

**Southern Cross University**

**Christine Tondorf**

***Lure* (an extract from the novel)**

Biographical note:

Christine Tondorf has worked as a journalist for 25 years in print, online, radio, and television. Her stories have appeared in *The Australian* and *Sydney Morning Herald* and on the Seven Network, the ABC, and SBS. She developed an interest in the Australian Coastal Gothic while reporting on a number of unnatural deaths as a regional TV journalist. In 2017 she completed a Masters in Gothic at Southern Cross University. Christine has presented papers at the International Gothic Association's conference, and at the annual conference of the Gothic Association of New Zealand and Australia. She received a Byron Bay Writers' Festival mentorship in 2016, and a Scarlett Stiletto Award in 2017. She has also been a finalist in three regional writing competitions.

Keywords

Australian coastal gothic – regional gothic

Alex Nass was a lucky man. He didn't like people and it was mutual – people didn't like him. So while most of us suffer the slings and arrows of life's outrageous fortunes, and aren't they always fired by those closest, Alex was shielded by his disdain for humanity.

The pretentious, curly-headed cow who lived next door – the one who wouldn't have pissed on Alex if he was on fire – he didn't care about her. And colleagues, jealous of his success – it didn't matter. He avoided everyone at work, friend and foe. He'd equipped his office with coffee and an electric jug, so never visited the staff kitchen. And he rarely ventured out to use the toilets. He'd even peed into a plastic bottle to avoid leaving his room.

Alex believed he was, in the words of Pink Floyd, 'comfortably numb', happily immune to the thoughtlessness, fickleness, and spitefulness of people. And if he'd only stayed that way, he'd still be alive today. If he'd only held on to his scorn for the human race, he would never have found himself in the early hours of the morning in a beach car park in northern New South Wales.

It was a pitiful sight: a six-foot man trying to hide behind a salt-stunted tea-tree bush. It didn't help that his legs and torso were bound by a long swathe of Lycra, and the material was covered with hundreds of sequins. Alex could barely breathe.

Alex's routine was to rise at 3am, dress and go to the beach. Surfers didn't appear until a tiny crescent of sun peaked over the horizon – by then Alex was long gone. He would have crawled out of his swimming hole, hidden from the shore by bush, and crept back to bed.

But on the morning of his death there were already four surfers in the car park. Why were these surfers at the beach so early? Were they surfing the break for the first time? They looked like skinned seals, their black wetsuits pulled only to the waist, tiny tufts of pubic hair poking out. As they unloaded their boards, the four talked about tides and fishing and girls.

*Hurry up and go away, hurry up and go away*, he willed. Alex hadn't made a sound, and the surf was a roar.

When the surfers stepped onto the beach track, they came close to his tea-tree bush. If they'd spotted him, what would they've thought? No doubt they'd have joked for years about the transvestite in the car park.

At first glance his get-up was reminiscent of the evening gowns worn by the Supremes in the 1960s. Alex was dressed in a long tube of aqua polyester, pulled up to under his arms. Onto the material he'd sewn shiny pale-blue sequins – each the size of a small coin. And every row of sequins overlapped the one below, creating the effect of scales. At his feet were dozens of triangles of green and blue tulle and chiffon – a cascade of froth that swept the ground as he moved. On his upper arms he'd tied thin bands of green Lycra and from these floated filmy pieces of mint gauze. When he lifted his arms they looked like wings, but they were fins.

He would have made a gorgeous transvestite. He had cropped, blond hair and broad shoulders, he was in his mid-forties and had a hawkish profile – as handsome as a Nordic tennis player. He was no transvestite, and if he'd been wearing the headdress, instead of holding it under his arm, there would have been no confusion.

The headdress was a foot long and almost oval shape. He'd made the frame from wire then stretched fine blue-green, near-transparent gauze across it. It fitted snugly and was tied under the chin with ribbons. At the base more sequins overlapped, and on each side of the head, close to the centre, he'd sewn huge black metallic discs. They were the eyes, and he'd shaped a mouth by stretching back the sides.

