (and the driver) on a train, in the moments leading up to its crash. In its online form, the stories are heavily interlinked: if a character works for Adventure Capital, the words "Adventure Capital" may link to the story of a character heading to its shareholders' meeting. The characters and their preoccupations criss-cross each other, often without the characters noticing it themselves; and when a few alight at the stop before the crash, these connections with the dead work to impress the reader with the scope of the crash, that even the fortunate escapees are heavily intertwined with the lives of those who stayed on for the next stop and never reached it.

The interconnection is reduced in the conversion to paper, interlinking replaced with an index that covers some of the cross-references, at the cost of the online version's integration of these connections into the text. The offline reader is also

much more likely to read the vignettes in one specific order (by the characters' positions in the train, the order the stories are presented in the print version), rather than by following different threads of story off in different directions. Even if readers of the print version were determined to follow the links, they would find themselves with no integrated way to be sure that they had read all the stories, whereas most web browsers show links to the stories that readers have already looked at in a different colour to those they have yet to view.

The other aspect of *253* lost in the transition to paper is "Another One along in a Minute", the "sequel you are invited to help write", which asked for 300-word descriptions of each character in the train behind the crash, stalled for five minutes (300 seconds) in a tunnel. "What will your characters do in that five minutes?", asks Ryman, inviting contributions. "Talk to neighbours? Read their papers? Complete their crosswords? Imagine that there has been a nuclear attack? No money will be made from this sequel. Copyright will rest with you. The editor reserves the right not to publish, or to suggest amendments." This "sequel" is as much a writing exercise or a creative game as it is a collection of short stories, and in this, too, it is typical of online writing.

#### **4.0: Characteristics of Online Fiction**

Compared to offline fiction, then, online fiction is dependent on a different set of technical limitations, and more likely to be integrated into everyday life, generally encountered in web browsers or email clients with multiple uses rather than as a standalone program or book. It's potentially cheaper and easier to produce, though only when compared to offline fiction that exists as a physical object, rather than as a download. It's more likely to be episodic or ludic, requiring a playful attitude from its creators or readers, borrowing forms from games. It's also more likely to be short or deceptive or both, although these differences are more obvious in online fiction that hasn't shifted to offline form than it is from an examination of work that has appeared as both.

These differences are neither good nor bad in themselves, just as the differences between theatre and film are neither intrinsically good nor bad; they are a result of writers working with a different set of tools, and understanding these tools makes it more possible both to create and to analyse works of online fiction without falling back on the the inapplicable standards of a different medium. This section of the exegesis will investigate more closely what these differences consist of, and argue that the theme which unifies them is one of ubiquity and blurriness—sharp divisions between fiction and non-fiction, leisure and work time, authorship and readership, being broken down. The result of this is fiction which does not set itself apart from the general experience of being online, and which spreads into areas which paper-based fiction currently does not—actively enabling socialisation or creation among its readers, for example—while being less successful in areas in which offline fiction often succeeds, like engaging the reader's interest in someone else's life to the exclusion of their own.

## 4.1: Brief

The number of people using the internet drops as much as twenty per cent on weekends (Kovash). Readers of online fiction are therefore often reading at work, without the opportunity to sit down for a hundred thousand words, or even ten thousand. If they do have the opportunity, most readers prefer not to take it, since a preference for paper books over screens is still widespread. As a result, the most widely-read online fiction tends to be *short*. It's something for readers to squeeze in between meetings or during lessons, while they're working or answering emails or filling in spreadsheets or talking to friends.

This is reflected in the relative word-count limits of paper and online magazines—the longest story considered for online magazines tends to be around two thousand words, not far from the minimum for many offline equivalents. Other ezines top out at one thousand, eight hundred, five hundred. Extremely short stories aren't unique to online fiction, of course; from Aesop's fables to collections of jokes, paper books are full of fiction that would qualify for even the shortest of online magazines. Similarly, there's nothing stopping writers from putting their long fiction online, and plenty do; but they are in the minority.

One indication of this comes from the Electronic Literature Organisation (ELO), a non-profit organisation located at the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, which tracks literature that could not appear on paper without undergoing significant changes, with almost three thousand works in its directory as of early 2007. The fiction in the ELO's directory is divided into short-form and long-form, with about three times as many of the former as of the latter; not an

overwhelming imbalance. However, the ELO directory covers all electronic fiction, not just online fiction, and one of the primary elements encouraging online writers to keep it brief—the fact that their readers will usually be reading at work or school—is not the case for writers of offline electronic fiction. Consequently, it is unsurprising that a third of the long-form works tracked by the ELO are offline only, while almost all of the short works were published online.

Additionally, the ELO is interested primarily in "cutting-edge literature" : hypertext fiction, multimedia poems, writing that investigates the capabilities of new technology rather than writing that just happens to depend on that technology ("Introduction"). The works it indexes therefore tend to be exploratory or experimental, and less concerned with potential readership.

In fan fiction, which is not found in the ELO, the brevity encouraged by online fiction is particularly evident. Fanfiction.net, the internet's largest repository of fan fiction, contains around 400 works of fiction based on Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* books. Adams's works are full-length novels intended for adults, so there is nothing intrinsic to them encouraging a bias towards shorter work; they are fairly representative of fan fiction as a whole. Half of fanfiction.net's works based on the novels are below 1000 words; ninety per cent below 5000; and ninety-nine per cent below 20,000.

To some extent the bias toward brevity acts as a limitation on the sort of online fiction that writers can create while still finding readers, but it's also an opportunity: to squeeze stories into gaps where they'd never fit if their readers had to rummage around and pick up a book. This is one of the great strengths of online fiction: it can fit into people's lives where other types of fiction can't.

## 4.2: Episodic

When the total length of a work of online fiction equals or exceeds that of an average novel, that work will usually be presented in a sequence of shorter pieces. Webcomics regularly choose to tell stories that last for more than a minute or two by stretching them over a number of installments, developing a story arc that encourages readers to return. Prose fiction is often published in weblog form, with new installments added as the story progresses. This episodic structure is another characteristic of online fiction, shared with newspaper comics and nineteenth century serials; and like these it allows writers to tell more complex stories than they can fit into a thousand words or a lunch break, without demanding more time from readers than they are willing to give.

Additionally, episodic presentation means that readers know where and when they can get a new installment in a work of fiction that they can expect to enjoy. They don't want to have to hunt for something to read; they want something they're already interested in, whether because they've read a review or had a recommendation from a friend or enjoyed other works by the same writer (often the case with paper fiction), or because the story's a continuation of a work they're already engaged with. Frequent, regular updates provide this, in a way that a complete work can't; when *Sixteen Across* went on hiatus halfway through its run, its traffic started falling at the rate of about ten per cent a month, beginning to recover only when posting resumed. In the same way that a television series with regular episodes can build itself into the rhythm of a viewer's life, regularly updated online fiction can provide punctuation for a reader's week. If it's Monday, there must be a new story at *Strange Horizons*.

There are some advantages in episodic presentation for the writers. Since online fiction is often supported by advertisements, a series of installments requiring multiple visits from the readers means more pages viewed, and more chances to show those advertisements. On a less commercial note, another effect of episodic presentation is that writers develop, to some extent, a captive audience. Once a reader has developed the habit of looking at a particular site, routine and engagement with the narrative means they're likely to continue, even if the writing heads in directions that wouldn't have interested them initially. Matt Webb's *Upsideclown* exploited this effect to induce readers to engage with a wider variety of stories than they might otherwise have chosen:

The experience of reading online is that you go to the site when there's a story to read and if it's not someone you like, then tough. (I'll ignore the experience of skipping through the archives.) And if you're in the mood to read, you'll give that story a chance. ("Re: Upsideclown and Whelk")

One of the earliest works of installment-based fiction, which predated the word "blog" but consisted of several, was *The Spot*, a soap-opera-style plot told through the online diaries of five fictional housemates, each "spotmate" controlled by a different writer. It ran from 1995 to 1997, and at its height was receiving more than 100,000 visitors a day, startlingly high for an online fiction site even today and much more so in the mid-nineties. The costs were proportionately higher than those of most online fiction. Actors were hired to play the characters, and to appear in photographs depicting their recent activities, on some occasions even to interact with fans; and since it was a commercial venture the writers, too, were paid. These costs were funded by advertising on the site, but by 1997 the costs were becoming unsustainable, and Cybercast, the company behind it, declared bankruptcy, shutting down both *The Spot* and several other works it had started running in



parallel.

A visitor to the site in 1997 was greeted with a cheery message:

Welcome to the Spot. We're a bunch of friends sharing a beach house in Santa Monica, California.

Everyday we put up this website and tell the world about our lives through our daily journals.

A visitor today finds only an error message.

Because only incomplete archived versions of *The Spot's* original content are available, it's difficult to examine its success as a work of fiction. There are, however, enough archived entries to give some idea of the writing style:

By the time I got home I was definitely in one of my moods. I was really ready to just cut loose on somebody, tear some eyeballs out. Just my luck, the only one around was Lon, and he had the biggest hang dog look I've ever seen. I was finally ready to vent and there wasn't a victim to be found!

*The Spot* dates from just before the sudden growth of reality TV shows like *Big Brother*, but it shares characteristics with them, as well as with the soap opera format on which it was more closely modelled. The characters speak to an audience, aware of their existence, via the intermediary of a diary. Its fascination is as much social as fictional. It presents itself as a record of the everyday lives of relatively normal people, who become gradually more familiar to the audience; it feels like gossip, like the constructs are standing in for friends of the reader.

*The Spot* was discontinued on Cybercast's bankruptcy, but its format is interesting. Like the letters in an epistolary novel, the blogs of the writers were real within the fictional context of their world, as well as existing within the world of the readers. This is not always the case with blog-based fiction; it's also common for writers to

simply use blogging software, or the blog format, to post successive chapters in an ongoing fictional work that makes no reference to the blog itself.

### 4.3: Deceptive

When a work of blog-based fiction does exist in a fictional world where that blog is real, written deliberately by a character, it isn't, inevitably, always clear that a fictional blog is in fact fictional. Readers may even begin interacting with the characters of a site while under the impression that they're real people, and some writers encourage this; Jim Munroe writes, of his *Roommate From Hell*, "I always hoped that people might come on it unawares and get drawn in" (Munroe, "Comment 526"). Munroe's name could be found on *Roommate From Hell* with little difficulty, but many blogs are published anonymously or under a pseudonym.

Sometimes the writer will go out of their way to sustain the illusion, most famously in the case of Kaycee Nicole. Two blogs, purportedly belonging to a nineteen-year-old woman dying of cancer and her mother, ran in parallel. Both were written by the same woman, Debbie Swenson, with photographs of Kaycee really showing one of Swenson's neighbours (van der Woning). This sort of deliberate deception by the writer is arguably no more a work of blog fiction than someone who pretends to be a music journalist in a bar is a performance artist; however, the distinction is not always clear-cut, and in many cases readers can only suspect that a weblog is fictional. If suspicions are confirmed, this is rarely greeted with outrage; except when a reader has built up a personal relationship with a writer, any work online is generally seen as potentially false, every real name as a potential pseudonym.

