

## **The Eleventh Hour Cli-Fi Short Story Entries**

June 2022

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## **‘Time is of the Essence’**

Susan Allen

Who could have foreseen that a night out would culminate in such a crazy and heinous act? Certainly not Eva Bell-Harris that was for sure, a woman who was expected to be squeaky clean in her line of work as a Private Eye. Beyond reproach, a pillar of her close-knit Nelson community, a woman renowned for always doing the right thing. Now here she was facing an unexpected moral dilemma. Eva seldom acted on impulse, preferring to organise everything in minute detail. Husband Ronnie referred to her as a micro manager which was downright offensive given he left absolutely everything up to her. Eva’s head was whirling as she faced the scary reality of the situation – what to do with the remains and how to cover up any residual evidence that could have dire repercussions for her.

Earlier that evening Eva had headed off with a spring in her step, eager to learn more about the art of composting at a garden centre in the city centre. Now here she was in this predicament that was growing more complex by the minute. Her motivation to attend the beginner’s workshop was fuelled by her growing concern about the impact of climate change. Eva worried about the amount of methane producing household waste going into landfill – a gas that threatened the existence of all life on Earth.

The evening was facilitated by a rugged looking young man whose knowledge about the scientific composition of the earth and the intricacies of creating good compost wowed Eva. She listened intently as he expounded the environmental benefits, thinking the process seemed simple, yet exciting. Eva could not wait to get into her garden tomorrow and feel the soft soil massaging her bare feet. She smiled smugly and nodded in agreement when the presenter confirmed statistics she already knew. “Thirty percent of food produced ends up in landfill so composting is one small way we can help both the environment and ourselves” he said looking in Eva’s direction and smiling.

At the end of the evening there was a prize draw with the winner receiving either a state of the Art compost bin or a worm farm – containing a thousand tiger worms. The mere thought had alarmed Eva with her fertile imagination picturing creatures of ginormous proportions with insatiable appetites. The graphic illustration on front of the box of a rearing snake with a gaping mouth terrified her. The concept of farming

worms conjured up even more weird and wacky imagery for Eva. She already had quite enough on her plate meeting the dietary demands of husband Ronnie and their aging Pug. Besides, she was in the throes of finalising an investigation into a conman based in Addis Ababa accused of a romance scam. Tending to the culinary preferences of tiger worms seemed infinitesimal in comparison.

Eva had a flashback to her high school years in the Hutt Valley and the dissection of an earthworm in biology class. Pinning the skin of the tiny form onto a board and slicing down the middle with a scalpel, exposing all the minute internal organs. Despite the assurances of the ruddy faced teacher Mr Martin, some had still been squirming, making one last desperate slither for freedom across the cold stainless-steel bench. Eva remembers feeling nauseous looking at the gruesome sight of the slaughtered hermaphrodites, genus *Lumbricina*, scattered around the lab.

The presenter was talking again, his deep voice interrupting Eva's jumbled thoughts. The workshop was ending ...” and the winner of the worm farm is Eva!” Everyone had cheered and clapped as Eva struggled to control the wave of fear that threatened to engulf her. It seemed like the plot from a horror movie, the idea of managing a herd of seething worms. Eva could feel her palms becoming sweaty and the sticky skins touching her own. Reluctantly she accepted the prize appeased by hearing that follow-up consultations with the workshop eco-warrior were part of the package.

It was Eva's worst nightmare driving home alone that dark windy night with her prize package perched precariously on the back seat of her Corolla station wagon. The Tiger worms getting bigger by the second in her mind, memories of the traumatic carnage in her biology class returning. Eva realised she was ill equipped to meet the needs of the creatures now in her charge squelching and writhing in the blackness just over her shoulder. A growing feeling of panic gripped her as she pictured the worms gnawing their way out of the box – crawling closer. Multiplying in numbers and size. Evolving into ferocious carnivores with strange mutations, devouring all in their path. A scenario now within the realms of possibility given the current global extremes of climate change. The red wigglers if left unchecked could evolve into super sliders capable of destroying an entire community – the likes of the mice plague happening in Queensland. Eva let out a sob she needed to act now. Her heart was pounding as she considered alternative methods of destroying the destroyers. The possible ramifications personally and professionally didn't bear thinking about.