When the surfers disappeared down the beach path, he unfolded himself from behind the bush. He was King Neptune emerging from a cave. Alex put on the head. His height was now over seven feet.

'I'm a fish, I'm a fish, I'm a fish,' he chanted. He could have turned back, retreated to his home, away from the surfers, but his need was too great. He began the shuffle down the path and stone steps that led to the Blue Pool.

Angourie had two swimming holes – the Blue Pool and the Green Pool – but they were not natural features. The seaside cliffs had been quarried for quartz in the 1950s. The two freshly carved cavities quickly filled with fresh water – the miners had hit natural springs.

Alex chose the Blue Pool for his personal use.

Both waterholes were shaded by natives: she-oaks, gnarly knotted banksias, mute-green eucalypts, and palms. It was a dark, quiet pocket of bush on the beach. The pools were deep, with a sudden drop-off from the stone banks, but just metres from the surf. In summer, they were a Mecca for families with young children who didn't want to risk the pounding waves. Pre-dawn the pools were deserted.

In one hand, Alex carried a thick rope. At the end he'd tied a shining silver hook, large enough to snare a shark.

He always tied the rope around the hard bark of an acacia then secured the hook to a belt around his waist. Once the rope was tied and the hook fastened, he'd jump in and swim a few circles around his pond, blowing bubbles, wriggling his fins. Next, as a rule, the thrashing could begin. For this he would need to remove the headdress, place it on the stone bank, then swim away from the tree until his rope was taut. Not easy, with legs bound by material, but over time he'd learnt to swim in a contorted butterfly stroke. His head, shoulders, and arms would rise out of the water in a jerky rhythm. He would pull hard on the rope, rear above the surface and crash down. Again and again he would do this, howling and screaming – despite copping mouthfuls of water – the sound of his cries smothered by the crash of waves. Never before had he seen anyone at the beach in the early morn.

On that last morning, almost discovered by the surfers, Alex doubted he'd make it to the Blue Pool. But he'd escaped unnoticed. His secret was safe.

Finally at the water's edge, he felt deliriously happy, knowing that soon he'd dive into the rippling expanse and swim ... swim like a fish. But tying the rope to his favourite tree, he thought he heard a noise near-by – a rustling of leaves. Was a surfer coming down the path? Alex panicked. He could not be seen. The only way to hide was to dive in, but stepping forward he slipped on a strip of chiffon. He fell backwards. His head hit the quartz.

Alex lay stunned on the rock face. A small wallaby popped through the greenery. He felt blood on his scalp. Before all his strength ebbed away, he managed to roll towards the ledge of the swimming hole. Plop went his body into the water.

Alex was free.

## **Part two**

Thirty kilometres away, Jason Crozier was tossing in his sleep, coiling the sheet between his legs into a knotted white rope. Just before dawn, his wife, Elizabeth, returned from nightshift and sidled into bed. He was splayed like a starfish across the mattress, naked, cheeks flushed, hot and bothered. It'd been another wet-season night. She elbowed him in the ribs. He flinched and rolled away. She curled into a ball on her side of the bed.

Twenty minutes before six the shrill of the phone rang through the house. After fumbling for the handset Jason croaked hello. He felt as stale and crumpled as the bed linen.

'Can you come in, Jason? Something extra special has turned up.' His colleague from Grafton's police station spoke without pause, every word clipped by adrenaline.

Jason wasn't rostered on until 10am. In order to induce a state of wakefulness, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up straight, but it didn't work. He wanted to ask what had happened, but his tongue was as swollen as a dead grouper. The colleague didn't need prompting. It was a suspicious death. A body had been found floating in Angourie's Blue Pool.

Jason stumbled around the room, bumping into furniture, searching for pen and paper. His wife moaned and pulled a pillow over her head – his damn work was always intruding on their lives.

