

University of Adelaide

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Can't look at the night sky

Biographical notes:

Alison Coppe teaches undergraduate creative writing, and is a PhD candidate in creative writing at the University of Adelaide. She was the Literature Program Coordinator for Feast Festival. Gretta Mitchell has recently qualified with an MPhil in Creative Writing from the University of Adelaide. Both writers were published in the first edition of the Melbourne-based subversive literary journal, *Gargouille*, in 2014.

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It was two years till I heard the Curlew sing. Having been born a widow, I was addicted to dead things. Descendant of a burnt hot hell, a place where love was impossible, I yearned for the tropics and to weep like the northern night sky. Stars looked down on the darkness, never (like us) finished grieving. I smoked a cigarette in Cairns. I'd given up, but like all addicts, began again. For her, I climbed through the swell of dark matter and song, the wet elastic air an ever-ascending scale. The grounded bird called for me at the last possible moment, seconds before my final annihilation. I waited for her and drip by drip she came back to me.

I wish I made it all up. Like history, I wish it weren't true. But wishes never do come

...

I wish I heard the Curlew sing on South Road, it was singing then, it was singing all along, scratching at the broken glass in the dirt, picking at the biscuit foundation of the house, pushing against truck after truck morning and night every conversation paused for the flight path.

... like dumb, teenage mums.

When the house was empty, Celeste reached out to me. She wanted me to cry in front of her, but I wasn't going to cry down that broom handle. I swept up dust; it hardly had a chance to gather a convincing hold on anything. Six months is nothing in the language of dirt. Traces of unread letters burned the inside of my still cold flesh (all my fear of fire gone). I wasn't going to cry – not even for *you*.

If only I hadn't been born — limp wrist and all, I think about it a lot. Like a melody I can't shake from my brain, all minor key and late-morning masochism, swinging somewhere in hollow air, a long-beaked, wordless cry, warning, warning against sex and neglect. But I never asked you to be true, curlew. Numbed up on struggle – fentanyl and oxycontin, spiced rum and bush weed – nothing helps. So, I only hear you, curlew, when you wail without reason. Sleep is no comfort. I know I'll wake up.

There wasn't much to do. A few loose bits of paper, a towel, a little rubbish to break down. I told Celeste to stand up in the bin and jump on the trash I'd inherited. She stretched out her arms to me, but the sun held her instead. It was fucking hot that day in Adelaide.

In the throes of another housing crisis, I'd run out of fingers to count them on. Digits of doom, so attuned to whispering hate speech and neighbourly threats, you'd think I'd be used to it by now. You'd think I'd have learnt to expect it. Set a bivouac watch. I hadn't.

But wait, it was winter.

She'd joked about raping me with a knife. I heard her through the low-income walls. But I was not going to die at the paws of a fool bitch with balls armed with a six dollar carving knife. She possessed the vocabulary of an illiterate. Lesbian was her favourite word — rapelesbiankilllesbianrapelesbiankilllesbian

Sylvia came back to the house. Everything ok here? She left the sun shade from her Subaru in the front room. Here it is. Ok, bye. I walked out the back and she drove away. Is everything ok here? What a thing to ask.

Me. She'd meant me. But I wasn't even a woman, so how could I be a lesbian? The next morning, before sunrise, I left an essay¹ half hanging from her letterbox. Hanging like an unfinished sentence – never finished because the poet died – and I was glad he died because I like unfinished ... If it was hidden from view, she'd never think to look. On a dirty coffee stakeout, I waited for her to find it. Turning to face my flat, she wasn't scared; no fear bent her posture as she dropped her Reject Shop panties and hitched her Sunday School skirt. Discharging all over discourse, the paper turned Gonorrhoea green, a celadon and gamboge hate parody of words she didn't know – like fricatrix. Literal symbols of sex-sickness, and the irony lost on her, drip-dicked from the paper. She posted it on my front door; it stuck. I read it as an eviction notice and left an image of Tom Cho under the rear windscreen wiper of her Commodore as I fled at 2am. It didn't, as I had hoped, obscure the five white stickers, the five white stars of nincompoop nationalism – tattoos and flags and family first. (She'd abuse her husband, kick him in the shins and call him a fuckin' faggot-arsed sissy 'cause he didn't want to help her rape, help her kill me.) Whenever I see the Southern Cross I retch. I can't look at the clear, night sky. Can't, look – anymore.

