

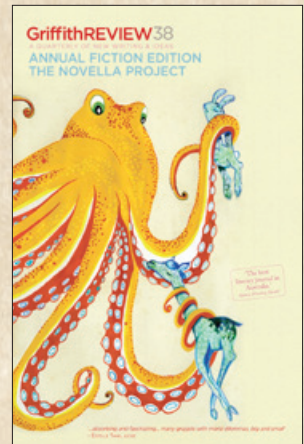
GriffithREVIEW

— S E L E C T I O N S —

The water of life

Mary-Rose MacColl

New fiction from
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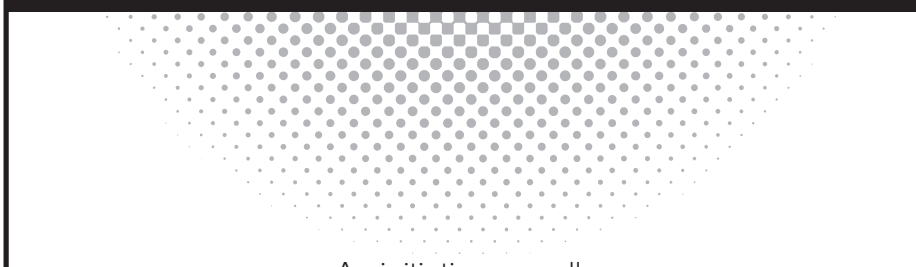


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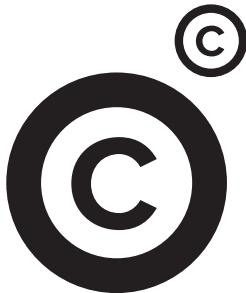


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FICTION

The water of life

Mary-Rose MacColl

HERE IS THE writer in this city of writers, this glittering dry mouth in the north where we can offer you beer, coffee and sauvignon blanc but no water. She reads her lines out loud and ranges over the dry grass of her craft with a friend. They can use ink on alternate days, after 6 pm. They drink coffee that is not straightforward, eat toast.

It is the first of spring and the writer is on her way home from a workshop with her friend. On her bike these mornings, she has thought about how simple it would be to end life, how kindly to find a truck large enough to leave a doubt in the minds of those remaining. Some days she gets in the shower and turns on the water and lets it hit a place on her back. She turns off the tap and cries in the drought, wastes only the water of her tears. This is a city too dry for melodrama.

At the intersection of Grey and Melbourne Streets, there are two police cars across the roadway, their blue lights spinning slowly. A man is lying in the red bus lane, face up, his legs splayed wide. He is not wearing a shirt. There is no mark on him as far as the writer can see in the minutes and minutes it takes for the light to change. She is noticing this grist for the mill, this water in the well. She is thinking, it could be me. The man is wearing brown shorts, like suit pants cut off at the knees. She can see his underpants, blue and white checked boxers, puffing over the waist of his

shorts. He is young, not thirty. There is an ambulance, paramedics with blue gloves who move as slowly as the blue police lights. The young man is dead. His soul is flying. The paramedics know there's no point calling it back.

The man who died is an artist named Jason Halligan and the writer wants to go to a memorial being held later in the week. But people will ask what she's doing there, how she knew the artist, and all she will be able to say is that she had a friend who died, she lost a child. She is alive.

She is on the way home, cycling along Grey Street.

AFTERWARDS. IMAGINE THE DRIVER

I WAS LUCKY to be offered a job with the Council. I never wanted to do anything else, right from school. Mum and Dad thought I should do a trade first but I knew what I wanted. I started in the shop at Toowong, cleaning the buses after service. Eventually, they let me drive.

At the inquest the Coroner will look at me and ask did I know the route. I did but as if I'd tell him I didn't. I'm not that stupid. I know how to keep my job.

I want to go to the funeral but Michele stops me. I want to meet his father, tell him I have a son, I have a son too, I know what sons cost, weigh. My son is seven and today I sit in the front yard and polish his bike while he's at school.

There is a story on the news about what I did. No one mentions the driver.

IN THE DAYS LEADING UP TO HIS DEATH

JASON HAS DAYS he feels good and days he feels bad. Today he's not sure yet. He woke with the sun streaming in the window. His head hurt. Last night. Last night? He was drunk. He rang Kyah again. What hurts worse than her contempt is when she feels sorry for him, asks, 'Is anyone with you? Can anyone take you home?'