Offline, the revelations that Norma Khouri's *Forbidden Love* wasn't based on a true story, and that Helen Demidenko was really Helen Darville, created notorious

furores; the latter resulted in heavy criticism of *The Hand That Signed The Paper*, despite the fact that Darville's claims of Ukrainian descent were external to the work itself. Online readers are less stringent; since many of them maintain their own blogs or journals, they also have a more visceral understanding of the way in which life-writing requires a degree of fictionalisation, but they are also less likely to be upset even by complete fabrications.

This does not necessarily equate to decreased curiosity. The internet makes it easy to try a little amateur detection, prompting readers to analyse potentially "fake" weblogs and stories in a way that would have required wandering around streets or visiting public records offices, twenty years ago. The investigation can become a game, part of a reader's enjoyment of the work itself. Plain Layne, the purported blog of a young American woman's go-go dancer-filled life, provoked an astonishing amount of research when people began to suspect that Layne didn't exist, with hundreds of readers contributing and speculating. When Layne turned out to be a fictional character, it was primarily readers who had exchanged emails with her and felt that they had build up a friendship who saw this as seriously affecting the worth of her blog.

The ability for people to pretend to be someone they aren't is one of the defining characteristics of fiction generally, and also of the online medium, so it's not surprising that online writing is less concerned with the idea of fiction as a distinct genre. The weblog *Diary of a London Call Girl*, by an anonymous writer identifying as "Belle de Jour", provoked dozens of newspaper articles in 2004 speculating on her identity. Online, however, the response was largely one of indifference and amusement:

Aside from Belle's writing, possibly the best thing to come out of this is being able to watch The Times and The Independent competing to systematically unmask every single individual in the Anglophone world until at last one of them says "fair cop guv you got me". How better to illustrate the utter ignorance of the press than to have them, without any pressure from us, confidently announce something as "news" one day only to renounce it the next, along with a story created by the mistake two days before? (Webb "ic\_temp").

This indifference has ramifications for online fiction, suggesting that the "fraudulent memoirs" that cause uproar offline would be accepted without equivalent dismay. Some readers will be happy to read fictionalised versions of a real life, without necessarily treating it as deceptive; others will see writers' lives as a game, or a puzzle to be solved.

The question of what is ethically acceptable in the construction of online fiction is not, then, a simple matter of whether it is all right to lie online; it is rare that anyone suggests this is not the case. Rather it is a question of what pains it is necessary to take to avoid deceiving people who feel like they are developing a personal relationship with a fictional person or sequence of events. When genuine friendships or other personal relationships grow online, then it is no more reasonable to make up and sustain an entire identity than it is in real life; those on the receiving end of these inventions are well within their rights to feel aggrieved. But an openly pseudonymous journal, a fleeting contact, a story told through blog entries: what indications of the fictional nature of the work should a writer extend to his or her readers?

The designers of alternate reality games (a genre of online fiction considered in more detail in the next section) adhere, on the whole, to the rule that non-players should not be caught by the story, as they have not chosen to opt into the game world. Designers of the recent work *Routes* therefore decided against sending

actors dressed as policemen to its players houses, for example, for fear of alarming housemates or other family members: “if a teen player's parents answered the door, it might put the player in a difficult position, because [...] the player had opted in but the parents hadn't” (Phillips). For ethically produced alternate reality games, there needs to be a moment when people opt in to the fiction, and choose to enact belief.

For more straightforward fiction, it is not always possible to provide this opt-in moment, but as long as there is no implicit contract of truth this is rarely a problem. Nobody particularly expects the "19 / f / Melbourne" on a chat site to be a genuine 19-year-old woman from Melbourne; nobody expects avatars in an online world to precisely resemble their owners. Internet users in these spaces are therefore called on to enact belief in a similar way to the players of alternate reality games; "assuming for the sake of the argument", acting as if they think something is true because it enables an interesting interaction. It is only when a work of fiction asserts its own truth – through explicit statements or through allowing friendships to develop, for example – that it becomes questionable.

#### **4.4: Mutable**

The reverse chronological order in which blogs are presented means that someone who starts reading halfway through won't be trailing behind other readers. They'll be at exactly the same point as the other readers, but without the background that the earlier installments have provided. Blogs depend for this on the mutability of a web page, which is perhaps the only characteristic of online fiction that simply has no equivalent in offline text-based fiction. Offline fiction can easily share the

brevity or episodic nature of online fiction, and often does; it can, with a little more trouble, be randomly ordered (B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, published in a box of chapters for the reader to assemble at will). It can even be produced very cheaply or for free, with surreptitious access to someone else's photocopier. Anything else that online fiction can do, offline fiction can do too, if sometimes awkwardly or less efficiently. A single instance of the work can not, however, be changed by its writer over time; at most, errata can be issued, or future editions revised.

Of course, not all online fiction uses its capacity to change over time. Online magazines generally publish one version of a given work, with no mechanism in place for revisions. When a writer publishes their work on a site they host themselves, however, as seen with Paul Ford's *Ftrain* or Brendan Adkins's *Anacrusis* (a series of 101-word stories published at the rate of one a day), they retain the ability to edit the work at will. Work published on LiveJournal, Blogspot or any other popular blog-hosting company is the same, as are most sites devoted specifically to hosting fiction. Sometimes changes are tracked: [fanfiction.net](http://fanfiction.net) records the times of any edits, and readers can see when a work was last revised, making the temporal dimension explicit. On other sites, and certainly when writers host their own sites, there's no need for readers to even be aware that anything has been changed.

Sometimes this ease of revision is irrelevant or incidental; many writers choose to leave their work unchanged (except perhaps for the correction of typographic errors) once uploaded. Others use the revisability to gather feedback from readers, treating the original posted story as a draft, to be replaced or supplemented by later drafts; this is particularly common within many fanfiction communities. With

blog fiction, individual posts may remain unchanged, but the creation of new posts means the reader's first approach to the work is always shifting, a preoccupation of some writers of blog fiction:

Stories usually have a strong element of time built into them, just like a weblog. A weblog, however, is a story where the beginning changes every day: what we see is the last element that was posted. The question that Plan B is trying to answer is: is it possible to create a story that makes sense, keeps the reader engaged, and yet can be "consumed" in bits and pieces, maybe even in any order?  
(Doval)

In some few cases, the revisability of online writing has been used to add a temporal dimension that itself becomes the story: a page is constructed and then revised so that readers who visit it again are presented with a change of state that suggests a narrative. Rob Wittig's "The Fall of the Site of Marsha" began in 1998 with a cheerful webpage about angels, written by a fictional "Marsha". However, this page changed over the following months, ostensibly "vandalised" by further fictional characters attacking Marsha's character and making accusations. Sections of the original website were crossed out and replaced with contradictory text; the cloud-patterned background image darkened. The story that unfolded covered Marsha's attempts to regain control of her site, and her disintegrating mental health, but it was only told over a number of visits. The story didn't just change, the story was in the changes.

This sort of change over time is most common in Alternate Reality Games, or ARGs, whose writers create vast fictional worlds with rules and adventures which readers (usually collectively) have to puzzle out. The stories spill from web pages to email, and often to real life, potentially involving phonecalls, physical objects, or actors appearing at specific locations to play out a scene vital to the plot. Because these stories involve a group effort from many readers to interpret, and because

they unfold over time, often a single web page will be changed in a way significant to the fiction, the creators trusting that someone will notice:

On July 27th, the message on the ilovebees.com page changed to say "PHASE 1 COMPLETE: Network throttling has eroded"[...] On August 10, the message on the ilovebees.com front page changed to say "PHASE 2 COMPLETE: This medium has metastasized". New hidden text appeared inside the graphics on the site, and new text was embedded in the pages. (netninja.com)

Like the fragments of *The Spot* recoverable from archives, these paragraphs are neither stylistically engaging nor immediately interesting; and again, as with *The Spot*, the process of reading, or playing, an ARG involves an ongoing engagement with a story that develops over time.

Because of the huge amount of effort needed to produce a wide-ranging work of ARG, the most successful examples tend to be funded by advertisers and produced as publicity for something else. *I Love Bees* was developed to promote the video game *Halo 2*, *The Art of the Heist* promoted Audi cars, *Lost Experience* promoted the television show *Lost*, and perhaps most famously *The Beast* promoted the movie *A.I.*:

In April 2001, observant people attending the Steven Spielberg movie *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* noticed a curious listing in the movie's credits that seemed strangely out of place amidst the listings for Best Boy, Stunt Man and the other familiar positions required to make a feature film. The listing read "Jeanine Salla, Sentient Machine Therapist". [...] Googling the name "Jeanine Salla" led to a series of intricately detailed and highly realistic websites and eventually led thousands of people to get involved, trying to figure out who killed the fictional character Evan Chan. (Szulborski, vii-ix)

#### **4.5: Ludic**

That one of the major genres of online fiction should be explicitly identified as a game is unsurprising; the intersection between online fiction and games is a wide one. Online fiction can respond to input from users, or encourage interaction



between readers. Furthermore, the ease of collaboration and the relatively fluid division between readers and writers means that it's just as common for the game to be in the writing as in the reading, with Oulippan constrained writing as widespread as Choose-Your-Own-Adventure-style branching narratives.

This is particularly the case with collaborative fiction: the fictional worlds created by players of Lexicon, for example, a game inspired by Milorad Pavic's *Dictionary of the Khazars*:

On the first turn, each player writes an entry for the letter 'A'. You come up with the name of the entry, and you write 100-200 words on the subject. At the end of the article, you sign your name, and make two citations to other entries in the encyclopedia. These citations will be phantoms -- their names exist, but their content will get filled in only on the appropriate turn. (Krishnaswami)

Hundreds of online games of Lexicon have been started by small groups of around half a dozen players; most remain incomplete, but when the purpose is socialising and creative game-playing, an unfinished game can be deemed as successful as a completed one. The Paranoia Lexicon is an example set in the world of a role-playing game, and as with most Lexicon games, the entries hint at a larger world without describing it, and are largely impenetrable without extensive reading of other entries in the growing encyclopedia:

A clone who has proven his or her worth to Friend Computer and the complex as a whole may be permitted to purchase or requisition extra clones, on a case-by-case basis, though the higher-numbered clones are often subject to a sort of 'degradation' based on overuse of the same genetic stock. This can sometimes be countered by appropriate (and expensive) refurbishing procedures. Examples: Ging-I-VTS-5, Billy-BOB-3, Sue-R-RAT-1, Ken-U-RON-6, Rasp-U-TIN-1. (Ken-U-RON-6)

Lexicon is not focused on creating works that will be enjoyed by the casual reader or passer-by, but rather on amusing the participants, and in keeping them interested enough to continue to contribute: the game is the point.

Some works of online fiction come close to the ludic elements of hypertext fiction and interactive fiction, providing a game for the reader: alternate reality games, short stories with puzzles, online versions of interactive fiction. Sometimes the puzzle-solving element is more explicit: *Get-A-Clue!* presents a new short mystery every day, challenging readers to solve it with as few clues as possible, and sites like *Murder Mystery Games* allow readers to create a detective who interacts with written characters and environments to solve a mystery. But even when not explicitly game-related, online fiction has a strong tendency towards the inclusion of ludic elements. Because there's often room for comments and questions, there's more opportunity for obliqueness without necessarily spoiling the story – someone who can't solve the puzzle behind it can just see whether somebody else has. Brendan Adkins' *Anacrusis* stories provide a game for Adkins, with the challenge of their 101-word word-count, but they are often a challenge for the reader as well, oblique and difficult to interpret:

Rountree ducks through scaffolding and leaps a gate, but his pursuer freestyles like it's almost respectable. He kicks from streetlight to brick and clears the gate wallwise. Rountree could swear he had wings.