I saw it coming, but too late. Like a bad pill about to drop, you have to ride it out. I'd already swallowed and was up on the promise of the high. I knew it was mine, this destiny, this sick fate, all my years of cringing at the light brought me here to lie at filthy feet, healthy and ready. G, a thing of darkness, a sharp face marked. How could I ask? To live there, there, on that thick veined road full of empty cattle trucks stinking of shit and fear, that whiplash spot marked with flowers for the dead.

So ... I was crashing again – you could hear the wreck hit me in the next world. Echoing like death – death – death – death – death. My friends with money told me they had 'limits', told me to use homelessness 'services'. When my new friend Al called, I was weeping over-proof tears on a you-can-stay-for-three-more-days shopping list.²

I almost walked away.

She'd found a house and we were going to move in. After telling her to fuck off, I laughed. When you've lived like me, kindness hurts. When you've lived like me you don't care about the wives, about the girlfriends, found dead in their homes on Australia Day. It's the bargain they made so they wouldn't be like me – homeless, stateless, mindless. Their devils wear glow-shirts and safety boots or their devils wear Armani.

The gates of 158 South Road opened and their metal pin dragged across the concrete driveway heralding with a screech the arrival of Rose the real estate agent. Her bud of a face painted white and her lips slicked with dark purple lipstick, but the red folds of her sun-damaged skin, like drooping petals on her neck, told me she was a red Rose and the price of this house would be my youth, such as it was. I didn't mind; I needed that house and besides, I knew something Rose didn't; queers never grow old. I would paint the red rose white, whatever the price. Celeste and I trod the boards of the beauty for rent. I tried to act cool. It was cheaper for being on the main road. The windows were double glazed not quite bulletproof but enough to soften the blow... I'd get used to the noise with time. The other applicants, dissolved into a single enemy

around me. Young couples with children, the foreign, the elderly and incomplete. She hardly spoke to the other applicants, but I didn't care. I needed that house. I stood in the kitchen and patted Celeste's arm affectionately, playing up domestic lesbianism for Rose who did that thing that people do, she called us *Girls*. And *Girls*, the floors are newly polished. And *Girls* the stove is gas, much better than electric, you can even use it for heating if you want to, I know we used to do that when the kids were little. She went on and on. I'm not a girl, I thought.

Apocalyptic heatwaves burnt Adelaide City into the context where love was impossible. The gargoyles mocked me and I began smiling for no reason. Inferno is a comedy after all. My only ambition was to become a ghost and terrorise the world. All I would have to do was appear at the foot of your bed — a dead girl.

My hunger for home left me smiling at Rose, beaming even—her fear of others lead to her my white, chalky hands, my badly torn fingernails snagged her pink flesh and into the comfort of domestic castration we went. This queen of hearts was out for my head, saliva pooled at the corners of my mouth, I'd never been desperate before, even desperation is sex. Twenty-three and ravenous, yellow bile carved a shallow well in my mouth and ran down my chin while I slept and dreamt of the lovers I hadn't lost yet. In the dream, she put my mobile phone in a glass of water and laughed. My bones softened at her touch, but *you* didn't know me then.

I wrote one last letter to the love(lessness) of my life(lessness).³

I was in a hotel in Melbourne when Rose called. You got it. You can move in. I got off the phone, sat on the bed and cried. This was the start of better, the start of easier, the start of home.

Beware the sentiment that things can't get any worse. They always can. In my experience, they always do.

I wish I'd heard the Curlew singing.

The house was over 100 years old, a relic of an antipodean ancestry that built things to last – like racism. Nobody knew if it was originally a house cut in two as it then stood. We scored the left hand side of that colonial beast. Make no mistake, the place was vast. Ceilings like church and floors like a desert city hell, a short walk to the Wheatsheaf Hotel. I secured padlocks oiled with WD40 on all the gates, and gave a cut-copy to Al. Making her promise three times over not to share them with a single living soul. They'd need the Jaws of Life to cut me out of that house. Behind the dirty glaze of crashes and wrecks and rescues and death, the paperboy's gaze, his sentences, his pay, it was impossible to hear, 'Helloo? Anyone home?' Impossible to hear, 'Knock, knock! It's Census time again. Be counted.' The well-read couldn't read my go-away locks, but I didn't care what the civilised thought of me – this 100 acre desire to lock, lock, lock the gates, and throw open the windows at night. Lifted high to let the old beast breathe while I walked without sound down the hallway, a fireman's tomahawk in my hands – not a weapon, but a tool. I held it like murder and its ballads were the only poetry on my mind. The cancelled (no not cancelled because

it wasn't planned), the absent performance of our house warming – a hurting place, sites of pain, here and there, where the once blazing fires lay resected.