In a moment of absolute clarity Eva knew what she must do for her own sanity and the greater good. She must summon all courage and conquer her irrational fears. There was no time to lose, global warming was a reality and the hours were ticking by swiftly on the conservation clock. Eva must do her bit to help restore a level of environmental equilibrium beginning in her own backyard by educating husband Ronnie on the nuances of worm farming. Eva Bell-Harris Private Eye, tropical fish fanatic and upcycling expert was ready to embrace her inner Eco-Priestess...and her one thousand tiger worms. She would use her standing in the community to spread the word about the wonder of the natural world and the part everyone must play to prevent irreparable damage to all life on Planet Earth. Time was of the essence.

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## Kauri Encounter

Barbara Cameron

Charlotte gave up smoking for that tree. Her great great granddaughter doesn't know that, thinks Charlotte was a greenie who never had any vices, the gin binges buried too. Ebony cranes her neck to take it in, take in it's enormity tweaks a neck muscle, ouch, then exhales with appreciation of this whenua and it's distinction from her roots. She can taste the hunger strike never broken. Charlotte shriveled so Tane Mahuta and his kin could carry on talking to each other through their root system, probably cautioning each other, like they had since colonisation came. Moss and the rich smell of the ferns submerge her. Her great great grandmother died protecting this forest. The tangata whenua whom have protected the remnants of this once vast forest, they have reserved treasures, treated as taonga, these incredible giant producers of oxygen. The Kauri breathe in, almost inhaling the sky, the sun and the rain, then expelling the crap, the CO2 we produce, rejecting and upcycling the pollution, the speed, the arrogance of our very human insolence, and they sigh with grief. Grief over what their environment has degenerated in to, their own demise. Heaviness from the air now, sadness at the slowing of the birds' conversation with them, telling the Kauri all about the far off coastline.

The Kauri trees bury the grief of humans, of the ancestors, both Maori and of the missionaries, whalers, settlers from the vast seas. Settlers whom have brought with them many harmful things, guns and diseases, greed and their Queens' chain, roping off Aotearoa so they can raise their stock and grow their crops. Tane Mahuta, he is threatened by an unwitting import of colonisation. *Phytophthora agathidicida*, Charlotte marvels at the scientific name for Kauri dieback that she reads from the DOC information board. From under the soil microscopic water mould reaches forth damages their roots and robs their tissues. They can not receive the nutrients and water, they starve to death, just like Charlotte. *Am I responsible for this, the fencing off of a giant tree, now like a zoo exhibit of the botanical.* Ebony feels an anatomical affinity with this tree, "You and me both solid, grounded and earthy." Ebony used to hate her thick legs but alongside tane Mahuta she loves their solidity. "You and me Tane we won't blow over in a storm." she laughs to herself.

Tane Mahuta, maybe 3, 000 years old, The Lord of the Forest can hear Ebonys' thoughts, would like to converse with her, get help for his friends, dieback haunts my neighbours, they will try hardest of all to save me, for I am the largest in the world. My friends the Pohutukawa, Manuka and Rata are stalked by myrtle rust disease, choked by gorse while the cretinous cockroaches, German , American unwelcome, the cute native ones can run up and down their spines.

The Kauri stand tallest of all, in their girth they hold many secrets and many sorrows. They are called upon to disseminate the memories of tribal war and land war, of the wars waged on paper against the ways of tangata whenua. Cast your eyes upward and see in their branches the painfully slow evolution of humankind.