He shakes the tail, maybe, with a tripleback over a pedway; Rountree cuts a corner and finds himself eating gun barrel. The gun is serious. It's also pink.

"Sorry, player," murmurs Valentino, bare chest slick and hand steady. "Got my good shoes on."

Rountree's eyes flick around. There: curvy, short, fro and glasses. Not even his type.

"Oh no," he says around the gun.

Valentino grins, and fires. ("Rountree")

Presented in isolation this would be bemusing at best – the casual use of words only years old, and still to reach the mainstream; the characters with no history– but in its online context it's possible for clues to be provided. Confused readers who hovered their mouse pointer over the story were illuminated by the pop-up text "My name is Cupid Valentino: the modern-day... Cupid", and commenters who were still confused explained to each other, deciphering the story as a group effort.

At the other end of the story-game spectrum to *Anacrusis*, there are pure games that edge just a little towards storytelling, and which hint at the possibility of future works that combine the two more thoroughly. Chris Thorpe's *And I Saw*, for example, is a game played in a physical neighbourhood that has been filled with numbered stickers. Players are asked to text in the numbers that they see; the game then constructs for each player a what-I-did-on-my-holidays-style online essay, "I went to the park and I saw an oak tree and a fountain and an umbrella and Sarah and a fallen-down wall". It is easy to imagine something halfway between a game like *And I Saw* and a social site that tracks the movements of its users and their interactions with their environment; something which aggregates those interactions into the story of their day (indeed, many web services are approaching this end-point from many different directions). And certainly any service that exists to track non-fictional stories will eventually, if it is popular enough or attracts sufficiently ingenious users, be used to create fiction.

Game structures can also be used deliberately as a powerful force for encouraging participation, collaboration and attention. The reinforcement of scores and achievements and accomplishments can drive a player, writer or reader onwards. These reinforcements can range from the scoring system attached to many

repositories of online fiction (particularly fanfiction and erotica), to the weekly challenges and ratings of the now-defunct Oulipian writing project [constrained.org](http://constrained.org). The most conspicuous example of the last several years is undoubtedly National Novel Writing Month, known to its participants as NaNoWriMo.

Each year, in November, more than 100,000 participants pledge to write a 50,000 word novel over the course of November. The website that administers this challenge suggests daily targets, provides web badges and graphics for users to track how far they have come, displays a Word Count Scoreboard, and more. It's a race, and also a community and a game; those who complete their 50,000 words are explicitly labelled "NaNoWriMo Winners" (success rate tends to hit around 15 per cent).

Even more interesting from a game perspective is the application *Write or Die*, developed by Jeff Printy and particularly popular among NaNoWriMo participants. Users of *Write or Die* set a time limit and a word count for each "session" of writing, and then start typing away - and then keep on typing. If they slow down too far or dawdle for too long, they suffer one of several possible consequences: the screen might turn red, a pop-up box might appear, loud and horrible music might start playing, or, if the application is set to its harshest mode, words that have already been written are deleted one at a time. Only when users reach the word count or the time limit is their work copied to the clipboard. Pauses are rationed, with no more than one allowed by the application during each writing session. Users can even team up and race against each other, progress bars showing both participants edging towards completion.

Game structures and ludic practices, then, can be important online to writers in the process of creating their work, and to readers looking for work they will enjoy. Publishers, too, find the area interesting: Penguin, for example, chose to commission ARG company Six to Start to work on *We Tell Stories*, one of the more interesting works of deliberately experimental online fiction of the past several years. Its primary focus is on six works from established authors, each one designed to take advantage of a specific capabilities of the internet. One story was told within the framework of a Google map, for example; another was typed live to an observing audience who could watch the words as they appeared. The work was extremely popular (it received 50,000 visitors in its first week, and was named Best of Show at the 2009 SXSW Web Awards), and the stories were for the most part interesting and successfully integrated with the specific online technologies they sought to investigate. The work's ARG element, which included a secret seventh story, was far overshadowed by the six primary stories, but Six to Start's game design history showed through there as well, in the deliberately ingenious repurposing of web services to narrative ends, and in one case in the use of an interactive-fiction-style format.

#### **4.6: Speculative**

It's not coincidence that most of these examples are from genre fiction, science fiction and fantasy and mystery. There is a heavy overlap between readers of science fiction and fantasy, and readers interested in games, as demonstrated by the tendency of interactive fiction and role-playing games to revolve around science fictional or fantastic themes; and mysteries are of course particularly well-suited to the creation of puzzles for the reader to solve. Outside of online fiction, most mystery novels come with an implicit challenge for the reader to solve the

puzzle before the detective does. Some 1920s novels would include detailed floorplans that anticipate computer-game maps, giving the reader as much information as possible and making the challenge more explicit; and numerous children's mystery books require the reader to turn to the back for the "solution".

Science fiction and fantasy are, however, much more strongly represented in all online fiction than they are in paper fiction, not just in fiction with ludic elements. The people who are interested in reading fiction online are still disproportionately people who are interested in computers and the internet for their own sake, or who find reading from screens as natural as reading from books; and there's a strong correlation between readers with these interests and readers with an interest in science fiction and fantasy (and, to a somewhat lesser extent, horror and mystery). Look at Wikipedia, with its thousand-word articles on any given Star Trek episode, and five hundred words total on the novelist L.P. Hartley (1895-1972). Look at 2005's topselling ebooks, read largely by the same screen-reading audience that reads online fiction; of the 22 works of fiction that made the list, eleven were science fiction, seven were Dan-Brown-esque thrillers (three of them actually by Dan Brown), two were mysteries (both by Michael Connelly), and two were pornographic novels (International Digital Publishing Forum, "2005 eBook Bestsellers"). Look at webcomics, the most popular form of online fiction: the subjects of the ten most popular webcomics include shape-shifting aliens, web developers, and many, many employees or followers of the video game industry (another genre-dominated medium). Look at Cory Doctorow's *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, downloaded over 700,000 times, and compare it to Eric Brown's *Intimacies*, downloaded only around 8000 times after a year online, despite extensive publicity including articles in *The New York Times* and *The*

*Guardian* (Doctorow, "Giving It Away"; Picot).

This tendency toward speculative fiction reinforces itself. Cheeseburger Brown chose to work on *Simon of Space* rather than on contemporary fiction (the genre he would have preferred) because online readers largely aren't interested in contemporary fiction:

Using science-fiction was a bridge to my Internet audience, an attempt to garner a broad appeal given the medium's prejudices. To be frank, I'd rather stay away from pulp scifi projects in the future. ("Re: Simon of Space")

Brown was aiming for financial success, and achieved it, in some measure, as well as getting *Simon of Space* picked up by a traditional publisher. Elsewhere, *Penny Arcade's* focus on video game news and jokes gets it a claimed two million page views a day (Holkins), a number which until recently made it easily the world's most popular work of online fiction. Outside of gaming and genre-related writing, even online fiction that primarily inhabits different subject areas tends to edge easily into science fiction. *A Softer World*, with an estimated 90,000 pageviews a day, takes the form of a weekly three-panel comic, each one containing photographs superimposed with a brief, standalone story fragment. Over photographs of wide formal hallways:

I've always known I'd be a bank robber. So judge all you want, ladies and gentlemen. Because you never did become an astronaut. (Horne and Comeau, 175)

Over a blurred face in a forest:

My mom's buried out in these woods. She wanted her ashes scattered at sea but it's like she always said: "No." (167)

Over a cat looking out of a window:

Out in the yard, birds were coming back from the dead. They were too slow to fly, lumbering towards their victims chirping "braaaains..." (77)

These elliptical glimpses of sadness and casual apocalypse edge towards "joke" as much as "story", but can be surprisingly weighty, provided with rhythm and depth by the photos; and there is little distinction in tone between car accidents, exhaustion and zombies.

Quite apart from the readership, there may be something about the situation of fiction online that makes it tend towards science fiction. To many readers or writers born before the 1990s, the idea of having their fiction onscreen, downloaded from a vast world-spanning electronic net of computers, is itself science-fictional. For decades, society's vision of the future has involved video phones, ubiquitous computers, connections to society's store of information, near-universal external surveillance, advertisements personally tailored to the viewer, and dozens of other technological or societal changes that have now *happened*, and that are apparent to anyone writing online. Reading fiction online therefore already mixes the tropes of traditional science fiction into everyday life, and why should writers distinguish between those science fictional ideas that have come to pass, and those that haven't?

It is for this reason, the tendency for online fiction to happily mix genre ideas even into primarily non-genre writing, that I felt happy for *16 Across* to combine a primarily realist tone—which was necessary in order to explore the relationship between the crossword structure and the Adelaide city streets—with occasional hairdresser witches, mysterious clanking creatures, and sentient shopping trolleys.



## 4.7: Concrete

The photographs in *A Softer World* help to anchor the fragments of story within a physical world, and create a feeling of space and location. For writing with no need to exist as an object or in a specific location, online fiction is unusually preoccupied with ideas of space, as if trying to make up for its ephemerality and intangibility with a sense of concreteness, whether real or metaphorical.

Many of the writers who are interested in the possibilities of online fiction are also interested in the idea of fiction made tangible. Shelley Jackson has worked in online and electronic fiction, her *Patchwork Girl* one of the most widely studied works of hypertext fiction—and has also created "Skin", a "story published on the skin of 2095 volunteers", one word tattooed onto each volunteer:

The text will be published nowhere else, and the author will not permit it to be summarized, quoted, described, set to music, or adapted for film, theater, television or any other medium. The full text will be known only to participants. (Jackson)

In other cases, writers want their work to manifest both online and in the physical world. Scott Rettberg and Nick Monfort have both written online fiction and written extensively about it. Their work *Implementation* was "a serial novel printed on sheets of stickers that were distributed in monthly installments" (Monfort). The distribution of course took place online, and then the stickers were placed by participants around cities, on walls and ceilings and rails, and in some cases photographed, with Rettberg and Monfort maintaining a central online archive of photographs. These are works of fiction that move towards the status of performance art: distribution and documentation takes place online, but the work itself is experienced only by a participatory minority in one physical place, with its ideas and residue becoming available to a wider audience.

The fascination with local or physical manifestations of online activity is a natural and widespread one, and the street-based grid in *Sixteen Across* is intended to provide a similar sense of the concrete: ties to a specific place, buried in the form of the work as well as the content. Many writers and readers spend an enormous proportion of their day online: work, emails, leisure reading, playing games, making and talking to friends, downloading movies to watch later. At the same time as they exist in an abstracted, electronic space, with online profiles in multiplying dozens of sites (LiveJournal, MySpace, Facebook, Twitter), they live in a specific physical location: they have to eat and sleep, and walk down specific footpaths, and for most people offline interaction with their friends and family is still more satisfying than online communication. As a result, many websites attempt to reconcile the local, concrete world with the untouchable world of an online existence. Advances in mobile computing and telephones makes it easier to access the internet outside, or on the train, or anywhere other than at a desk in front of the computer. Photography sites like Flickr allow users to tag their uploaded photos with their physical location, and see maps superimposed with other photographs taken nearby. Twitter encourages users to post the answer to "what are you doing?" either online or from a telephone, and then sends out the answer to the user's friends.