G's mother was smoking outside. I took the painting in and leant it against the kitchen wall. We stood together looking at the abstract red, fluoro green and white, the paint layered thick—red on white and green on white and red. The form of the piece poured in thin red lines over archaeology of brushwork and hands. A history suspended and cut short, choked of its enamel gleam – the promise of a future, success, fame. As we looked on, the canvas began to slide down the wall, objected, it refused to be seen. The artwork died when the artist... It refused to be hanged. The last rebellion for abandoned work, a child of an unfinished oeuvre, was to lay horizontal, flat on its back, to slide out of sight, out of mind. It hit the floor. "I really like it, Alison. Whenever I do abstract art it always ends up looking like an abortion," that's what G's mother said.

When she was anxious the sky fell like the Mastercard out of Ma's purse. Al's ex was dead. And Ma would never live it down if her daughter (finally) committed (to something for once in her life) – suicide. So she'd flown halfway across the continent, over empty lands of thirsty wheat and departed sheep, to buy plants for the garden. Vines: \$500 of virescence. She knew I liked to talk to plants mostly without saying a word. Inveigh away; I'll be in the verger. Queens might be going, going, gone, for nothing, for a song, but jungle creepers curled around my ankles and wrists, held me to the lifeless earth for one more setting, one more play. Medicinal dusk, stage lights fade. I'd heard vespertine whispers that life wasn't worth living. Lianas growing over my lines, wilful obscurantism, but the will was not mine. Dear Priapus,⁴

How perfect. The Mother handed me an abortion in the kitchen while I looked for answers in abstract art. I folded curtains of blood between my fingers and said, "You know lesbians are having abortions⁵ all the time now."

Before I got my hands on it, the backyard looked like a decade past landfill site. Litter (like lettering) told stories of people done and dusted. Broken bottles, jagged jade and russet razor-sharp, shallow graved rusty screws like nobody could be bothered to fuck you (over), lost marbles of childhood gambles, trashed mosaics of cheap ceramic ruin, tiled and filed under a mythological easy-going national character that didn't even exist, and the golden two-inch foam of poverty sleep that outlasts eternity – what looked like abortion bags. I was glad they were gone, the folks who left me this legacy of mess because . . . I'd the uneasy feeling we were competing for the absence of the place. Smoking, thinking — it wasn't a game you'd want to win. It was no surprise when I saw her.

"I was sorry about your friend," she said.

She didn't scare me. In fact, I desired her. Wanted her to visit my garden, to dance there in the creeping light, to sit on my lap and suck my neck. All she wanted to do was fuck, but she couldn't find a queer kid willing to try their luck. She came to me to learn that only an androgyne would want to touch that blush of nothingness.

"Thank you." I said walking without being able to lift my bare feet off the floor boards. "That's kind." Everything here splintered by a ghost dragging her rope and

trail of enamel paint; I soaked my heart-head in her fumes. Nail polish remover and death, but then everything was stinking of death. No matter how clean the house was. No.

That'd be too easy.

That'd be a giveaway.

That's the trick, you don't see it coming. I was rotten on the inside.

That's what I could smell.

Redolent, rotten, Ma'd had her fill of sparkling wine and Bundaberg Rum by 4pm; there'd be no waking her until sour and thirsty she stirred like Irish Coffee at dawn. Praying to Bacchus ad nauseam: was it her fault she couldn't love, really love, her queer child? And Al was seeking comfort elsewhere, away from the growl of malodour that creeps up behind you only to immaterialise, seeking relief from loveless care and careless love. My first unimaginary friend abandoned me for the beds of familiar faces that weren't lost to trouble, abandoned me for their scarless hands gifting food like truth that knew no test, abandoned me for the gratification of their innocent palates. I resented her absence but I didn't blame her, listening for the turn of her key, listening, listening – nothing, nothing. Despair, my only skill-set, an acquired taste, I guess.

The house, already wounded, already gutted and patched up, groaned that tenderness was a scam, but that's alienation for you. I put my ear to the wall and it whispered *survive this, Son.*

After dark it was just me, just me and that fey beauty. Drifting down the hallway at night, she'd lead me to secret places. She told me to turn off all the lights. She told me to bring redhead matches. She told me to be a whisper because her mother's hatred of vandalism never waned. She told me she would've loved to graffiti her mother's grave, but death found her, the daughter first. Following, vigilant of every hateful human step, so as to be equal to her noiselessness; my misanthropy endeared her to me, and when I struck the first match, traces of inscriptions illumined – under hell's sulphur-smoking flames, there, her childhood games.⁶

Vanilla scented candles burned in my room, cheap like pink musk and plastic, cheap and toxic, bought on a whim in George Street. The light went out for The Ghost (and all the girls I'd loved before). I begged her to touch me; her hands went cold.