'You,' he wants to say. 'You take me home.'

It was crazy to ring her when he'd been drinking since drinking had

been his problem, she'd said. Drinking and aimlessness. Aimlessness, even the word was a snake. Fuck, who needs an aim? The beach, painting at the beach. There's an aim. She'd sighed, as if what he'd said proved some point. 'Swimming,' he said. 'I aim to swim.' Fuck her. He didn't need the stupid sell-out bitch. He just wished he could stop calling her.

The night Kyah told him they were finished it was like a punch from some guy in the street, totally unexpected. He went home and didn't drink. He sat on one of the old chairs in the front room and counted cars, seventeen before he fell asleep. 'I'm moving on, Jason. We both need a break.' This was Ganges Street. Where were those cars going? And why were four of them yellow? The moon pulled him to bed finally but bed smelled like Kyah so he moved to the floor. The next day, Sunday, he washed the sheets, which made Maria next door cluck with satisfaction. 'You a good boy, Jason,' she'd said. 'But the music is too loud for Charlie last night.' What music? he'd thought but hadn't said. And remembered. Nirvana. Love myself better than you, over and over again.

'Please, Kyah,' he'd said the next night when he turned up at her place. Later he will hate himself for pleading with her.

'I can't stand this,' she said. 'Get out.' Her mouth is a tight line in his memory, her hair pulled back from her forehead, a beautiful witch. He tells himself she'll come back, fantasises about not taking her back. But she doesn't come and he knows he'll take her back if she does.

He isn't spying exactly; it's just that sometimes he walks past her place to go to work. When she comes to the door to greet clients she smiles. He can't believe she can do this. Jason and Kyah have been together since college. She'd done printmaking, he was in fine art and then intermedia, but she'd given it away and he'd stayed on. She helped out at a childcare centre while she did a massage course at night. Now she was running a business from home. 'You have to have a place you're heading,' she said to him. 'Where's that place, Jason?'

'Where's that place, Jason?' he'd said to her later, as they made love, and she'd blushed.

Jason makes greeting cards out of pieces of paper and sells them to a local bookstore. It's not so different from massage, he thinks. Each month, he'll

do twenty cards and someone comes into the bookstore and buys the lot. A writer, the bookseller tells him. You wouldn't have heard of her.

Jason has a gig with the museum. They're working with the Council's town planners to prepare the south east for change, for population growth, only you're not allowed to mention the words 'change' and 'population growth' because they make people nervous. It's money for once, real money, a hundred bucks. He stands in front of city hall and screams on the hour for two days before the Lord Mayor sends a message down for him to stop. 'People don't get it,' the Lord Mayor's office says. 'That's the point of art,' Jason says later to the curator who engaged him. 'I know, you know,' she says, 'but the PR people don't.' She likes Jason, likes his energy.

'Will I still get paid?'

'Yeah,' she said. 'Shoot, Jason, we're not that bad.'

Jason gets called a performance artist, a hard case. His twin sister Annie is a lawyer with long blonde hair. She jogs. She has a tattoo she doesn't tell people about. Jason has a snake down one arm and is thinking of a blue hypodermic syringe for the other.

I REMEMBER THE old woman who alighted at the Cultural Centre. I pulled up, watched in the rear view as she approached the door and I said, 'Do you need a hand?' Before I knew it I was out of my seat and helping her down the step. I should have used the ramp, but old people don't like the ramp; it makes them feel disabled. She didn't even want my help on the step but she'd never have got down on her own. I knew I'd fucked up, getting out of my seat on the route. You never do that because the bus could be hijacked. But I flicked a look in the rear view when I returned to my seat. None of the passengers looked like a plain-clothes inspector, which is what Reg told me to look out for, and none of them looked like hijackers. And the old woman really did need help.

I think I remember another woman, a woman in a blue dress. She has bright pink hair to match her bright pink bag and shoes and she is bouncing along Grey Street. I am looking at her and thinking about how much she reminds me of my younger sister who is the black sheep of our family because she's doing arts and my parents think she should be a doctor like my brother. I am looking at the woman with pink hair and when I look back there is no

time to stop. The boy is there, the young artist, the son of a father, and I am over him.