Online fiction without a physical existence often yearns toward an equivalent, a metaphorical existence in space and real life. Webcomic characters take part in crossovers, shifting from one comic to another, as if walking between panels. *Anacrusis* contains a series of fifty stories, one for each American state. The stories of 253 are arranged on maps, seating plans of the individual carriages and a larger map of the interlinked carriages themselves. It is perhaps appropriate that

*Afternoon, a story*, one of the earliest hypertext novels, and *253*, one of the earliest online novels, both tell the story of a crash. Of the two, *253* is much more strongly and immediately situated within a physical location, and this, too, seems appropriate: a work of hypertext fiction has the physical anchor of a CD-ROM, a confined world whose lexias are thoroughly mapped out. The internet is sprawling, intangible and unmappable, and a work of fiction online may float in an abstracted nowhere, with its setting giving it weight and holding it in place.

#### **4.8: Transient**

Tattoos and stickers erode; and so does online fiction. *The Spot* is gone, the pages saved in archives an incomplete version. Douglas Cooper's *Delirium* is gone as well. *Upsideclown* hasn't been home to a new story since 2003, although the front page still claims updates every Monday and Thursday. Web-based fiction—web-based anything—is staggeringly transient. It gives the illusion of breaking free from the physical world, but it is fixed to it not just by maps and descriptions and the actions of its writers and readers, but by its groundedness in specific wires, servers, satellites.

Longer works hang incomplete, last updated 2008, 2002, 1997, and when they are completed, they rarely stay in place. Of the millions of pieces of long fiction started optimistically, whether online or off, only a small proportion see completion, but when a writer aiming for paper publication gets bored or busy or dead after a couple of chapters, then nobody ever sees those chapters. When an online writer starts another fictional blog, and then gives up after three or four entries, they've already put their work out where people can find it. The result is that looking for online fiction, or indeed online anything, can become an almost archaeological

experience: poking through dead links to find the sites that still exist, looking at weblogs with updates that were promised "next week" some time last century, frozen images of the past. Stuart Moulthrop suggests that the 404 error page is "the most representative aspect of anyone's Web experience" ("Error 404: Doubting the Web").

When writers post their work on their own sites, they often grow bored and give up on maintaining it. When they post it on someone else's, they may not even have that choice. In 2004, Matt Webb wrote a story named "In(formation)", which was "spread over a number of different sites, posted in their comments sections", each comment including a link to the next part of the story (which meant Webb had to post the stories backwards, so that he would know the URL to link to). Eighteen months after the experiment, he posted screenshots of the original comments to his own site, to preserve the story, reporting that "about a year after posting, the story was intact. At the beginning of 2006, the nodes are beginning to disappear".

With "In(formation)", this decay is built in from the start, consciously:

And now my information won't persist, it won't behave like matter. It'll degrade. I will degrade. I am just pattern, and my only hope is to reinforce myself. To create feedback, because if the information which forms me reproduces into your head, then part of me will exist in you. I shall be distributed like the metabolic cycle. Every time you speak, you will speak my flesh. Every time you listen, you will consume my flesh. I will exist among you and through you. I shall be redundant encoding, an infinity of ghosts. But I shall persist, a new one among you.

The original nodes of information erode, leaving memories and links leading nowhere, incomplete archives that are accessible awkwardly or not at all.

Webb wrote his story, with its fragmented sentences anticipating their own disintegration, after a long period in which his own websites were entirely

inaccessible, following a server crash and the slow, expensive process of recovering lost data. The distributed installments loop back to their beginning, but each time a reader tries to follow the path it's more likely that the path will be gone. The internet developed from military communications systems built with the assumption that the network was unreliable, that any given pathway between one node and another might break, and as a result it is highly efficient at dealing with the loss of connections; but the loss of the nodes at the end of these connections remains endemic, and can't be fixed by discovering a better ink (as Gutenberg had to do, when his first printing press trials faded quickly).

So online fiction disappears without maintenance; even the reader has to provide a constant stream of electricity to experience it, and the writer often needs to put in a significant amount of ongoing effort to keep it in place. Many web directories will give the date a link was last checked to verify that it was live, implicitly acknowledging the likelihood that it won't be. Books and CDs stay put, though technology may eventually leave them behind (in 2008, many readers will be hard-pressed to find somewhere to consume fiction published on floppy disk), but a writer with work on his or her own site has to keep paying hosting fees and domain registration for as long as they want their work to remain available: if they stop, then the work disappears (*Sixteen Across* is hosted for free by a friend, but even so it costs about \$20 a year for the domain name, which will need to be renewed regularly). Work uploaded to someone else's site is outside the writer's control, but just as likely to disappear, as the gradual decay of "In(formation)" shows. And just as the science-fictional surrounds of online fiction make science-fictional content feel natural, so does the proliferation of dead pages make stories of apocalypse and disaster seem appropriate.

This is the flip side to mutability: a work might be different each time a reader visits, but it might also be gone entirely. One briefly famous example of online fiction, Stephen King's *The Plant*, has gone from its original address, and is barely mentioned on King's main site. From a critical perspective, this means that anyone researching online fiction will find themselves unable to access reliable versions of some of the seminal works: the real-time interactions of fictional characters within a MUD or MOO (forms of text-based online roleplaying games); any other work constructed and experienced in real-time; and, in particular, fiction distributed by email, which has often been designed to give readers one chance of experiencing it, and then to disappear.

There are many fiction-based websites that offer copies of updates to the site by email, but email fiction is usefully distinguishable from this: it's fiction for which email is intended to be the primary distribution channel. Usually the emails are presented as genuine emails from a character or characters within the narrative, often sent to subscribers at irregular intervals, possibly timed or written to connect with events in the real world.

If online fiction can feel ephemeral, stories nestled among hundreds of dead web pages and unfound servers, then with email fiction this effect is multiplied many times. Jesse Kornbluth's *Dark Nile* ran in 2002, and anybody who didn't sign up then doesn't get another chance. In other cases, for example Rob Wittig's *Blue Company* and its sequel, Scott Rettberg's *Kind of Blue*, an online archive of the emails is maintained, but it's made clear that these are records of a work rather than the work itself; when asked about the possibility of setting up a program to mail the emails out automatically, so that readers who missed it the first time around could experience it in its original form, Rettberg wrote that

this particular work might not gain more from that than it would from appearing as a kind of web-specific whole. Much of the surprise/recognition of its time-based(ness), at least in the original version, came from the fact that its characters were reacting to events in the news and world that occurred the same day as the messages were received. For this work, all that would be gained from the email time re-release would be the pacing of the novel/event. ("Blue My Mind: Comment 262")

As with MUDs and MOOs and other real-time fiction, email fiction becomes a one-off event rather than a persistent work, even if repeated iterations are made available. For Michael Betcherman and David Diamond's *The Daughters of Freya*, an email narrative based around a Californian cult, each reader's experience is explicitly described as a "performance" that lasts for about three weeks, beginning anew for everyone who signs up.

Although the work of some writers, like Rettburg and Wittig, revels in the fleeting nature of email fiction, other writers have reacted by developing ways of emulating the experience of email fiction, and appropriating its trappings, without actually using it: writing "email fiction" that isn't delivered by email. Sometimes these are paper novels: Astro Teller's *Exegesis*, any number of sweetly excited novels with titles like *rob&sara.com*, *Hit Reply* and *Lisa33*. Online, Jerry Pinto's *Inbox Outbox*, now defunct, presented its narrative as a simulation of a hotmail account to which the reader had illegitimately gained access.

There are a number of advantages to this approach. The work is less ephemeral, which is a benefit for writers who don't want to see their writing disappear on execution. There is greater freedom for the writer to control the reader's interactions with the text, and incorporate web pages or other elements into the story. It also affords the reader greater control over when they choose to encounter the story, rather than running the risk of installments arriving when they're

otherwise occupied:

With a couple of the email narratives I've read where I've received individual emails instead of reading the archives, my attention levels have varied so from day to day that I've not really been able to follow it properly, and have ended up reading groups of emails collected over days instead of reading them as they arrive. (Walker)

One work of email fiction that repays further examination, Richard Powers' "They Come In A Steady Stream Now", takes (at least at first) this form of pseudo-email: a flash program that simulates an email in-box, beginning with a single email, "one of seven", "from" Richard Powers. Once you open this email and begin reading, another appears in the inbox; and once you open that one, a third, and so on (sometimes the emails are spam, selling viagra or inviting the reader to join a Russian personals site, but sometimes they're further installments from Powers; two of seven, three of seven). There's only one path through the narrative, reading email after email as they arrive; if you don't open one, the next won't appear.

That the emails are numbered is important: it gives the reader a sense of how long the narrative will run, rather than asking them to commit an unknown amount of time to the story, a problem with a lot of Flash-based fiction, particularly since few works written in Flash make provisions for saving a reader's progress or position. (This theme comes up elsewhere in, for example, the FAQ for *Daughters of Freya*, which tells potential readers how long the story lasts in weeks, how many emails they'll usually receive each day, and how long they can expect it to take them to read these emails, with reassurance that "they're short" (Betcherman and Diamond "FAQ")). Unlike many email narratives, Powers' emails are not addressed to a fictional character, or indeed to anyone in particular; there's no "hello there" greeting or "bye then" sign-off. Instead, they're paragraphs from an essay by



Powers on the experience of receiving email, and spam, and on memory; on encountering emails "from" spammer-generated names that are shared with real people you know, with the sort of present-tense train-of-thought writing that email encourages, full of fragmented sentences and sudden changes of direction.

A note comes in from someone you know you must have known, once. Why wait for time-consuming FDA approval? Powerful memory enhancers are available now. Two mouse clicks, and perfect memory is history. But before you condemn this message safely to the recycle bin, the name comes back to you. That fake sender's name. A boy from your confirmation class, struck by lightning when scrambling out of a lake one summer. Sandy brown hair, if you remember right, and a goofy smile that declared a standing state of total bafflement at the passage of time. Maybe someone who would have remained kind, even into adulthood.

The spam that interrupts the narrative is frustrating, as are the occasional pop-up advertisements for the literary magazine that hosts the story, which have to be closed before another email can be read. However, it's these frustrations that help the reader to feel that they're interacting with genuine email – at least until the end, when another frustration presents itself. Instead of reaching "seven of seven", the illusion of an email inbox is broken, as the site pops up a demand for an email address: "Registration is FREE and provides many benefits". Readers who persevere and give a genuine email address are sent a pdf file including the text of the first six emails from Powers, and a final paragraph; through breaking the illusion of a simulated email inbox, Powers shifts the narrative to a real inbox. However, online readers have traditionally shown great antipathy to the idea that they should have to register, even for free, to read something; many readers will give a false address, or give up entirely, and never reach the conclusion.