'Look, I won't say any more,' said the policeman. Jason could hear him smiling. 'I don't want to spoil the surprise,' then his colleague paused. The fool was behaving like a jock in a bar – savouring the punch line while his drunk friends yearned for the joke's climax. 'Just come straight to Angourie's Blue Pool.' He hung up. The flippancy chafed Jason, but told him this was something out of the ordinary.

Sitting back on the bed, Jason's body ached. He tried to enjoy a few seconds of cool. Mornings were the only pleasant time of day when Grafton was in the grip of summer. The bright light, heat, and flies hadn't arrived. Birds serenaded the reprieve. Lace curtains billowed with puffs of breeze.

Elizabeth was so close to the edge of the bed that if she rolled forward she'd tumble onto the floor.

Jason knew that when she worked nightshift, he reverted to his bachelor-habit of sleeping across the mattress. On her return, she was always pissed off to find him hogging their bed. Sometimes she'd shake him awake, furious, then she'd embark on her pet rant about the move north. The bed was a metaphor for their marriage. There was never any room for her in their bed, or their relationship. They'd left Sydney for his work and come to Grafton, an old river town on the north coast of New South Wales. She'd given up everything – her friends, family, and job – and moved for him. But she'd made a go of it. She'd learned to love the town with its spring Jacaranda blooms. She was getting nursing shifts at the hospital. She'd made friends. Now he wanted to ruin everything. To move again. The transfer hadn't worked for him and, of course, it was always about him; there was no room for who she was or what she wanted.

Jason heard the too-familiar speech in his head as he looked at her sleeping: pink lips parted, nostrils flaring with every breath, a web of blonde hair across her cheek. These days he could only appreciate her looks when she slept.

Because he feared disturbing her, he dressed in the kitchen. It had become second nature to avoid speaking to Elizabeth. It was preferable to fighting. Jason found his navy-blue trousers and an ironed shirt in the laundry. His boots were under the kitchen table. A chequered blue police cap hung on the back door. The uniform was too hot for Grafton.

He drove to the police station to pick up his utility belt and a police car then gunned it up the Pacific Highway to Angourie, blue lights on but no sirens. Why wake up the town?

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Kim Trinh arrived for her shift at the Grafton radio station just after 5am. Whenever she parked near the rear door, she noticed that the building looked more like a public toilet block than a news hub. It was a flat, brick structure from the early '70s, whereas her beautiful silver Audi was one of the spoils from her past life as a Melbourne career woman: it didn't belong in a parking lot where weeds sprouted, and discarded food wrappers rolled about like tumbleweed in a western.

Kim was tired, struggling with the combination of hot nights and early starts. Unless she had a good night's sleep, getting out of bed before dawn was painful. When her career as a radio journalist began twenty years earlier, cadets were always rostered on the graveyard or dawn shifts. It was a baptism of fire, but for the past decade she'd enjoyed the civilised hours of a city TV reporter. Alas, the punishment for her fall from grace in Melbourne was an endless future of early rises. She'd blown it – got wildly drunk at the staff Christmas party and grabbed the news editor's crotch. It had

been a form of inebriated protest after being cheated out of a promotion. She was the one in the newsroom who broke the big stories, produced the most polished packages, and had the on-camera charisma, yet she'd been bypassed for the London correspondent post. Perhaps her boss thought it would be too confusing for viewers to watch an Asian woman with an Australian accent reporting from the capitals of Europe. Even though she was a seasoned journo, had the strain of ten years of tight TV deadlines caused her to lose it at the party? The morning after, the chief-of-staff asked her to resign. He told her it would be forgotten – in time – and she'd be reinstated, but she should get out of Melbourne for at least a year, maybe two. So Kim moved to Grafton where her aunt, the only Vietnamese person in the town, ran a clothing alteration business from home. There she found this crumb of a job.