– mendicants – cadmium – dukes – the sun sets – vanilla sex – suppositories – a furlong way – the black ox – to prey – rank –

“Oh, Al. There are no salvations,” that's what G said. I wanted to save a dog because I couldn't save The Ghost. Slipping on her wet map of lines around the house, I followed her wherever she went, but not far enough.

And every night for six months we laughed for no reason. Then on the fourth of June she said she heard voices creeping. Up against the wall, we'd crawl. Counting to two – erotica's silent cost. The details of the graph dissolve and acidwash jeans are back in fashion, Doc Martens too. I can't describe her to you. Or what we'd do. The

haunting didn't belong to me. Boo. Boo fucking hoo. You're fucking who? Oh, nobody new. Nobody knew. We're through.

I licked her train of blood from the polished wooden floor.⁷ Rose said the bin was too full. I went back for the rubbish. Turps burnt my lips as I stuffed my hand into the bin fishing for a bag. This museum dive left blood and grime under my fingernails. I slipped into the wheelie bin legs out like Alice, relics of a femme youth I'd kicked on South Road all climbing in the history of waste I swam in. I carried it from place to place, high heels and old clips, eyeshadow, stilettos to crucify, stigmata and red red lipstick. I took a platform shoe to the head, but didn't bruise. I didn't make it to bin day. No blood. I was dying too, slowly, in black and white, like un-read letters.

*So I leave a joke behind. Nobody will ever find. Let alone appreciate.*⁸

I chewed the side of my mouth in Cairns. A boy with curly hair told me it made sense to make plans. It made sense to make plans? How do you tell someone without a home to make plans? That was some talk. Plans are for other kinds of people. To live out a high and sweat into someone else's skin... that was logic... a lesbian was pulling up – a plan – little white lines on a card table. Her neat shoulders and short hair were wet with sweat.

I act bored, instead. Shiver — nobody sees.

“Come here, you fucken queer,” she said with a scowl and smile. She pushed mine along the green tabletop into a ring of water from someone's glass. “Quick, put it on your finger,” I wiped up the dissolving powder and put it at the back of my gum on the top right of my mouth. It tasted like earwax and petrol. A beautiful man with a beard held a piece of lemon up to my mouth and said, “I'm going to help you,” I sucked on the lemon, eyes closed. I danced. I sang along. He was a bird keeper. He lifted the hood from my face and I saw the ruins of our house, the marbles and metal scraps dancing in tiny formation, like stars in the skin beneath his mat of facial hair. I looked up at the night sky to see if it was still falling. It was almost morning. Under creeping daylight, I folded my body in against two women on a mattress in the middle of the room. I sang into their mouths, cawing and spilling stardust along their waxy still flesh.

I hear bats feeding on the ghost gum after dark. I wish it weren't true. I wish I could gaze, but I still can't look.

I opened the essay, G on Angela Carter.

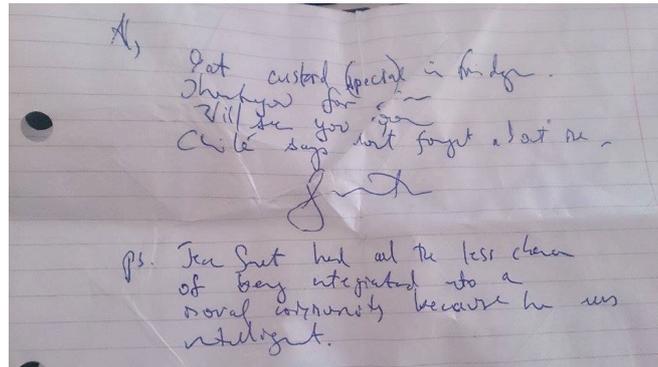
I opened the story, G on dancing.

I opened the back door, G's garden in view.⁹

I opened The Ghost's letter, too little too late.

... you can't touch the night sky with just long fingers ... you need long arms too... never said, wrote love, without an attack, just to show you how useless love was, how impossible and quaint, love belonged to people with mortgages and credit cards, we were paying off other debts, debts for desire, tomes filled with the sickly blue-balled fate of every queer who ever loved you... And you were teaching me how to hunt... I

didn't have the wrist for it ... don't femme out ... maybe I hadn't quite kicked off my heels after all ...