What, then, is the point of requiring registration for the final installment? It does shift the discourse from an fake inbox to a real one; but if that were the only aim, why provide the final paragraph in an attached pdf document rather than as the

content of an email? And why send it without a reply address? The pdf, and the need for registration, are, like spam, two more inconveniences, two more things that get in the way not just in Powers' story but during many people's experiences of the internet. The struggle to find meaning within these interruptions echoes the search of Powers' narrator, and moves the narrative from one of individual memory to one experienced by the reader in tandem with the supposed writer of the emails. It's not just a work of online fiction, but a work of fiction about the online experience, in many ways epitomising it with its brief, present-tense, putatively-installment-based narrative, collapsing the distinction between the fictional world and the reader's experience.

One of the results of online fiction's ability to be integrated so closely into people's everyday lives is that it often doesn't have an aura of artistic specialness to set it apart (unlike the aura that Benjamin attributes to original works of art) to set it apart. There is no dust jacket, or frame, or plinth. Like Kaprow's happenings or flash mob pillowfights (where participants use an everyday situation as a platform for startling behaviour), or like graffiti, or advertising, online fiction takes place in the context of everyday experience. This effect is sometimes diminished—by fiction published in online magazines, for example—and sometimes enhanced—blog-based fiction that deliberately allows its readers to believe that it's true—but it's always present. Without a feeling of specialness, readers will not generally be in a frame of mind to approach online fiction as art; they will approach it as they approach anything else, granting it no special privileges, and growing bored or irked as easily as they would by anything else.

## 4.9: Collaborative

"They Come In A Steady Stream Now" is also, like many works of online fiction, collaborative, and hugely dependent on its technical implementation. In the previous section, I wrote that "Powers shifts the narrative to a real inbox", but in fact Powers does no such thing: the whole Flash interface to the story was programmed by Jessica Mullen, with the art for the pop-up "advertisements" by Jessica Gunji and Joseph Squier. Powers wrote the original story in response to a request from the BBC for something that could be read out loud in seven minutes; he had no input into its online presentation, and didn't even see it until several weeks after it was completed.

It's extremely common for online fiction to depend, like "They Come In A Steady Stream Now", on integral work from more than one creator. Electronic fiction as a whole, and hypertext fiction in particular, is often treated as intrinsically collaborative:

Within a hypertext environment all writing becomes collaborative writing, doubly so. The first element of collaboration appears when one compares the roles of writer and reader, since the active reader necessarily collaborates with the author in producing a text by the choices she makes. The second aspect of collaboration appears when one compares the writer with other writers—that is, the author who is writing now with the virtual presence of all writers "on the system" who wrote at another moment but whose writings are still present. (Landow 88)

It seems more useful, however, to consider this form of collaboration as something else instead, maintaining a distinction between fiction in which the reader makes choices that affect the text presented to them—collaboration by Landow's definition, but distinguishable as interactivity—and fiction where the readers (or a number of writers) make choices and contributions that affect the way the text is presented to others. The active reader of most hypertext fiction (particularly offline

hypertext fiction) affects only a single instance of the work, leaving it unchanged for others to experience. Collaboration in the context of online fiction, however, involves the construction of a persistent text that will be different when new readers encounter it.

At one end of the scale, this covers writers who put their work online to get readers' reactions and then revise it, and works like Powers' where one contributor takes the work of another writer and alters it. At the other, it includes fiction created by any readers who choose to participate. All these forms of collaboration have precursors offline, from Beaumont and Fletcher to stories graffitied on the back of toilet doors to multiple-author screenplays; but they manifest differently online.

The emphasis in works that allow anyone to contribute is firmly on narrative rather than language; inevitably, given that the voice of the writer changes with each section. Even in cases where previous contributions can be edited, instead of just augmented, these free-for-alls concentrate on the events of the story rather than the way they're relayed. One site, Glypho, has stories that are more tightly controlled than those of many other sites, with an author proposing an initial idea, and other contributors working to form an outline before writing begins; but this outline is entirely narrative-driven—there is the facility to "suggest plot" or "suggest character" but no "suggest tone" or "suggest voice" or "suggest style".

These collaborative works rarely reach a wide readership, tending to attract single- or double-figure contributors, and few regular readers beyond those contributors. They are also only very rarely finished. The Poetry Wiki languishes untouched, with edits coming only every two or three months; almost every wiki novel attempted has reached a chapter or maybe two and then died; works like Ryman's *Another*

*One Along In A Minute* or Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph's *Flight Paths* depend on a strong structure put in place by writers who are overseeing the project, and even then rarely gather as many contributors as the initiators of the project hope. In works with open membership, it's only when there's a firm structure like the one provided by the Lexicon game that writers find themselves engaged sufficiently to continue to work on a piece of fiction until it reaches completion (and even with Lexicon, the vast majority of games are left unfinished).

It's not surprising that more successful works of collaborative fiction tend to be those where there are restrictions on what form the collaboration can take, and some editorial control. Work from a closed circle of contributors is also far more likely to see completion (or to reach a stage where it's interesting as a work in itself, rather than as a work in progress, in the case of webcomics and blog-based fiction, where there is often no obvious point of completion available).

The advantage of the internet in these cases is simply that it makes it easier for collaborators to interact with each other, and for both to work on their fiction, regardless of physical proximity; but some of this collaboration would not be necessary in another medium. Most writers, even those interested in online fiction, are not competent programmers. Many pre-made formats for online fiction exist which don't require a competent programmer (blogs, email, repositories like [fanfiction.net](http://fanfiction.net)), but more experimental or intricate forms can require as much effort on the design of the work as on the content, as if writers of paper fiction had to build a new printing press whenever they want to write a book formatted differently from the standard.

I am not a competent programmer. I maintained and updated *Sixteen Across*, and

contributed to the design, choosing colours and drawing logos and backgrounds, but the actual javascript meat of the work, the crossword that made it possible to save and check answers or move to different stories, had to be outsourced. Kevan Davis, the web developer who implemented the javascript and helped with the design, spent two days experimenting and showing me example crosswords, and telling me what could and couldn't be done.

Examples of collaboration like this, and Powers' "They Come In A Steady Stream Now" (where the contribution from programmers postdated the text and altered the reader's experience of it, rather than predating it and affecting the way Powers worked), are, again, part of how online fiction tends to blur divisions: in this case, between a clear-cut author of a work and other contributors. From the beta readers of fan fiction (who read a work before its public release, and advise changes, a formalised version of the time-honoured "getting a friend to read your drafts"), to works which any interested reader can add to, writers of online fiction are more likely to be dependent on others for their work, and online readers are less likely to feel a sharp division setting them apart from the writer.

Online writing therefore is more likely to be a social practice as well as a literary one, enabled as much by social software as by applications intended for the creation of fiction. It is likely, too, to involve personal interactions, to be as reminiscent of oral traditions of storytelling as of mainstream print media.

#### **4.10: Cheap and Easy**

The ease of collaboration online rests on the ease of communication, and the ease of transmitting a complete work without having to bother with physical artefacts. This is also behind the incredible cheapness of publishing fictional work online. It

can take under a minute for a writer to set up a blog or a wiki page for a new work of online fiction, and it needn't cost any more than internet access. These very low entrance costs, both in terms of cost and of effort, are why there are so many works of online fiction at all—proliferating like dime novels and penny dreadfuls on cheap pulp paper—and why so many are abandoned after a few installments.

These low entry costs also mean that any work of online fiction is competing for readers' attention in a market that's much more tightly packed than the market for paper fiction. The distinction between writers and readers is eroded; instead a continuum develops between those with a few readers and those with many, or between those who start works and those who finish them. Furthermore, when combined with potential for anonymity, the low entry costs are the reason the internet makes such a congenial home for so much illegal or dubiously legal fiction—pirated ebooks (distributed online, if not read there) and, in particular, fanfiction.

Fanfiction and real person fiction (stories about actors, politicians and other public figures) are arguably the most popular form of online fiction. Fanfiction.net has contributions from over a million writers, and though it won't reveal how many readers each work has had, each story has a number of "reviews" from readers who've commented on it, the numbers ranging from zero to several thousand. Fanfiction.net is itself, though the largest single fanfiction site, home to only a small minority of all fanfiction; other examples can be found on sites devoted to fans of a specific work, on people's own pages, and on blog hosting sites like LiveJournal, where fanfiction is one of the most popular "interests".

Fanfiction and real person fiction can be unambiguously legal: when they involve

real people who are long dead, or fictional characters who are safely out of copyright. More often, however, fanfiction involves living people or fictional worlds which remain under copyright, and it's uncertain whether the courts of most countries would uphold a creators' right to publish these derivative works. Sites hosting fan fiction often tacitly acknowledge this by forbidding works by specific writers, either those who have written to the site asking that anything derivative of their work not be displayed, or who have made public statements against fan fiction (fanfiction.net forbids the uploading of stories based on the work of Anne Rice, Terry Goodkind, and a number of other writers).

Fanfiction enthusiasts often react badly to this, suggesting that fanfiction helps writers by creating awareness of their work, and maintaining interest in it; and indeed in Japan, though fanfiction is technically illegal, it is encouraged by many publishers and often printed in commercial magazines. However, given the dubious legality of fanfiction in itself, the sites that host it are often particularly vigilant, deleting accounts of writers found to have copied passages from other (particularly offline) works. Fanfiction writers also recognise that they have no claim on the characters they write about, often including an explicit disclaimer in the introduction to a story. There is a prevailing assumption that their work is tolerated on the basis of its non-commercial nature, and certainly unlicensed commercial fan fiction is more likely to lead to a court case: see, for example, *Anderson v. Stallone*, in which action was brought against Timothy Anderson for his attempt at an unlicensed commercial Rocky script; and the more recent case of the Harry Potter Lexicon, a Harry Potter fan-site which J.K. Rowling supported until they attempted to publish commercially (*Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. et al v. RDR Books et al*). Millions of online stories (fanfiction.net alone hosts almost



300,000 works based on the world of the Harry Potter series, and several million works in total) would encounter similar legal problems were their creators to try to profit from them; and the internet provides the perfect medium for distribution with no cost (or minimal cost) to the writer, but no charge for the reader. It is partly for this reason that online fiction has taken over from paper zines as the primary distribution channel, though the fact that fanfiction tends to aim at a niche market also contributes. If there are only a hundred people in the world who will want to read your Peter Pan/Anaconda crossover story, then distributing it by paper is unlikely to reach any of them; online distribution and search engines makes it easy for those who share your interest to find your story.

The main results of the cheapness and ease of online publication, then, are to encourage many more people to participate than would bother if they needed to get their works onto paper or CD; and to make it easier for readers to find fiction that they're interested in, no matter how niche that interest, again encouraging a wider distribution of writers rather than a narrower range of a few who are more popular.

#### **4.11: Niche**

There are many thousands of complete novel-length works available online, many of which have been published on paper as well. Cory Doctorow's *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* has already been mentioned as one of the more popular works of online fiction. It was made available online in early 2003 and downloaded over 700,000 times in the next four years (20,000 times over the first two days, 75,000 over the first month, and then gradually slowing down to a few hundred a day).