Charlotte never identified as Maori, she knew that she had import status, loved Aotearoa and all things Maori. Never wanted to be all about cultural appropriation without the aroha. Ebony has her own angle on how she slips in to this Utopia, definitely Utopia when the rest of the planet has no breathable air, people just living in pods. Ebony can draw down on the generations of Georgesons like drawing on a pipe, Shetland Islands descendants who have run sheep and cattle in verdent hills of Hokonui. Enveloped by a green that soaks your eyes in its fecundity. I can come here, stand here, Ebony belongs in this security. "You don't mind me calling out to you across the barrier do you Tane Mahuta."

She has read the traditional Maori creation tales of Tane seperating earth and sky. She wishes she had been able to sit with her great great grandmother and hear the voices of tangata whenua tell her about Tanes' parents Ranginui the sky father and Papatuanuku earth mother, tell her of how their many tamariki, became frustrated by living in the darkness between their parents and decided to push them apart. From her left she hears quick footsteps, "Outa me way stupid, stupid cow, why are ya talking to a tree, haw haw" Ebony is a bit stunned. Much more stunned when he pulls a chainsaw from his tramping pack. She sees him greedily pulling the starter cord right there in the sanctity of the Waioua Forest, "I'm a gunna chop down this fence and get a selfie right under that big tree, me mates dared me to and I always take up a dare" he grunts proudly. *What can I do, what can I do, he might hurt Tane Mahuta.* Ebony is not going to let him harass her tree, Charlottes' tree. "You idiot, put that down" He starts it up sweeps it in an arc laughing. Ebony darts behind him, shoves his right elbow, the chainsaw falls and stops. He turns to her looking more stunned than pissed off. Ebony knows the shock will evaporate in to anger and retaliation. She leaps at him pinning his shoulders to the ground with her knees, the kauri like strength and girth of her thighs pinioning him on the mossy, ferny, forest floor. Rich voices carrying with them four young men from the local Iwi approach. "Kia ora, did he propose and your saying no?" one of them asks. "He's an environmental hooligan!" Ebony dismounts, the young men frog march the chainsaw would be massacre back out of the Kauri forest, Tane Mahuta reflects on the courage of Ebony and her great great grandmother.

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## ***The south window***

*Jackie Cook*

It's snowing in the south window. Not heavily, although it would like to. White flakes are drifting down, not settling, and not yet many. But they'll come.

The screen says 'intermittent.' Or maybe, 'imminent.' Either is possible.

The gauge twists, and the heat purrs up a notch. The house knows what to do. It can be trusted.

Outside the south window the sky gets greyer, darker. Nothing is moving, but then it mostly doesn't. Hasn't for some time. Worth checking how long that's been - but then again, why?

It doesn't change anything.

It is what it is.

The book today is called *Bleak House*. It suits the mood for the south window.

If the clouds weren't so low, if the mist cleared, that other house would be visible, the one which has lost its roof.

Or maybe it never had one.

Maybe that roof never got built.

*Wuthering Heights* it had been called, like that other book.

Who knows why the roof was missing?

Who knows why it was called *Wuthering Heights*?

The house on the other boundary, the one through the East window, never had its front pane installed.

Supply problems, the gap too large for what was available. They'd kept reducing it down, smaller, smaller - but the orders cut out, in a race forever lost to availability.

Wasn't it always the way? Or had been, for a very long time.

Maybe they'd had a window installed, but it had been stolen away from them.

Cut away clean. Silently. In the night, or in the mist. Carried away to somewhere else, to some other house.

Maybe this one.

There was a long history of that, back in the beginning, when the houses were first built. Too few nails, too little tin, and a chronic shortage of glass.

It had to come a long, long way.

The first crimes were thieving building materials. Endemic. Filled the gaol houses.

They didn't have windows, either, but got built. Among the first places completed.

You have to have order, don't you. Property has to be protected.

Otherwise, what's it all for?

Outside the East window it is sunny. Clear blue sky. Not a cloud.