I stood in the middle of the kitchen a poem in my fist, turned my tongue in my mouth to whet my appetite. Poetry was hunger. I ate the peach in the air. Once upon a time, I called your name.¹⁰

Lesbians, all fists and tongues, just another Australian Myth.

And there were no roses in the garden. Not those English flowers.

Adelaide: colonial thorns and rosy-poesy, just another Australian Scythe.

For me? A rose was a rose was a rose was a rose.

For me? A rose is a poem of rape.

No, there weren't any roses in the garden.

No, there weren't any roses in the garden.

Remember?

Yes, dismembered.

So, we'd been driven out by disease and driven in by a Commodore and a carving knife. G said she wasn't scared. I wasn't there, but I was afraid.

— afraid of matches when we met, starting fires by the time I —

I went to The Wheatsheaf Hotel the day G left. I smoked a packet of cigarettes and drank whiskey, talked out loud to myself between trips to the bar singing country music in the bathroom for an echo off the white tiles. A ghost sang harmony to my melancholy blue line. My skin, vellum caked with the film of this tale, which existed to show that I was not an innocent anymore (that I had never been one). I thought I'd never see G again; she fled into arms stained with forty-year-old ink, back to the desert of affection she grew up in. I followed the ghost to the houses of friends and lovers. Haunted, I slept in their wedded beds while they were on holiday, walking it off. I slept with a knife. I, a hero of nothing, was scared and alone in a house that wasn't mine, wondering if the Bougainvillea survived the trip up north.¹¹

Endnotes

1. destroyed.
2. *painkillers*
~~*food*~~
pencils, Lumograph 2B
walking cane
Akubra, made of black rabbit felt
MD Traveller's Notebook
\$5000 cowboy boots
3. Z
4. ... censored.
5. babies
6. Hangman: Game Over. You lose. Quee_.
7. There wouldn't have been much blood, her small face turned black and blue, rung out like thousands of years of suffocation. My cowardice, my fear of fire stopped me from seeing the body, cremated with her glasses on. That same fear kept me from her bed in another house, paint sprinkled over the grey carpet, not vast and wooden, but small and full of candles, soft light, and asylum bright in the morning, the bedroom lit like a money shot in some porn film.
8. I pilfered Al's bookcase and stole a copy of *Writing and Difference*. Now you know.
9. *She left leaves, gone south like the Devil*
She came back to me.
with condemned women and their vines.
Finally, it was time to listen to 'Shivers'.
Don't take your love to South Rd,
You taught me to build a fire.
fireman.
We know how to hit each other.
Don't take your love to town —
No touching.
no fucking around. Angel can't look at the sky no more.
Just whispers.
Too late like night...
Kisses gone missing.
another text, another text, another text.
Emptied somewhere.
Into backspace dreams
Between drinking water and sewerage.
we delete.
10. "We cut strangely.
What.
That's it.
Address it say to it that **we will never repent.**
A great many people come together.
Come together.
I don't think this has anything to do with it.
What I believe in is what I mean.
Lifting belly and roses.
We get a great many roses.
I always smile.
Yes.
And I am happy."

11. Some place in time forgotten, but touching still the last legs of winter, cold and white, pilose and wet, opened only to the ceiling, opened only to the touch of an urgent hand, with the heat of summer and smooth trimmed fingernails, you lift, you pull apart, kissing the arch of her left foot as it kicks you in the face. No blood. No bruise. No colour at all, just the memory of the hit, kick that, kick it, trip it. Yes please.

G was afraid too, for the ghost and her wanderings, she could never love you or me or the light.

Now, I never wonder. I spark up, start fires, hold her blue flame in my hands, there's nothing to be afraid of anymore.

Research statement

Research background

Recent monographs on Queer Gothic posit: 'the Gothic is always queer [...] and queerness is always gothicized' (Weinstock 2011: 86). Gothic textuality – twisted, wayward and perverse – never follows a 'straight' course (Weinstock 2011: 81). Barthes asserts that all texts are made from 'unconscious or automatic quotations' that reproduce 'past citations' or other texts (ctd in Williams 2015: 169). The plagiarist or pirate forces themselves on other texts thus mobilising the paradox production/destruction.

Research contribution

'Can't look at the night sky' interrogates Australian Queer as beyond visibility politics. Echoing the plagiarist montages of Acker and Burroughs, pirated 'textual interruptions' (Campbell 2013: 160) thwart traditional narrative/political progression to seek its Gothicized, shadowy hollow.

Research significance

This creative work has been accepted for publication in a leading journal of creative writing research.

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