Doctorow's book was nominated for multiple science-fiction awards, written about in many newspapers, and Doctorow himself co-runs one of the internet's most popular weblogs; the success of his novel is therefore a massive anomaly, at the top end of potential online popularity as it now stands – except perhaps for writers already famous in other media. Stephen King's *The Plant*, released three years earlier than *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* and consequently to a smaller user base, was downloaded 150,000 times in its first day online, despite King charging users a dollar for the privilege. *The Plant* was published a chapter at a time, never completed, and was taken offline within six months, but certainly if King or one of the few other writers with an equivalently huge offline readership were to put a work online for free download, they could expect its readers to eclipse Doctorow's.

Gutenberg.net's stock of out-of-copyright publications is similarly at the top of the popularity curve, primarily as a result of its writers' offline fame. Ibiblio.org, the main source of the Gutenberg downloads, averages around a hundred thousand distinct downloads a month (not all fiction). These downloads are spread across a hundred thousand titles, but of course some of these are much more popular than others. The top books for a day will be downloaded up to three or four thousand times; the hundredth most popular fifty or a hundred times; and down, and down.

For other online forms, the distribution looks similar: a few enormously popular works, and many many others with an increasingly limited readership. There are thousands and thousands of webcomics; two or three get over a million visits a day, then there's a gradual decline in readership to hundreds and dozens and none.

This pattern is not confined to fiction; indeed, it is frequently argued (by web-

culture commentators like Clay Shirky and information dynamics researchers like Bernardo Huberman) that a power-law distribution inevitably governs websites' relative popularity. If you graph the popularity of the hundred top blogs, or webcomics, or anything else within a social system like the internet:

the basic shape is simple -- in any system sorted by rank, the value for the Nth position will be  $1/N$ . For whatever is being ranked—income, links, traffic—the value of second place will be half that of first place, and tenth place will be one-tenth of first place. (There are other, more complex formulae that make the slope more or less extreme, but they all relate to this curve.) (Shirky)

This pattern is common offline as well, but research has shown it becomes more marked when there are more choices available to readers, as minor preferences snowball and niche interests are catered for; so the nature of publishing online encourages the existence of a few enormously popular writers, and (because the most popular are so widely read) well over half of the available works with a readership below the mean. Even as the numbers slowly increase, as readers become more and more comfortable reading online, the curve remains the same.

Shirky is writing about blogging:

At the head will be bloggers who join the mainstream media (a phrase which seems to mean "media we've gotten used to.") The transformation here is simple - as a blogger's audience grows large, more people read her work than she can possibly read, she can't link to everyone who wants her attention, and she can't answer all her incoming mail or follow up to the comments on her site. The result of these pressures is that she becomes a broadcast outlet, distributing material without participating in conversations about it.

But the same distribution holds true for fiction. With publication almost as cheap and easy as reading, for those interested, and readers tending towards a few of the very popular works, most writers online can't expect to have more people reading their work than they themselves read. The pattern for most writers is reminiscent of Tudor manuscripts, copied out and handed around among friends, writers

working for an audience of people they knew with no expectation of financial benefit.

#### 4.12: Immediate

It seems appropriate, given the swiftness of communication that the internet allows, that a disproportionate amount of online fiction appears in the present tense. This usage in print fiction is widely reviled as an affectation or irritant, attributed to film and television's dominance of contemporary fictional modes. It's more common in many languages other than English, and Anthea Bell, translator of children's books including Jean de Brunhoff's *Histoire de Babar*, is:

...most reluctant to use the historic present in English in a middle-of-the-road kind of children's novel, even if it is the main tense of a French or German original. In English, the historic present seems more a tense for a stylist than is necessarily the case in other languages. I like it myself; I like its immediacy. But I feel it needs to be approached with caution in translating children's fiction.

Yet nobody flinches from using it in English poetry, or finds it a frustrating affectation there:

What wondrous life is this I lead!  
Ripe apples drop about my head;  
The luscious clusters of the vine  
Upon my mouth do crush their wine;  
The nectarine and curious peach  
Into my hands themselves do reach;  
Stumbling on melons as I pass,  
Insnared with flowers, I fall on grass. (Marvell)

Even in strictly narrative poetry, it often finds a place — the framing of "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is again present tense:

The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide,  
And I am next of kin ;  
The guests are met, the feast is set :  
May'st hear the merry din.'

He holds him with his skinny hand,  
'There was a ship,' quoth he.  
'Hold off ! unhand me, grey-beard loon!'  
Eftsoons his hand dropt he. (Coleridge)

The tense here slides from present towards past ("quoth" and "dropt") as the Mariner's tale begins, and remains there for the bulk of the poem.

Online fiction often leans towards poetry, or toward jokes (another bastion of the present tense: "a man walks into a bar"). This manifests in its tendency towards brevity, its allusive incompleteness, a focus on strange details or on just enough of the story to evoke the rest without being explicit. The function of the photos in *A Softer World* is reminiscent of Blake's illuminations, providing a context and a mood. Ryan North's popular *Dinosaur Comics* uses the same six panels for each installment, with only the words varying, the panels of conversational dinosaurs providing a structure like the rhyme and metre rules of a sonnet. It's therefore unsurprising that shorter online fiction should share poetry's tendency toward the use of the present tense.

And it is primarily the shorter works that use present tense. This makes sense: the primary argument against using the present tense in paper fiction is that it alienates readers. Geoff Wright, analysing the use of the historic present in lyric poetry, suggests that it "helps to elevate, to make not merely permanent but monumental and mythical that virtual experience we find at the center of the poem" (Wright, 52) ; and who would be keen on a monumental and mythical experience that continues for 70,000 words? Any feeling of timelessness and immediacy is bound to become strained if maintained at length.

When online fiction is presented in installments less than a couple of thousand words long (and often less than a couple of hundred), these objections no longer

apply. When online fiction does take the form of novel or novella-length works intended to be read in a single setting, it's significantly more likely to be written in the past tense, as evident in a breakdown of the 189 works of English language fan fiction based on the movie *Edward Scissorhands* available at fanfiction.net as of June 2006. While fanfiction based on a book often seeks to emulate the original writer's style, there's no such writing style to be emulated with a movie, and *Edward Scissorhands* has no narrator to influence writers of fanfiction. The choice of past or present tense for any given work would instead have been made on the basis of what the writer thought appropriate for the work. Two of the 189 pieces were written in script form; of the others, no story with a word count above five thousand words used present tense; of the works between one and five thousand words, nine per cent used present tense, seven per cent began in the present but changed quickly to past, and the remainder were past tense. Of works under a thousand words, forty-three per cent were in present tense.

Another reason for the prevalence of the present tense in online fiction comes from the close association with gaming and puzzles. Games are intrinsically present tense: you move a pawn, you shoot an alien, you interrogate a suspect, you interact with a game world as well as viewing it, you take a direct action that has an effect. Everything happens now. Yes, the story of a computer game can be told in flashbacks (as in *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*), but even in these cases the action itself feels present tense, as it must: the player is doing something, affecting the game world, interacting with it and seeing the results immediately. In the same way, Choose Your Own Adventure books are always present tense:

"Don't listen to him," says the Englishman. "This ship is beautifully engineered. I tell you, she can't sink." (Montgomery 3)

Online fiction that requires active participation from the reader naturally tends to use the present tense as well: the many choose-your-own-adventure-style works of tree fiction, for example. The acclimatisation to present tense that results from this may also contribute to the widespread use of present tense even when it's not necessary for the genre.

It's worth noting, however, that although online fiction uses the present tense heavily when compared to paper fiction, so does electronic fiction designed for offline consumption. Works of interactive fiction must do so, being games; but so too does hypertext fiction, and none of the explanations above can account for this. Works of hypertext fiction are rarely short—they can easily include more text than most novels, and even when they don't the method used to navigate the text (with its movement from lexia to lexia, readers potentially encountering them many times each) can make it feel much longer than unilinear fiction with the same word count. The reason may be the same as that behind the present-tense tendencies of IF and games: the reader is necessarily making choices in order to participate in the construction of (their experience of) the narrative, and is therefore more closely linked to the action than they would be with most works of paper fiction. However, hypertext fiction traditionally involves choices of directions in which to explore, rather than choices of actions: the readers affects which parts of the story they hear, but they don't affect the story itself. The result resembles Choose Your Own Adventure books less than it resembles B.S. Johnson's (past-tense) *The Unfortunates*.

Is there, then, something that offline electronic fiction and online fiction share that contributes to the existence in both of extensive present-tense narratives? Well, they're both electronic, of course, and perhaps the reason is that simple. They're a

process, dependent on the continuing run of electricity, rather than an object. They're there while you're reading them, and then when you shut the window, they're gone. They're read from a computer screen, and the natural tense of screens is present tense, just as it's the natural tense of pictures (Anthea Bell makes an exception to her rule against translating children's books into present tense for picture-based narratives, and comics both web and paper are all but exclusively present-tense). They're for doing stuff to: writing or editing, playing, drawing. When electronic fiction isn't read from a computer screen it's most often read from a phone or PDA, even more intrinsically present tense: objects for communicating with other people right now, for receiving text messages tapped out thirty seconds ago, and replying.



## **5.0: The Possibilities of Online Fiction**

The question preoccupying many professional writers isn't just what works in online fiction, but how online fiction that does work can be made to pay. This is particularly evident in the widespread concern about ebooks and piracy (and although ebooks are only ambiguously "online fiction", their distribution over the internet makes their payment methods relevant to the possibilities of selling other forms of fiction online).

Many writers of online fiction are willing to pay to put their work somewhere readers can encounter it; finding someone willing to pay to read the work is more difficult. Typically, online readers won't pay for words. In a world where most writers have low costs and a small audience, there is inevitably going to be a lot of work online that's available for free, and given that this is the case, why should anyone pay for it? They'll pay for a physical object, or for privileges; they may pay for something else entirely from a completely different website that happens to have advertised near some words; but not for the words themselves, especially not for fiction. Even writers of non-fiction ebooks are advised to design a cover for their book, to at least give an impression that readers are getting something physical, if they want it to sell.

### **5.1: Commercial possibilities**

Of course, not all writers of fiction have the same appeal, online or offline; sometimes there is a reason for readers to pay for a specific work, rather than just moving on and looking for something else. This is particularly the case when the fiction concerned is by a writer who has a significant following. It might be possible to move on and look for more transvestite zombies elsewhere, but if your

favourite writer has just put out her own transvestite zombie work then nobody else's is going to satisfy.

### **5.1.1: Direct Sales**

It was partly because of his offline following that Stephen King's *The Plant* seemed ideal for online sales, back in 2000, but there were other reasons as well. Over half a million copies of King's novella "Riding the Bullet" had already been sold online (for, admittedly, a broad definition of "sold"—many of them were given away with other purchases by online booksellers like Amazon, or discounted heavily). King was hugely popular, one of the bestselling writers in America. There was a feeling that this might be a breakthrough for online publishing, that Stephen King could make any medium succeed. In some cases, writers who were already working online struggled with resentment—King flouncing in and getting all the publicity, for something they'd been doing for years—while others waited nervously, hoping that King would help online publishing to move closer to the mainstream. King himself viewed it as an experiment:

"We have a generation of computer jockeys that we've raised on Napster and MP3 who have gotten the idea, the mistaken idea, that everything in the store is free," King said. "And I'd like to see if we can't re-educate these people to the idea that the fruits of talent cost you money." (Sutel)

The answer, as it turned out, was that no, they couldn't. *The Plant* folded after six installments.