The police are all around me. I hear one say to another, 'I don't think he's on anything. I think he's just thick.' And the other, the girl, who hisses, 'Keep it down,' and looks at me. 'He's in shock, for God's sake.' And I want to say, 'No, he's right, I am thick but I'm a good bus driver.'

JASON WAS BORN south of the river and will die there. His parents were circus performers who met on the trapeze, or almost. His father dropped his mother at a practice during which they hadn't bothered with nets and his mother broke her back. Later she blamed their slippery unchalked hands for the end of her circus career and not the two babies she carried inside her.

After their father left, they stayed in the house on Skinner Street with their mother and Jason never saw his father except at the shops where he kept his distance. Jason's mother kept the trapeze in the backyard. It grew ivy and housed a family of butcherbirds in the nets and when his father came to collect it, his mother came out with a kitchen knife and told his father he was trespassing and did he want her to call the police? Jason's father backed away then, his hands in front of him like in a television show. She didn't need the knife, she told a friend later, drunk on cheap chardonnay on the back verandah. The threat of the cops was enough. 'Never touch it,' Jason's father used to say about alcohol when Jason was small and his parents were still together. They'd been drinking the day of Jason's mother's accident. But Jason's father touched everything else: marijuana, barbiturates, antidepressants, heroin occasionally, some stuff he called 'Dutch acid', which made him look at Jason strangely and hit him without warning.

I LIKE THE routes that start ordinary and end up somewhere unexpected by going a strange way. The Great Circle might be the best for this, you go right round from Chermside to Mount Gravatt, never going back the way you came. But it's long. The 385 is short. It starts in the city, goes over to South Brisbane as if it's tricking, comes back over the Grey Street Bridge, heads out through Paddington with the 374 and then finds the tail of Ashgrove along Coopers Camp Road and finishes in the bush.

I'd been out of the water for a week with my shoulder but I swam that morning. 'Was it material in this case?' the Coroner will ask no one in particular. 'I don't know,' I will say. 'I think it's the muscle. The swimming helped.'

At Grey Street now there are plastic flowers lining the pedestrian barrier and a kangaroo paw sticking up in the median strip where his body finished up.

ANNIE WAS THE first person he called after Kyah told him and he spent three nights on his sister's couch drinking rum. 'Jase,' Annie's boyfriend Chris started. 'Jason,' Chris corrected, 'Jason.' But Chris didn't finish whatever he was going to say.

Annie gave Jason the number of the counsellor she'd seen, to get those fuckheads out from under my skin, she'd said, meaning their parents. He threw the number in the bin at the front gate and went to Skinner Street and took as many pills as he could find and went into the shed and curled up on the floor. His mother shouldn't have found him – she never went into the shed – but she needed a hammer. I reckon I knew, she told a friend later, in my spiritual body I felt him trying to leave. I willed him back. She willed him back and he woke in the hospital sicker than a bottle of OP rum would have made him, aching all over. When he got home he slept for thirty hours, waking to hear his mother on the phone. 'Thank God he came home to do it,' she said quietly. 'I don't know, I just don't know.'

He had a referral from the hospital for a clinic. He didn't go. 'Does Kyah know?' he asked his mother. It was the first thing he said when he woke up in hospital and she slapped him. 'Jason, she's moved on. But you're alive and there's all of life from here.' He closed his eyes.

He turned twenty-seven. His mother asked him had he been to the clinic and he said yes. What was it like? 'Good,' he said, 'it helped. I'm okay now, Mum.' And he was. Well, not okay, but not wanting so much to teach Kyah a lesson that would require his death for the learning.

KYAH WAKES UP in the morning and doesn't feel like throwing up. Just in case, she goes to the kitchen, takes a cracker from the jar, goes out onto the verandah and nibbles like a mouse. There are balloons this morning, Remax and Sirromet and another one she can't read.

The child grows in its amnion with perfect knees and microscopic fists and intentions.

I THINK YOU have to know your mother loves you, that's the most important thing. And I always knew that. In fact, I think she almost loved me more because I wasn't like the other two. I needed more help. With Dad it was the same. They were kind, my parents, and could accept that nature deals the hand it deals.

HE WAKES FROM a dream in which Kyah is nestled in the dip between his collarbone and ribs and he feels safe. The emptiness of waking has a weight.

