

FEATURED FICTION

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You think you know what it'll look like: a shaky aerial shot of tiny figures running from the beach, hopeless, ten feet ahead of the brown-water rush. None of us had ever pictured the wave indoors. None of us had ever visualised it in our homes. A drive from the shore, a good five minutes, that was our investment against risk.

After it came through, too quick to think about, too quick to react to, I pulled myself from the jumble of my home. My arm was pulped, an obscene windsock by my side with my barriers split and all mingled with fibre and wood-fray. I was already across the gap, in fourteen loud minutes already installed in the new world. The others were gone and nowhere to be seen.

For the first two days I tried to find a doctor to deal with the arm, the pressing thing, and when I finally found one, scrounging through the debris near where the hospital had been, she looked at it with the blank doom of a trapped marsupial and shrugged her shoulders. There's nothing, she said. What am I supposed to do?

Those of us who remained, that excised clutch, didn't talk much. This was the second thing we learned, after the new state of things: grief wasn't a personal journey any more. It wasn't an identifier or an indulgence. It was the new baseline of things, the new sympathetic string over which we were all forced to harmonise. The first word we forgot was *had*.

It was difficult to recognise faces. I passed people the same as I passed the bones of beams of houses or the one steel street-sign tube still

semi-upright at the place where it stood and marked the new centre of wherever this was. The second word we forgot was *family*, and its associations - *daughter, son, wife, husband, brother, sister, mother, father*, and so on. There were two people, two *abstracts* that sat in the dirt in the same place day in day out, their arms bound about each other, joints petrified and locked that way. Each kept their head turned away from the other. Maybe their necks were fused too. I never saw them eat. Nobody did. I never saw anyone eat or for that matter had any memory to call up of eating myself. We thought maybe the idea of eating had been washed away same as the walls and eaves and pictures and electrics. We didn't drink, either, because there was no body of water to be found anywhere, although everything seemed damp to the core. I had wondered if maybe it was all water, if we were now beneath the wave, or if its penetration into our world had been so total that it had bashed apart the structure of our atoms too and now perhaps the distinction between water and not-water was useless. I tried to talk about this with the doctor once, but my tongue was so sluggish that I couldn't get it around the words.

There was the junction, now more of a valley in miniature, where we arranged ourselves around the leaning sign-post, carefully spaced so that each had a line of sight to the others, so that none of us could reach out or rush any other. Twenty minutes' walk that way was the old main boulevard, the place where people used to go in numbers to do alien things, mingle and push past each other unconcerned and swap things and eat, *eat*. You used to see familiar faces, and unfamiliar ones, blown in from somewhere else maybe or maybe you just hadn't seen them before, never gotten to know them. The next forgotten word was *stranger* — it was useless from two directions. Now that boulevard, or where we thought it had been, was blasted into a circle and ringed by jagged concrete teeth. On the rare occasions when any of us spoke we spoke about this. It was the only place with any heat to it. The damp mess of the ground there would steam, and the circle was overhung with mist. Whenever someone fell inward, when the impetus of their will could no longer strain against the stasis of their body, they would go there. There were figures, watching, and

a thing that dwelt at the centre of that circle. The bereft would go to it, and it would pull them apart.

Our numbers dwindled. We had long since stopped moving, stopped talking altogether, stopped recognising one another or remembering anything at all. Words left us in a constant stream — *enemy, safe, sternum, owl, rough, human*. We sat and watched each other and the shifting grey of the place and silently shared this descending transcendental shift. The sky no longer marked out time. The sun had abandoned us, the planet lost momentum, the only perfectly still thing in space.

Who knows how long we stayed there.

There was a sound, inconceivable, and one of us started walking. They moved slowly. It was the first time any of us had been forced to remember something. And many of us followed. Our skeleton ground against itself in the effort of rising. Balance was difficult, our arm still gone, still present, cured now by the wind and tough, thick, hanging from our shoulder, filled with some coarse grit which popped and powdered when we palpated it with our good hand. We took an age to leave the valley, maybe, all of us, carefully placing feet on terrain too rough here, too smooth here, each leg reluctant to move again once it had found purchase and settled. We passed the two abstracts at the edge of the common ground, dragged our eyes across the knot of them and kept moving.

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We found rhythm of sorts as we walked, though the going was still slow. Movement, once it had found its way into our default, became another kind of stillness. There was nothing around except the horizon, so we walked towards that. Occasionally one of us would stop, look up, heave a heavy, dusty breath and fold, collapse, sit for a while. By the time the rest had gone a-ways distant, but before they could make it out of sight, the sitter would stand again, drag the impossible weight of each bone upright and recommence the walk. All of us did it from time to time. It spread us out,

now, each of us at the centre of a vast radius that had figures dotted within it, spat across the sand or the soil or whatever it was. In this way, we migrated.

We travelled for fifteen eternities, dust in our eyes, dust in our heads, dragging dusty limbs and dusty minds in one-two determination. We knew we were getting close to something when we spied the spine of an olive tree speared into the soil, a turned wound where it met the ground. Those of us at the vanguard were waiting for the rest, staring at the thing, dumb and swaying. A beast perched up there, half the size of the biggest of us and preening its feathers. We gathered there and heaved dust from our lungs and watched it blink. Its black eyes were flicking to oil-milk grey. It turned its head and stared. Who knows what it saw. There was a hand, spiked onto the jut of the branch next to it. We turned this truth over in our heads and tested the threshold of recognition, stumbled in a dark room with the exits long since bricked up. And then one turned their head in a pendulous sway and kept walking, and the rest followed.