Before going inside, Kim karate kicked the last in a row of garbage bins at the back door and watched it topple into an overgrown garden. Yet the attack on the bin only fanned her fatigue. She plonked into her seat. The newsroom was a maze of desks, each supporting wobbly turrets of newspapers, government print-outs and half-empty take-away containers. Chad, the young news reader, didn't look up from his computer screen, but Gabriel Smith, the morning presenter, arrived with a plunger of coffee. The clean, heady aroma jolted Kim awake.

'Oh, thank God,' she sighed. 'Gabriel, you're my saviour.'

When the petite silver-headed man poured her a cup, she toasted him with a chipped mug. 'You are my early morning balm.'

Kim and Gabriel talked about the rundown for the day's show then retreated to their desks. The office was quiet, the only sounds the staccato of typing, the sporadic crackle of the police radio scanner in the corner. But when they heard the voice of a young policewoman over the static, they stopped typing.

'Copy, Knoxy. So Jason is coming down?' she asked.

'Yep, and I'm also minutes away, but you've got to be pulling my leg – or should I say tail?' came the voice of her male colleague.

Kim was straining to hear. Did he say tail?

'It's true, it's true,' chimed the lighter female voice. 'He was dressed as a fish.'

Kim and Gabriel froze; neither made a sound that might obscure the policewoman's words. This they had to hear.

'A dog walker pulled the body out. It's still beside the Blue Pool in Angourie.'

'I think we should continue our conversation on the mobile,' said the male voice. The cop knew he might have an audience of long-haul truck drivers, insomniacs, and maybe a journo tuned into the police frequency on the scanner.

When the scanner went silent, Chad rose from his desk at the far end of the newsroom and walked over to Gabriel. 'We have to get someone out there. This is unbelievable.'

Gabriel agreed, but with Chad due to present the first news bulletin in fifteen minutes and Gabriel still finalising his show, there was only one option: Kim.

‘I’ll manage without you for a couple of hours,’ Gabriel told her. ‘Just go.’

She gulped down the remainder of her coffee.

‘Stop floundering,’ bellowed Gabriel. ‘Get it, flounder-ing.’ He was a middle-aged man with the grin of a school boy.

Kim grabbed a recording kit and left. She still felt sluggish, but her silver-grey Audi wove silently down the highway, gobbling up kilometres of blue asphalt like a sea monster.

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Kristi Hunt was listening to the radio as she drove, wondering if it was almost news time. It wasn’t a planned trip. She was driving her father’s van, the one he used to deliver cakes. But she should still be baking bread in Nimbin, not setting off to a cake shop in Yamba two hours south to deliver a tower of nuts, dried fruit and icing.

Her day had started to go wrong when her father noticed a sheen on the powdered white of the momentous cake. ‘Oh Luv,’ he gasped, ‘I think it’s starting to melt.’

The masterpiece sat on a stainless steel bench. The two bakers, in their matching whites, stood before magnificent spires of icing, encircled by pillars of shiny silver cake racks. The big chrome wall-oven cast out a ferocious heat; it was set for bread baking.

‘What’s the customer gonna say if it’s melted?’ asked her father. ‘You best deliver it now. You’ve put too much work into it to see it ruined.’

Their Nimbin shop was renowned for beautiful cakes. Whenever bakers in the region needed special-occasion cakes, they commissioned Hunt’s Patisserie and, even though Kristi had no formal training, she was a skilled decorator, a natural artist. This cake had been ordered by the Yamba pastry cook.

She’d been reluctant to leave her father. They had a long list of orders and they’d only just finished kneading the dough. There were buns, sponges and butter cakes to make. But they were charging more than \$500 for this cake, so nothing less than perfection would do. Kristi gently loaded it into a tray mounted on the floor of the van then began the long drive south.

She hated the delivery van. Unless absolutely necessary, she never got behind the wheel. A big woman, she felt even more bloated in the van. A monster-sized chocolate éclair dripping cream was painted on both sides of the vehicle.