In many ways *The Plant* really was ideally suited for online success: as well as being written by an enormously popular writer, it was horror edging into science fiction, one of the most popular online genres, and it received a huge amount of publicity. Furthermore, the work was never available for purchase in hard copy, so

even those who wanted to read it on paper (King reported readers who were looking forward to getting hold of it in "book form") had to buy it online and then print it (Harrison). Even the logistical problems were dealt with thoughtfully: it was available for download in the widely-readable pdf format, rather than in one of the encrypted formats common with other ebook releases (and which had caused problems for many readers with King's own "Riding the Bullet"). The initial cost per installment was low, at one dollar, and easily payable by credit card through Amazon.

However, although many of the details had been dealt with sensibly, the fundamental model was flawed. King made each installment of *The Plant* freely downloadable, and asked that readers pay the cost either before or after downloading it; as long as the payment rate remained above seventy-five per cent, he said, he would continue to make new installments available. News stories published shortly after the launch of *The Plant* were enthusiastic – the payment rate on the first installment hovered at around eighty-five per cent. However, by the sixth installment, the number of downloads had fallen to 40,000, and the payment rate was below half. King suspended publication of further installments, with a scheduled recommencement for 2001; seven years later, the original website has disappeared, and King's official site mentions *The Plant* only in a complete list of his works, giving no hint of its online publication.

A number of problems with King's model are clear in retrospect. Although fiction that comes in installments or episodes is well-suited to online publication, it does require that readers remember to check for new installments and remain interested in the story; it works best when integrated into the reader's life.

Installments of *The Plant* came out once a month; by the sixth installment, readers

were continuing with a story they'd begun half a year ago and which they were only revisiting rarely. This was particularly problematic given that King needed his readers not just to remain interested over a long period of time, but also to be willing to go through the process of paying. Most installment-based fiction of any type comes out at least once a week (television shows, for example) and often more frequently; those media where there are lengthy gaps between installments (film franchises, books that are part of a series) tend to make each installment self-contained, and to publicise each one anew, whereas the extensive advertising for *The Plant* (including a full-page advertisement in *Publisher's Weekly*, appearances on morning television, and an email newsletter) was focused on the initial launch.

*The Plant* was also, once the installments began to build up, relatively expensive. A dollar isn't much, but a dollar for a single chapter of a book is quite a lot (well over the market rate for most paperbacks), and the increase of the cost to \$2.50 shortly into the project exacerbated this problem (particularly since King never gave an explicit prediction of how many installments he envisaged, so readers had no idea how much they would end up paying for the whole work, were it even to be completed).

At least as important a flaw as the high price, however, was the idea that it's reasonable to expect a seventy-five per cent payment rate for something that can be downloaded for free. This has become much more obvious since 2000: many, many websites offer their services to both paid and free users, with paid users getting certain benefits, and even with the offer of advantages to be had from paying, free users almost invariably outnumber paid users. A payment rate of between one and two per cent is more typical, even on sites which allow their paid users extra privileges (Carson). If users are so reluctant to pay even when they're

benefitting from it, no wonder many of them chose not to pay King for an experience that was exactly the same for paying and non-paying users.

This doesn't mean that online fiction sites would be well-advised to make their content accessible only to paying subscribers. Some sites have successfully asked for donations from their pre-existing reader base, and certainly done better than they would have had they insisted on receiving payment in the first place. This is particularly effective when a site maintains a personal rapport between the writer and his or her readers, an approach particularly common in the world of webcomics, where comics are often accompanied by brief commentary from their creator; and indeed one of the most famous early examples of successfully donation-funded online fiction was a webcomic, *Something Positive*, whose creator Randy Milholland was annoyed by his readers' complaints at his irregular updates. He offered to take a year off work to concentrate on the comic more intensively if his readers would donate a year's salary, and within a month, this target had been reached.

Milholland's work is extremely popular, running since 2001 as one of the most widely-read dozen or so webcomics on the internet, firmly sat in the towering high end of the power-law curve; less popular sites are commensurately less able to fund themselves through donations. The online science-fiction magazine *Strange Horizons* is also funded on a donation model, running yearly fund-raising drives. Where the (unreliable but indicative) page rankings of Alexa.com put *Something Positive* at around the world's 25,000th most popular site, *Strange Horizons* comes in at around 250,000. Its donation drives raise significantly less than Milholland's, usually aiming for \$3000, "about one-sixth of [their] annual budget" ("*Strange Horizons* Spring 2006 Fund Drive"). Further down the scale of

popularity, LiveJournal user Shadesong asked readers of her personal (and occasionally fictional) blog to donate and encourage her to write more fiction; she received \$200 in a day from her thousand or so readers, which LiveJournal labels "friends", cementing the feeling that these were not readers paying for access to a work, but acquaintances supporting its creation. That the relationship between reader and writer is not the same as it is in offline writing is clear: and when one of the internet's early successful bloggers, Jason Kottke, gave up on his attempt to make a living from working on his blog full-time, he blamed his inability to build up "a sufficient cult of personality" (Wearden).

Relying on people's good nature didn't work for King, but he set unreasonably high standards. Looking at a work of fiction online isn't analagous to buying it; it's more like flicking through the pages a bookshop, and nobody expects 75% of readers who look at a book in a shop to buy it. Writers with less exacting expectations can sometimes get readers to pay for their works, as long as they don't try too hard to force it, and services like Kickstarter – which allows potential writers to seek donations before they embark on a work, offering rewards for larger donations, with donors pledging a certain amount which they only pay if the writer's overall target is met – will continue to make this more possible.

Ebooks are arguably a counterexample to the rule that demanding pay doesn't work; evidence that in some cases, writers can get readers to pay online for their work even if they do try to force them. However, sales of ebooks remain relatively low. Despite sales rising at a reported 15% a year for most of this century, the International Digital Publishing Forum (IDPF) puts ebook sales at around 500,000 units total per quarter (Bogaty). This means that more paper copies of *The Da Vinci Code* have been sold than of all ebooks ever, and that, for any given

year, most of the bestselling ten or twenty paper books will outsell all the ebooks sold during that year put together. The imbalance may not be as great as it seems—the IDPF does not gather statistics even from all major publishers of ebooks, let alone from writers selling their work independently—but it's definitely considerable. A work that's in the top ten on Amazon's ebook sales list will be lucky to make the top 10,000 overall. Given that readers are still more likely to read non-fiction in ebook form than they are to read fiction, it's clear that sales of ebook fiction remain relatively low.

Readers' complaints about ebooks, as revealed in a 2006 survey by the IDPF, are unsurprising; the primary objections are that commercially released ebooks are too expensive (rarely much cheaper than their paper equivalents), that there is an insufficient choice of available titles, and that proprietary formats and associated digital rights management make it difficult to use some ebooks. These complaints indicate that readers are more irked by ebooks as the ebooks move away from the dominant ideas of how fiction should be distributed online: freely, with a tremendous variety of choice for the reader, and with as little as possible getting in the way of the reader's access to the work. Some writers have argued that ebook sales are actually less successful than free downloads of their work, not just in terms of number of downloads, but in terms of financial reward as well. The evidence suggests that allowing free downloads of work by a writer will increase sales of paper copies of that work, as well as other books by the writer.

### **5.1.2: Publicity**

The contention that a free ebook edition increases a work's paper sales is worth examining further. Most examples of free ebook versions of paper-published

books, at the moment, are novels from science fiction or fantasy publishers; Baen Books, for example, has an extensive library of its backlist available for free online, the Baen Free Library, as do many Russian publishers of science fiction. The Free Library was established after Dave Weber's book *On Basilisk Station* was offered for free in order to get readers interested in Baen's ebook Websubscriptions (a bundle of ebooks available cheaply each month); during the time that *On Basilisk Station* was thus offered, it became Baen's best-selling backlist title in paper. Eric Flint writes:

And so I volunteered my first novel, *Mother of Demons*, to prove the case. And the next day *Mother of Demons* went up online, offered to the public for free. Sure enough, within a day, I received at least half a dozen messages (some posted in public forums, others by private email) from people who told me that, based on hearing about the episode and checking out *Mother of Demons*, they either had or intended to buy the book.

It's possible to argue that using ebooks to promote paper books is short-sighted; Cory Doctorow has suggested that

ebooks shouldn't be just about marketing: ebooks are a goal unto themselves. In the final analysis, more people will read more words off more screens and fewer words off fewer pages and when those two lines cross, ebooks are gonna have to be the way that writers earn their keep, not the way that they promote the dead-tree editions. ("Ebooks: Neither E, Nor Books")

This hasn't stopped Doctorow from releasing his more recent novels as free ebook editions: for the moment, ebooks do work as marketing, and whether they can eventually make a sustainable book market on their own merits is uncertain. The idea that writers should be able to sell copies of their books and "earn their keep" from it is, after all, a relatively recent one. There is no reason to believe that a significant number of writers will continue, indefinitely, to be able to make money from a royalties-based consumer-buys model; certainly there is nothing in the history of online fiction to imply it.



For now, however, delivering online fiction via blog or another online form is, like the distribution of free ebooks, potentially very good at getting attention for a paper edition. Blog-based fiction like *Simon of Space* and *Old Man's War* have not only found a publisher through their online incarnation but have also had a ready-made audience to buy the paper version (though Ephemera Bound, publishers of *Simon of Space*, requested that its writer take the online version down when their edited print version was launched).

Furthermore, it isn't just paper versions of a work that readers will buy: some online fiction is commercially sustainable not through readers who'll pay for the fiction itself, but rather through readers who will pay for related merchandise.

### **5.1.3: Merchandise**

The idea of selling readers objects rather than words, or at least as a supplement to words, has a long history in electronic fiction. In the 1980s, Infocom tried to deal with piracy through "feelies", physical objects which came with a work of IF. In some cases these objects would be necessary to solve a game, holding the answer to a puzzle; in other cases they were simply nice to have, thematically connected to the work with which they were sold. There was a "Don't Panic" button for the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy game, for example, and a map of London and a copy of a faux-nineteenth-century newspaper called *The Thames* for a Sherlock Holmes game. Many of the games also included "Invisiclues", booklets with hints for solving the game that could be revealed by running over the pages with a special pen.

Some popular works of online fiction have reached commercial sustainability in a similar way: by selling readers *stuff*. The increasing cheapness of print-on-demand

technologies for t-shirts, books, mouse-mats, buttons and bumper stickers means that almost all successful webcomics have extensive merchandise available.

Webcomic creators are also sometimes able to sell the originals of their art, or prints of standout panels or strips, to their readers. Though this resembles typical corporate marketing in many ways, it tends to be distinct in that the purchases are half acquisition, half token of encouragement; they indicate not just an enjoyment of the work, but an explicit desire to support the creator and, like the donation model, are encouraged by the feeling of a personal relationship with the writer.