He is working on a show with Clinton who has convinced the Minister for the Arts to give them \$1000 to explore 'Difference'. That's it, the whole gig, 'Difference'. The Minister – call me Frank – said Jason would make a difference. The Minister laughed then and said that was a joke, mate. So Jason laughed. For a thousand bucks, Jason would do whatever Frank said to do.

When he goes into those offices in town – the museum, the gallery, the Minister's office – the chocolate or orange décor, their jarrah counters and blond furnishings, the china cups and quiet – Jason feels he ought to be dry cleaned and ironed at the door. When he said as much to the Museum Director, she looked at him as if she wanted to understand but couldn't possibly.

IT IS WELL into spring now. At South Bank the swimmers have emerged like bears from the mountains. There are two sorts. The ones who run around and around the lake like startled flamingos, then jump and hop and crawl over the sand and then dive in and thrash their way from one side to the other, their splashes calling, Notice me, Notice me. I used to call them the Notice Me birds when I told little Sam about them. And the others, slow swimmers like me, who trace our figure eights through the water, waiting for the sun. The guy from the winter is gone, I notice. Perhaps like me he's shy of the flamingos.

Some mornings the water is still cold enough that I can stand under the shower afterwards and let the shaking find me.

WATER, THEY SAID the theme was water, drought, so he'd stood beside a running tap with a gun. Someone had called the police. He'd been arrested and the curator had had to vouch for his bona fides, as she called them. When they arrested him, one of the officers looked at the other, scratching his crew-cut as if it were brand new. 'He says he's a performance artist.' If Jason could catch that moment in his art, the scratching, the crew-cut, but it would never be reduced to art.

He heard a writer on the radio talking about painting. She said visual art was real whereas writing was such artifice. He laughed at that. 'I buy these cards made by a local artist,' she said. 'They're honest.' Jason wanted to hear her name but then she was gone. They're not honest, he wanted to tell her, they're a way to eat.

REG, MY MENTOR in the service, told me driving a bus is like sex. You get better at it with experience. I can't imagine Reg having sex, like imagining your parents. He's been over to visit. He said, 'Sammy, you have to get back up there buddy or you'll lose it.' No one's ever called me Sammy before Reg but that's my name in the service. Michele has ironed my shirts. Little Sam has polished my shoes. They are waiting on the rack out the front and Sam walks them along the floor with his hands and says they're saying, 'Time for work. Time for work.'

I tried. I went to the depot and guys said hello who'd never said hello to me before. I was on the 411 and I got on my bus and I sat there until the shift supervisor came out and I opened the door and he took the disabled seat across from me. And then he went out and he must have organised a replacement for the day and I sat there for however long I did and then I got in my car and went home. Michele had talked to them because she knew. She took me in her arms and held me like I was the smaller one and I thought I might be all right.

Sometimes I feel the weight on my chest and I know I am not taking in enough air. When I sit up the weight falls off. I believe it to be the weight of a soul.

HOW IS A man to live? Jason and Clinton would imitate their English teacher, Mr Wjocjek, Mr WetCheck. What does this mean, to be a man? The questions

he'd made fun of at school were the very questions he'd like answers to now. What does it mean, to be a man?

He wanted to hate her but found instead he'd reconstruct the night they parted. He'd be the one with a future and not this loser.

Found objects had been the name of the show. Twelve international artists had written the concepts and twelve local artists had realised them. Jason and Clinton had a concept from French artist Marie-Claire Lanois. Cast a silver ring and lose it in the street. Clinton rolled the edge of a coin into soft wax, leaving the partial inscription, *liberte*, as raised text around the ring. He cast the ring and gave it to Jason to 'lose'. Jason climbed the Story Bridge. At the exhibition in the Institute of Modern Art, people watched on video as Liberty Ring rested on the steel of the bridge. How final a losing this one was, no chance of anyone finding the ring in the bottom of the river.

Several months later, Clinton and Jason were having dinner and Clinton noticed the ring on Jason's finger. Jason laughed and said, 'No one said when I had to lose it.'

I GET TIGHT shoulders, my arms feel bolted on, and Michele said I should go see a girl she knows in West End who does massage. When my back locked up altogether, Michele mentioned the girl again and I agreed because I knew I wasn't going back to work without something to take the weight off my chest.