It should be cheerful, a good sign - but there hasn't been one of those for a long time. The trees are still bare, and the ones nearest the walls don't have any growth buds. Icy stems. Naked twigs.

Maybe this year they won't make it. The signals, whatever they are, won't come. Conditions will stay wrong, or the right ones not arrive in time.

Or maybe someone will steal them.

A disappointed sort of light is streaming down. The earth steams a little, vapour rising, but otherwise, nothing stirs.

*Bleak House* is a very long book. The pages flick over, deep into the afternoon. The sun, such as it is, drops away.

The snow has climbed the window ledge to the South.

During the night the screen monitor flickers, pings its cue sounds, little arpeggios skittering about, like keyboard exercises. There are no alerts current, although the Western skylight begins to show lightening flashes, a good way off, beyond the ridge. There's no rain on the roof, no thunder or wind gusts. Maybe it's the Tesla Array, picking up electrical charges from the atmosphere.

That's what the screen seems to think, for it has turned itself off. Gone into protective sleep mode.

There's that strange smell in the air again, ozone, raindrops hitting hot asphalt, or maybe it's scorched wiring. One or the other, who can tell which?

It hangs in the air, indeterminate. Or interminable. Maybe both.

That screen is becoming unreliable.

The power hums on. You can do that when you're off grid, linked in to the old hydro, churning along, all these years. The penstocks whirl as they have since 1920-something.

They've largely been forgotten, which seems on the whole to be a good policy. 'Under the radar,' as they used to say. A tad shady if you want to know - much like the North window, which used to have vines to protect it from the sun.

These days even that doesn't seem to rise as it should. Slipped in its orbit. Maybe Maui's brothers had a tighter grip on those ropes than anyone imagined.

There's a perpetual sense of dampness. Bleakness. Perhaps that's what 'wuthering' means. Wuthering away, in a gathering dark. There's dampness, waiting, every so-called dawn.

The gauge clicks up another notch.

Those flashes through the West skylight are getting brighter now. More burn than flash. No intervals. Continual, or maybe continuous.

Is that an alert? A whiny sort of hum, getting louder, popping the signal-bars, up, down, up again. Progressing upwards, overall.

Not good.

The house will check. It will know what to do...

It's been a while since anything's come in from Tess. Always stayed in touch, even if the house has never been a client. Maybe it's an inbuilt marketing urge.

'Hello there! Have you ever thought about trying...'

Serious engineering, these Tesla Arrays. No sense of humour at all.

'See ya later, conservator!'

Never replies.

Metconn chirps on, but there's nothing new. Weather forecast: 'Everything.'

'No change predicted.'

It's right about that.

'Have a good day,' it says. No sense of irony.

Tasnet is getting very faint. The signal barely arrives. Running out of puff. Hard to believe the turbines aren't turning, but who knows? Their data feed pegged out ages ago.

The bills keep coming.

The house always pays them, of course. Just in case. It's the only channel still operating.

It's nice to have someone to talk to.

The house clicks carefully through the monitor roster, security lights, auto-locks, battery levels.

Nothing in the in-box.

Nothing ready to send.

*Bleak House* is ended now, the last page turned. It gathers itself up and returns to the online library.

It's given up demanding it be reviewed.

In the South window snow still falls.

Through newly broken panes, and onto the floor.

## Trustpower

Ciaran Durand

*It smells like the hoover's being going, at least he's done that.* Taking a second to unfurrow her brow, she aimed blankly into the beady eyed lens at the top of the sophisticated ignorant locking device. Lovely greeting. Nothing about the gap at the bottom a mouse could limbo through. Priorities. In that stale moment she imagined driving her index finger into the lens and knocking whatever mouldy teen was sitting narrowly in the darkened chair of some grey room in a greyer building dry-eyed and twitchy tired. No waste.