Another epoch by our count to the great construct. There was nothing to think when we spotted it so we didn't; we walked to it. A wall. Tall, taller than anything else left, and dull silver. Or maybe it was polished to a mirror shine — all that we could see as we approached were dun smudges warping across the surface. It was circular, maybe, or seemed to be. It swept to either side of us in a slow retreating arc for a horizon either way, an unfathomable perimeter. Some of us sat. Others stayed standing and looked about slowly. One of the sitters struck up a creaking in their throat.

There was a noise from somewhere above, a sort of lurching yawp which ceased, and waited, and started up again. We looked. A figure there, at the top of the wall, dark cut out against grey but still visible, its face making motions of uncertain import. It moved its mouth, its tongue, yawped again, and waited, and then yawped again for a third time. How could we react? It was impossible to divine anything from the sound, which drifted down to the soil around us. The figure hefted something, put it to its shoulder. Some of us, perhaps, had hidden by-trails still in their minds

and they found them now, back towards recognition: a weapon. These turned to slouch away, or dragged their molasses arms over their heads and half-crouched there in their tatters. The weapon cracked, and its payload punched through the throat and the collarbone of the creaking sitter. A puff of dust, a sullen trickle from inside this body as it jolted, tilted over, fell to mingle with the dirt. By the time the figure cried out again we were shifting to move. The weapon took another of us as we walked away, the crack and thump behind us. We didn't regard it. We followed the wall. We followed it for a long time, impossible to tell if we had circumnavigated it or made it one tenth around the circle or one hundredth. We never saw any door or gatehouse. When this endeavour exhausted itself within us we turned and made our way back towards the horizon. Here we lost another handful, those who finally met the limits of infinity and slumped to stony knees, found their hateful voice right there at the end and let us know it.

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It is now that we wonder, forgetful, not how long we have walked, or to what end — stupid questions, useless — but which direction. Had we walked inland, or turned to our genesis and stepped out onto the moonscape of the seabed? We are on salt flats. Who knows if the salt was left behind by the wave or carried here in it? The air has changed, has gained electricity and some tiny measure of substance. We taste it, cannot bear the moisture on the hot churn of our tongues and lips. The concept of mirage is useless to us also, the very thought of illusion, so when we see the shimmer in the distance we just move towards it, lurch and scrape in our fits of skin. The shimmer breaks ahead of us, dissipates like mist. There is really something there, indistinguishable but *there*, so we tread. We tread. Until the brown stroke here and the pale green scratch there and the dip of the flat that comes to a glitter resolve themselves. A bush, with leaves, the first that any of us have seen, a tiny turn in the elevation of the earth — this alone is enough to stir some forgotten tremble in our chest — and here, unheard of, impossible, spooned like mercury across the salt-crust ground,

a still pool of water. And by the pool, a post. And on the post, a pipe, a faucet, a flat square with something signed across it in a language none of us remember. It takes everything for us to drag ourselves forward those last four steps, to sink to our hips in the cool of the water which boils at the touch of us but settles after a minute.

A minute — this means something to us now, and some of us sink further, squat down, to our eyes in the stuff. We have forever to hold our breath. And we do, those of us still in the shallows, too, as one of us unearths a tremendous kernel of courage, kept gripped tight in some internal fist for this moment, and they lower their face to the water, and remember, and drink.

And we — I, *I* — move through the shallows. I marvel at the feel of the stuff and its chill, drape the fingers of my dead hand through the surface and imagine that I feel it there also. I have moved at a tangent across the hump of the pool and up again to the miracle of mud at the water's edge. I am standing by the faucet, staring at the sign, furrowing myself at it and trying to remember, to remember what memory is. I rest the fingers of my living hand on the ring of the tap and I feel the deep subterranean tremor, the terminal power there, some gargantuan cavern beneath the mantle where water rests, where the wave has retreated, broiling and impatient. The others are moving. I watch one, their face stretched tight over their skull, a blank grimace. But they are crouched in the water, twisting their torso, arms floating by their sides. They open their mouth, lower their body, scoop water with their jaw, thrust their tongue and send the liquid tiding over their lips. They are drunk on the excess of it. Beneath my hand, beneath my good hand where blood still pumps in tiny mouse-like starts, the tap. I could turn it, turn this, one-point-three trillion gigalitres set free and roaring out, blooming the ground, resurrecting the great network of organic turmoil, rusting the metal edifice in the desert, seeping into the cavities of the abstracts in the town and softening them, making their ligaments supple, swelling their muscle and skin. Or thundering across the plains of this place and not stopping, taking all with it, towns, cities, skyscrapers, vast arboreal organisms that have

lived tens of thousands of years, smashing through life, tearing apart the beams of a house, taking a son, a spouse. I watch the others marvel in the simplicity of water. I am gripping the tap, have been gripping it for a long time. The skin on the palm of my hand is hot for the first time.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Kieran Stevenson is a Naarm/Melbourne-based writer, musician and researcher, currently completing a creative writing PhD at Deakin University. His work is focused on genre, politics and the notion of the pre-apocalyptic.