The van flew down the pot-holed Nimbin Road nestled in the lush cleavage of mountain rainforest. It sped past Nimbin Rocks, jagged volcanic extrusions spiking from the earth; the landscape was being sucked skyward.

Finally, the local road joined the Pacific Highway, that ribbon of tar wrapping Australia's east coast. A dull, undulating white line flicked past. Kristi was relieved that the highway was empty – no one to see the fatty in the cake-mobile.

Over the years, her weight had skyrocketed. Her stomach had grown so large that when she sat the fat folded into three hard layers and rested like stones on her thighs. Her breasts had swelled to the size of small boulders and the flab on her upper arms was as dimpled and crimped as a dry riverbed, while her bulging hips spilled over the sides of the car seat. 'How did I get so fucking fat?' she asked herself as the road swept past.

She started piling on the weight after she got sick. The heart murmur zapped her of energy. Her parents never stopped taking her to hospital for tests. She missed weeks of school and tried to catch up, but her mum implored her to chuck it in, work in the family business. Since she'd dropped out of school, all Kristi's friends had left Nimbin to study or work or follow lovers. But she had stayed put under her mother's watch.

Kristi had never been able to stand up to her mum. The woman could hold onto a grudge for weeks. When Kristi refused to eat dinner as a kid, Mum dished up the silent treatment the next day.

When she was a teenager, boys liked Kristi. She was large, soft, and sweet tempered, but Mum vetoed every guy who showed an interest. Wrong family, dumb, or worse. Rough.

In high school, Kristi began washing her hands frequently. It became a compulsion that followed her into adulthood, washing at least a couple of times every hour. But all the perfumes of Arabia could not sweeten her little hands. Years later, the compulsion made sense to her. Kristi had been trying to wash away the part of her that displeased Mum.

Given she baked for a living, perhaps it was the right compulsion for her.

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Three hours after Alex Nass drowned, Kristi, the baker and cake-decorator extraordinaire, had almost reached Yamba, the last town before the coastal hamlet of Angourie. Not far behind her delivery van was Jason's police car, and behind him in a silver Audi was Kim, disgraced TV reporter-cum-radio producer.

They were a convoy – three strangers travelling down a thin bitumen road lined by grazing cows, sugar cane and estuaries – a small flotilla, three individuals blown off course by life.

## Research statement

### *Research background*

I investigate whether the pristine beaches of regional Australia could be a credible Gothic location. My creative work, with a coastal setting, evokes feelings of foreboding, the uncanny, even fear – all Gothic markers. The beach becomes the Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (Stevenson 1886/1999) of Gothic locations, offering restoration, yet it's also home to the grotesque and strange.

### *Research contribution*

By focusing on a city exile in a seaside town, I follow Tim Winton, Robert Drewe and Peter Temple, who have each penned dark stories about troubled men retreating to the coast to surf, swim, and fish. These texts have a swell of Gothic markers: a preoccupation with death, turmoil, the *unheimlich*, and buried secrets. They are Gothic tales of degeneration set in seaside country towns. But in Australian literature, the regional coastline is not widely recognised as a Gothic locality. Historically, it's the continent's interior that usually traps Gothic protagonists in texts as diverse as 'The Tramp' (Baynton 1902/2005) and *Wake in fright* (Cook 1961/2009). Yet the wandering anti-heroes of the Coastal Gothic are reminiscent of Romantic Gothic figures like Heathcliff (Brontë 2009) roaming the moors, or Frankenstein's monster (Shelley 1818/1993), adrift in an Arctic wilderness. My creative work is part of an emerging regional literature from the Northern Rivers of New South Wales – often featuring Gothic characteristics.

### Research significance

I was awarded a Masters of Arts for my creative text and exegesis. I delivered a paper at the 2015 International Gothic Association Conference and won a 2016 Byron Bay Writers Festival Mentorship Award and a 2017 Scarlett Stiletto Award.

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