At the start she asked did I have any particular problems. I told her about the weight. 'Anything happening in your life?'

'No,' I said, 'not really.'

SHE'D NEVER REMEMBER to take pills so they gave her an IUD that released something. It had stopped releasing the something and now she was pregnant. 'You can sue the manufacturer,' the young doctor said, trying to make a joke. Kyah was sitting in his office. 'There are options,' he said then. She looked at him and nodded and walked out without signing the claim form. The receptionist called after her, she realised later, but by that time she was running along the street. She was out of breath when she got to the river. She lay down on the grass and watched clouds. She lay there for a long time, until the sun fell from the sky and it was night and the river park

creatures began to emerge. She saw two possums, a mother and baby, high on a wire, like performers, the mother seeming to have a life in spite of the load she carried.

It was one thing to have a child, quite another to force someone else, to be forced. He would not want a child, she knew. He'd given her a ring once from a show he'd done. He'd been supposed to lose it. 'You lose it for me,' he said. 'We're both free, right?'

That night after she'd seen the possums she told him they were finished and told herself she believed it.

AFTER A SWIM I stand on the Goodwill Bridge and let the sun do its goodwill work and warm me to my core.

The union has given me a solicitor. Her name is Joan. She isn't young, not quite old enough to be your mother, she tells me, and I think she is pretty smart. She reads what I said to the police. 'What did you mean you weren't paying attention?' she asks me. She wears glasses I notice have become fashionable, with black rims my grandfather might have worn. 'How do you know you weren't paying attention?' Joan says.

'I didn't see.'

'A driver has many things to pay attention to, agreed?'

'Yes.'

'Could you have been paying attention to one of those other things, the oncoming traffic, the right, your control panel?'

'Yes.'

'Then how can you say you weren't paying attention?'

'I didn't say it. The policewoman said it.' I thought of the girl with the pink hair.

'She said it and you agreed?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'She was in charge.'

I decide I must tell Joan the truth about the girl. When I do, Joan nods and puts a hand on my shoulder in a way that makes me think she wants me not to remember. Joan tells me I have to think about the things I say, the

things I agree to. She asks me do I think I deserve to be punished. I say I do. She says, 'Sam, did you kill someone on purpose?' I say I did not. 'Well let's not punish you as if you did then.'

'Okay,' I say, but feel I have been tricked.

THREE NIGHTS BEFORE his death, Jason drove to the coast at dawn. He swam out through the surf beyond the break where the water wasn't so confusing. The swell rose up and around him easily and he started to feel safe, developing a rhythm of breathing, watching for the wave, swimming, breathing, watching for the wave, as if seeing the wave would make it manageable. Almost complacent now, swimming, breathing, swimming, breathing. And then the wave is on him, the largest in the set, over him, through him and he's down, down in the deep, sand and foam and blackness, no idea which direction is the sky and which is the sea bottom. What is it you do? What is it? And then his body relaxes, surrenders to the sea that gives him up up up to the sky of men. He goes on swimming but with this new knowledge that surrender is the answer.

After the swim he wants to tell someone. He wants to ring Kyah but instead he gets in the car and drives home.

He is doing his best work, his PhD supervisor tells him. 'I've been swimming in the sea,' he says, and the next morning when he gets in the water at South Bank he wills himself to remember that swim in the sea, to remember the sea's beneficence, the sea that saved him. Jason will not die now. Surely he will live.

JASON'S MOTHER PUNCHES the air above his forehead with all the strength she has, to vent her fine hopeless anger, to wake him up from this stupid, stupid sleep. 'My perfect boy, how can you die?' She can see the lengths of his legs under the sheet. They are short like his father's but his torso is long, perfectly proportioned if Michelangelo's *David* were your model, a little close to the ground, he himself would say. Stupidly she thinks of mashed spinach, frozen in ice cube trays, orange juice, chickpeas, fish. The foods that grew him, the books she read him, the buildings and trucks they constructed while Annie dressed Miss Poppy in the corner.

She had been a good enough mother, she thought, but he had died anyway so perhaps she hadn't. Perhaps she had planted in him some seed of rebellion that made him walk across a road when the sign said don't, some failure to gain the ticket out of adolescence that made him do the opposite of what he was supposed to do and die.