*Smells hoovery, doesn't feel it, wonder how much power he sinked half doing it?* She stopped at the screen in the tiny hall. Innately aware how tiny for an atom of a second. They'd made a hall a room of its own, design-bots pushing pretend human ideas. A three roomed ruined box, no waste. Staring hard at gated graphs and barred charts on a pawed screen, it was tough to tell if he'd been hoovering enough, she'd have to opt for today's breakdown. He'd see that she had if he bothered looking. She felt he had been more bothered looking lately so instead she did some cobbly sums silently and bunched up more bulbing suspicions loudly.

His cold neck strained, a burial stare of pristine white eyes up into the black dot innards of a dead shower head. He knew how that control pad could autopsy his usage in a molecule, lay it bare, lay it there, there for her. *Leave no trace.* A tagline from way back when forced its weak way from the cracked wax seal on his memories. *Nothing but traces now.* Human slugs tying ourselves up in sticky toffee lies, so muddied it ceased being water. He'd stick to the plan, good cold water for a minute, remembering to count evenly. Warm it up to wash, use those two full minutes he's collared from the hoovering game earlier. He couldn't remember the last time he'd glimpsed two bloated minutes of warmed water at whatever rate they set the centralised pumps. Bliss waste.

The reflection of her re-furrowed brow was long established before she felt it. The control screen's power-pointer indicated the shower was about to go on. The lever set to coldest. A coiled spring of puke leapt in her stomach. Believing was seeing. She pushed the thought from the front of her head, but its stain remained. *What was he waiting for?* she wondered, the wonder pulling her back a foot from the brink for a hand of time. She knew how easy he could see her skimps too if he looked. Dinners were less warm and clothes less dry but only by a few increments. She was saving too. Saving to spend.

A shinny penny stood out; he knew that. He could hide the good wash under some clothes maybe, something he could peel off to ensure the essence of effort wasn't wasted. His pride pushed for shinier, his scarred arms reminded him of prides wasteful folly. He hoped she'd be there, as they had arranged in the most analogue fashion they could. The delay timed out; the shower decided it was time to shower. The ice water whiplashed him from his cosy concoctions. The once beautiful sympathetic inhaling gasp was dampened to a meekness

unbefitting of a human. A waste they said. He counted evenly, a whiff of the warm to come rested on his tethered shoulders. The fizz of a tiny thrill coaxing the embers of a spent existence.

She looked to see how much oven they have left for the month; her sums were off. No tradeable wiggle-room. A life full of roadblocks on a road to no place anyway. The dinners went in, just enough to meet the calorific guidelines, she was sure they changed every year but couldn't pinpoint the year ends. As if by chance she found herself cursing the dishwasher. No licked plate ever needed the washing it gave, a sick joke she thought. Couldn't give the thing away these days, too many fell for the tale or rebates and savings, hygiene and clean. Having it meant *they* wanted to see it being used. Waste not want not. The day of wants was well gone, baffled to spent whispers. *What was taking him so long?* A prod from within, stirred her. Setting the corner table, she knew meals used to be something, flashes of noise and smells of taste warped her mind but lacked the stamina to adhere. Would they enjoy a meal again? Could they enjoy a meal again? So much waste tasered in the wasteless system.

*How did he have so long?* The subconscious doing unwanted favours, tallying behind the curtain. *YA, he was in there an age...* brow furrowing. Was it worth asking him, calling him, inquisition. Draw the spotlight down, only thorny thing was the reach of the spotlight. She wasn't without blemish, a rising tide and all that. Keep the powder dry, let closed eyed dogs lie. A cabinet full of proverbs in a mind of ageing admin.

"Hungry?" she muttered.

"Only the exact enough," he nodded to the warm oven. She smirked, slowly remembering what a smirk was.

"Will I light a candle?" she wavered.

"Ya, lets. Will they allow it to last the meal?" he said, as if they weren't alone.

She cotton sock slid to the only press. He walked to the control screen and scrolled to extra requests. Searching silently, he saw a history of requests, she saw how long it was since they shared a candle at dinner. His mind raced, engaging gears haphazardly. Her mind slowed to a pulse, the last one barely egging the next on. *So much waste*, they both thought, separated by the drained room.