That it isn't solely a desire to support the creator means that online fiction with less visual appeal than webcomics is commensurately less likely to do well from themed merchandise; wearing a t-shirt with your favourite character tends to appeal more than wearing a t-shirt with a really compelling paragraph. However, there's still room for entirely text-based fiction to offer print-on-demand (POD) paper-book versions of the fiction, and sometimes other related merchandise. Cheeseburger Brown's *Simon of Space* offered both themed merchandise and a POD version of the work, as well as running advertising on the site and making it easy for readers to donate to support the site; merchandise made very little, followed by advertising revenue and then donations, with book sales doing by far the best ("Re: Simon of Space").

#### **5.1.4: Advertising**

Brown was, at least, able to put advertisements on his site, even if they didn't do as well financially as book sales. Many writers of online fiction don't have that choice: most free and many cheap sites don't allow the writers whose work they host to supplement their stories with advertisements. Fanfiction.net is advertising-funded,

but the money from those advertisements goes to the owners of the site itself, not the writers whose work it makes available. Advertising is therefore unavailable to the writers of the vast majority of online fiction, and even when it is available a site needs a large amount of traffic before advertisements will prove profitable, or indeed even cover hosting costs. Some webcomics augment their standard advertising income by offering product placement or allowing readers to "sponsor" a strip, but, at no more than \$5 to \$10 per instance, there's little chance of this supporting their creators.

Many of the characteristics of online fiction mean that it's ideal for advertising, when it is popular: readers who visit frequently and briefly are more likely to click on an advertisement than readers who come once and spend an hour before leaving. After a few minutes on a regularly visited site, readers often have no particular destination in mind when they leave, and are therefore more likely to click on any advertisements that catch their attention.

Furthermore, one of the major genres of online fiction, alternate reality games, consists more or less exclusively of advertisements; the games are often explicitly intended to promote a product. Their funding depends on their ability to draw attention, and to engage readers' interests for an extended period. The writers are paid for their work; but by distributors rather than readers.

It's not, then, impossible to make money from online fiction. It's just very very difficult, and the proportion of online writers who manage to live off their writing may well be even lower than the proportion of offline writers who manage to do this. Looking for the "solution" to this problem is not just doomed, but a result of misunderstanding the possibilities of the medium; they are many, but financially

viable fiction-writing careers are not foremost among them.

## **5.2: Creative possibilities**

Many of the commercial possibilities that do exist point toward the strengths of online fiction: towards work that is encountered for relatively brief periods, but revisited frequently; towards engagement between the writer and reader, creating the sort of personal relationship that leaves readers more likely to want to support the writers they enjoy; towards work that is freely available at least in part, if not in whole. The internet is an opportunity for writers and readers to integrate fiction into everyday life; to fit it into backgrounds and unoccupied corners.

Online fiction can exist in the gap between day-to-day existence and the creation or experience of fictional worlds and narratives; or it can question whether that gap even exists, once the framing effects of book covers and galleries are no longer present to set a work of art apart from the world at large. On a continuum from oral fiction to bound copies of paper books published by commercial enterprises, it falls closer to the former than the latter, existing primarily in spaces that are home to the everyday processes of normal existence: web browsers, email clients, instant messaging systems. Short stories in magazines have worked within a similar, often advertising-supported and ephemeral, space since the nineteenth century, and it is certainly not an unalloyed good. It can contribute to the fact that it's more difficult to get a reader's undivided attention online, and this means that works that require consistent concentration are less likely to succeed. However, it also means that fiction can become part of a reader's life more easily; it can encourage movement away from text-based fiction as standalone entertainment that takes a special decisive effort to encounter, and towards fiction as just another thing to do, to

write or read as habitually and unremarkably as we fictionalise our lives.

In order for work within this space to be successful, it isn't sufficient for writers to continue creating the same sort of fiction that has been creatively or commercially successful offline; art created for an old medium will not necessarily transfer without significant changes. Writers whose primary interest is in novel-length non-speculative narratives are unlikely to integrate their work into the lives of typical online readers, or to want to. The new forms (like alternate reality games and blog fiction) that online fiction has developed, however, do work to make fiction into part of the everyday life of those who experience it.

The ambiguous nature of online fiction tends toward this end as well: if it's unclear, as a matter of course, whether a work is fiction or not, it's impossible to set it aside cleanly from other aspects of existence. This, too, has a number of disadvantages: many readers are uncomfortable reading a work whose position between fiction and non-fiction is unclear. Nobody who comes to rely on information that turns out to be part of a work of fiction, or who feels as if they're developing a personal relationship with somebody who later turns out to be imaginary, is going to have an excited reaction of "gosh, this sure does blur the line between text-based fiction and my own personal experience, and perhaps also makes me realise that our everyday lives, too, are fictive". However, given how easy it is to create a blog or web page, and how difficult it is for readers to prove fakery, there's always going to be a high proportion of online fiction that isn't clear about its fictional status; so it just isn't practical for readers to be too concerned about each example. This is no different in type to the fabricated news stories or fictionalised memoirs that occur offline, but it is different both in its prevalence and in the extent to which it is not just accepted but assumed to be the case. The

mere fact of appearance in print gives writing a physical and metaphorical weight that online writing lacks. The cost of production acts like a peacock's feathers, flaunting its health with their extravagance: it's not a guarantee of verity or quality, but it is evidence of significant investment by the writer or of support by publishers, and—whether it's justified or not—the lack of an equivalent investment and solidity in online writing can encourage readers to treat it as intrinsically less reliable.

The exceptions that come when people feel personally deceived by online fiction are another indication of the integration of online fiction into everyday life.

Readers may idealise their favourite paper-fiction writers, but they rarely feel like they're making friends with them. Online, the writer-reader relationship shifts: readers interact with the writer in comments, or make donations to a site personally, often in response to an explicit request from the writer. Sometimes they make suggestions and see the narrative change in response; sometimes they contribute to the fiction themselves; often they have their own equivalent work of fiction elsewhere online.

If this is the kind of space into which online fiction can fit most successfully, what should it do in that space? There's no way to answer this question without saying something that will sound hilariously quaint in twenty years, like a prediction about printed fiction made in the seventeenth century. It's clear, however, that fiction created for an online context will continue to diverge from the path of paper fiction. If what you want from creative written endeavour is a selection of good or great pieces of writing distributed to a public who reacts to (and potentially pays for) that writing, then this divergence is a bad thing. It's certainly a bad thing for the existence of "fiction writer" as a viable professional path: online fiction

encourages more people to write, and that means there will, on average, be fewer readers to each writer. From many perspectives, however, this is a good thing. It's arguable whether reading a novel that's had a lasting influence on the course of English literature makes you a better person. Living inside someone else's fantasy world may not be intrinsically superior to creating your own. If there's a choice between ten thousand people reading something created by a writer who's made it to paper publication, and ten thousand people writing something of their own, then the latter could well involve more thought, more creative endeavour, and more of a sense of achievement, even if the ten thousand new stories go largely unread.

It can sound terrifying, the idea of so much fiction being written where we can see it, most of it (like most of anything) not very good. No wonder Sanders, Tuman and Birkerts were worried about literacy becoming mere "information management". Fortunately, ten years on we have search engines, social bookmarking sites, friends, taxonomies, ratings, tags and a dozen other systems to help us find the things we're interested in. We can all inhabit our own little corner of the internet; the maps exist to connect us to the places and people and stories that we want to see.

Now that information online is at least as easy to navigate as any library, concerns have shifted away from "how will people find what they want" and towards "what will they want, and what will they do with it?". Books like Paul Keen's *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet Is Killing Our Culture and Assaulting Our Economy* and essays like Nicholas Carr's "The Amorality of Web 2.0" argue that the move away from "cultural gatekeepers" and professional researchers or writers is an enormously destructive force:

At the 2005 TED Conference, Kevin Kelly told the Silicon Valley crowd that we have a moral obligation to develop technology. "Imagine Mozart before the technology of the piano," he said. "Imagine Van Gogh before the technology of affordable oil paints. Imagine Hitchcock before the technology of film."

But technology doesn't create human genius. It merely provides new tools for self-expression. And if the democratized chaos of user-generated Web 2.0 content ends up replacing mainstream media, then there may not be a way for the Mozarts, Van Goghs, and Hitchcocks of the future to effectively distribute or sell their creative work. (Keen)

But Mozart survived through patronage, not sales. Van Gogh's paintings sometimes sold, but for a pittance. It's absurd to suggest that making it easier for these artists to disseminate their work would have made them worse off. People don't suddenly lose their ability to assess the credentials of a writer, or to express preferences, just because they're reading from a screen and they don't have to pay.

Nor does the fact that most online writing is not very good mean that there are no exciting possibilities for excellent writing, both innovative and traditional! Some stories will exist within a wider context than that made possible by traditional publishing, with alternate endings and rough drafts available to anyone who is interested; Leonard Richardson's "Let Us Now Praise Awesome Dinosaurs", for example, was published in *Strange Horizons* but also released under a Creative Commons licence along with a "deleted scene". Others will result from the collaboration of many participants; yes, most massively collaborative works of fiction will rest incomplete and unread, but a small proportion of them will be structured and maintained in a way that enables genuinely interesting stories to emerge.

Each new tool or web service provides new contexts for the communication of stories. Flickr has become a home for writers who accompany their photographs who accompany their photographs with brief narratives; the rising popularity of



podcasts led to a surge in audio anthologies. Twitter-based "magazines" provide a selection of almost uniformly awful microfiction, but other forms occasionally spring up even under the constraints of a 140-character message limits: hundreds of people using a particular hashtag that makes all tweets on a particular subject viewable en masse, creating a collaborative world suggested glancingly through disparate installments. The comments of group discussion site Metafilter are filled with personal anecdotes, jokes, arguments and interesting factlets, but they are also home to occasional short stories that sit unmarked among other comments, often framed as a personal anecdote with only implausibility to mark it out. The very fact that the stories are unmarked, appropriating discussion space for a new use, can make them more powerful, their impact increased by their existence within a familiar social space.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of communities and social spaces to many of these developments. Full-time writers who are supported by a close-knit group of readers; collaboration en masse; occasional storytellers who drop their fiction into primarily social contexts; stories released to anyone interested to redevelop and tweak and respond to. But there is space, too, for standalone work, for games that turn into stories and stories that turn into games, for bad stories and very very good ones.

Online fiction doesn't mean the death of discrimination or taste; people will always have preferences. It may narrow distinctions of certain kinds, as I have argued: between writers and readers, between fact and fabrication, between work time and recreation, between speculative and non-speculative, between paying sole attention and multitasking. Part of its success lies in its potential for ubiquity. It moves easily from something people read to something they solve or react to or

follow, to something they create; or from something that has to be deliberately sought out to something that's delivered by email or RSS feed; or from something that takes place elsewhere to something that takes place here. Some of the best online fiction is created to fit into a minute or two of spare time, oblique and allusive, just enough of a story to stick. Some of it is designed to become part of its readers' daily routines, consumed between coffee and email. Some of it fails or succeeds entirely on the terms of its readers' and creators' interactions within the context it provides, almost unnavigable when approached as a finished artefact. Almost all of it is free. Almost none of it will be widely read. That doesn't mean it isn't worth creating.

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