At first she was sure this was suicide; suicide as performance art, Annie had named it bitterly. But the Coroner, his gentle voice and receding hairline, ruled out suicide and Jason's mother decided to believe the Coroner because the alternative was unbearable. Jason crossed the street against the lights, he said. That's all he did, something every one of us has done. It's true he had been depressed after losing a relationship. Tragically, we now know his lover was on her way to reconcile with him that morning. They never met. But Jason did not take his own life. He stood on a narrow unprotected median strip. The bus driver, distracted by one of the many other things a driver must focus on, took the corner. The edge of the bus hit the boy. We have a tragedy that is no one's fault.

The Coroner went on then about the intersection, the engineering, the detailed study needed to correct the flaws.

They called her out of a class to tell her. Two police officers, a male and a female. The male was Jason's age and the kinder of the two. The female might have liked to be kind but some hardness around her eyes prevented it.

'We have some bad news, I'm afraid,' the male said. She had no buffer of disbelief one is supposed to have at such times and she fell to the floor and they had to pick her up and carry her to a chair.

They called Annie and she and Annie went together to identify his body.

A freak accident. The corner of the bus flicked her son high into the air. Jason had landed in the opposite bus lane. The blunt trauma of the bus had left the outside of him perfect and had torn his aorta from his heart and killed him.

IN THE MORNING before the Coroner decides I am a good man, I watch the river under the bridge. The water moves in fast little eddies. Sticks I drop spin round and round before they disappear. This is it, the answer, the water turning and turning and disappearing into itself and making making making.

‘What will happen?’ I ask Joan because she seems to know more things than law.

‘You’ll never be the same,’ she says. ‘But it will ease.’

I tell her I don’t think I can drive buses anymore.

Even if you’re not a bad person it’s hard to grow up believing in your own goodness. At school some of my teachers thought I mustn’t be trying because my brother and sister were the smartest in their classes and I was behind just about everyone. One or two teachers were kind. One or two punished me. I think those punishments have always stayed with me and whatever badness it was they saw in me has been waiting until now to turn up. My parents never actually said that being dumb was bad but being smart was everything to them so it must have been bad to be dumb, to be me.

When Michele tells me we are expecting another child, I try hard to smile and say I am thrilled. The words sound like five-cent pieces dropped on glass in my head. What I really feel is lead on my chest so heavy I am not breathing. I have to make an effort, tell myself to breathe, and even then I don’t take in enough air.

I go to see Joan and tell her I must go back to work. She negotiates on my behalf, which means I can work in the depot office at Toowong until I’m ready to go back to driving.

KYAH WILL TELL Jason today. She will walk up to the gallery where he and Clinton are working and tell him. Tell him she loves him, she doesn’t want to wreck their lives, but she can’t abort a baby. If he doesn’t want the baby, he doesn’t want her.

JASON ARRIVES BEFORE dawn. The waving guy is there already. Every morning through the winter he’s been in the water and when he sees Jason, he waves while he’s still swimming, waves as his arm comes up for a stroke but doesn’t stop swimming. Jason waves back on the guy’s next breath. He’s pretty sure the guy smiles. Jason wants to put him in the show on ‘Difference’. It’s so corny. He’s happy, the waving guy, he’s found out how to be happy.

Today the water is cold enough to make Jason slow getting in. When the

sun comes, it's sudden and Jason loses his rhythm when the water breaks up into lines of light. Surrender. It's all right, he thinks, it's all right.

Jason thinks of the tree in the backyard at Skinner Street, a Moreton Bay fig he will never see again, his father's face, the lines of light in the water at South Bank and the sea.

IN HER MASSAGE room, I am disconnected from all the things that tie me to my life. From Michele whose face comes to me now and then but doesn't see me, to little Sam who leans over whatever he's doing and doesn't look up as I pass. I am a ghost wandering through someone else's life.

'My boyfriend died,' she said that first time, and I knew her boyfriend was the one. 'This is my first week back.' We don't speak again. Her hands on my body are like those of a child, small and without enough strength to unknot my shoulder blades but hot and comforting. When she finishes I see she has been crying. 'Can I have another appointment?' I say.

'Sure,' she says. As I'm leaving she apologises, tries to hand back my cash. 'I shouldn't charge you for today. I wasn't focused on what I was doing.' Tears well in her eyes and I look again. 'See you next week,' I say, waving away the cash.

I'm a partner who tells most things but I don't tell Michele about the girl and the massage.

Her name is Kyah and the fourth week I go to see her I notice her belly. 'We weren't really suited,' she tells me. 'I was way too OCD.' I have to ask her what it means. 'Control freak, obsessive-compulsive. I need everything in its place. He was great for me.' This is how she does massage, I realise. The soft hands of our first session have gone. She orders my back like clothes in a drawer, pushing the muscles this way and that until she gets them just how she wants them.

'Jason did this show once with a silver ring. He was supposed to lose it but he gave it to me and told me we didn't need to prove anything to anyone else. But I needed more than that, I think. If only I'd known what was going to happen.' Tears were coming now, dropping on to my back. 'Sorry,' she said.

'It's fine.'

She tells me I'm easy to talk to. I tell her she is shifting the weight from my chest.

IN THE AFTERNOON the writer sits down and pens one of her cards to a friend in America. 'A boy in my street died when I was a child,' she tells her American friend. 'My best friend. His heart stopped. I wasn't allowed to go to his funeral because it might upset me.' Alone in her little office, she shakes her head and stares out at the smokestacks puffing away over the four exes on Milton Brewery. 'I remember seeing his dad months later sitting on the front steps of their house.'

The writer doesn't say she left a child behind in that street. The child was herself. She remembers her friend, that white-haired boy of eight whose heart stopped for no reason anyone understood, whose funeral she was not allowed to attend because she was given to over-excitement. She thinks of his father, tears streaming down his poor square face as he polished his son's bike, polished it to give away.

THIS WATER OF life, this river, this sea. What it brings. What it brings. We are. Becoming. Past. Being born.

IN THE AFTERNOON the temperature reaches 41 degrees and the first lick of a breeze doesn't smell like rain. Clouds move over the city fast and the drops are heavy, becoming hail that batters all, the churches, the men, the tree in the backyard at Skinner Street that falls over the trapeze, Jason's twin sister who rushes to the car with the *Brisbane News* over her head.

Jason's body is deep within a vault within a cellar of a tall building in South Brisbane. He does not hear or feel or see anything. The driver sits on his front steps and hail cuts his face just under his eye where tears will fall. Jason's mother sits in her car and listens to hail hammering the roof while the river swirls before her. Kyah is doing a massage. The hail on the roof above her is distant. Her hands are nervous on the client's warm living body.

ANOTHER FIRST OF SPRING

JASON GETS UP on his elbows, doesn't try to stand. His hip hurts, might be grazed where he's come down onto the red asphalt. The driver has pulled

up the bus twenty metres away and is running back towards him. 'Are you okay?' he's yelling.

'Yeah, I think so,' Jason says. 'You fucking hit me, you idiot.'

The bus driver is grinning like a cat. 'You're alive,' he says and crouches down to the boy's level. 'I thought I killed you.'

Jason starts to feel the pain now, in his leg and arm, shoulder, neck.

'Stay here,' the driver says. 'We need to call an ambulance.'

'You swim at South Bank,' Jason says.

'Yeah,' the driver nods. 'So do you.'

'You're the idiot who waves. I'm trying to put you in a show. Do that wave.'

The bus driver doesn't wave. He touches the boy's cheek. 'My life,' he says. 'My life.'

Jason and Kyah are in the back of her house in Victoria Street, making love, carefully around his sore right side, while her client rings the bell. A child, Jason thinks, my child. 'Shouldn't you go out?' he whispers to Kyah. 'No,' Kyah says. 'Fuck it.' They stifle their laughter until the client goes away, puzzled, massaged by hail on her way to the car.

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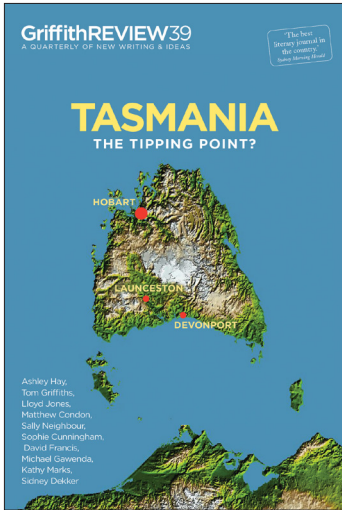
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