"Here, I got one," she jittered. Hoping deep down it wasn't too late.

He sensed it. Deleting the history on the controller, he moved towards her.

"Great," a smile cracking the creases.

Maybe all wasn't lost.

## Deep Dive

Martin Hucklesby

"Just run that past me again for timing, will you Bernie?"

"Like a bit of mansplaining, do you?"

"What is this, 2020? Skip the archaic terminology – anyway, it's not for me, it's for my hologram audience. We've only got 3 terabytes of data and you know how crappy Starlink coverage is over the Tasman Ocean, especially this far South. You're on."

"OK. *Well, hi Lucy and welcome everyone to Time Capsule. In this series we're exploring the area once known as Te Taihu, or Top of the South. We left the Palmerston North port terminal about 5 hours ago. There's one of the ferries now, on its way to Murchison, where...*"

"Bernie, stop. Too much detail – this isn't the History Channel. I'm wasting data – get to the point or I'm going to have to drop to 6G, then only the retro-tech geeks will be able to watch it."

"And they're not your demographic, I know. OK, here we go. *We're moored in 120 meters of water right above one of the first low-lying areas to go under during Uprising1 in 2030 – yes, 70 years ago, bit of a jubilee – sorry, inappropriate, you can cut that bit out.*"

"You're a funny guy Bernie. You're going to love the filter I'm using on you – not!"

"Now who's talking like an old-timer? What, I'm still on? Right... *Local iwi called this area Whakatu, but there was a short period, two hundred years, when there was a city here known as Nelson. Nelson was planned in what were the British Isles – yes, plural, there's only one now of course – and dropped onto the terrain with little regard for the local topography or the local people, and with an immigrant population ready to make their mark. The island behind us, with the remains of a memorial on top, was a hill that marked the geographical centre of the country at that time. Ad break?*"

"Better have one – that was about a minute, nearly 100 words, can't push it."

"Well, you know your audience. I'm ready – I could do with a drink anyway."

Bernie slid his free hand into the top of his jacket. The faux-microfibre surface bulged and flexed as he rhythmically squeezed something over his chest. Bernie's face mirrored the undulations as though he was drinking. He cleared his throat.

"*Distilled from a blend of artesian bore concentrate, Scott Base winter melt and Franz Josef glacier extract, Three Waters sachets plug into all standard thoraxcess fittings. So don't forget to Plug and Glug!*"

"What was that look – pleasure or wind? You're supposed to look quenched and satisfied. The biometrics engine will have to fix it. Hurry up!"

"Right then... *Over those two hundred years the land was stripped of its natural foliage and chemicals, human and animal waste tainted the rivers. Land no longer secured by native bush collapsed into the little liveable land that remained. Parts of the estuary near the city were fenced off and filled in. This was known as reclaimed land, as if the sea had somehow stolen it. Of course notions of ownership, property, claim and counterclaim were seriously distorted in those days, and the natural world was seen as a mere resource.*"

“Cut, stop there, getting a bit heavy. Have to see what the comprehension-age algorithm makes of it. Need a bit of action, but we’ll slip in some animated visuals here – the Early Settlers’ Memorial statue, just the heads showing, people fishing from the first floor of the old library. Do the commentary now and I’ll punch it in over the soundtrack.”

*“OK...The hard-fought decision to construct the library on stilts was a sign that rising water levels were at last being taken seriously. It was too late of course. But since the trawlers stopped going to sea local produce was abundant – just ask these happy fisherfolk!”*

“Very nice Bernie, very old-school. We’ll cut to you in the capsule now. I’ll use the feed straight from the external cameras. Get your gear on. You can get high on that pure tanked Lake Rotoiti air.”

“Yes, at least it’s local. Funny, the council was on to the clean air thing over 100 years ago – big shout out!”

“Big what?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

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“OK Bernie, what can you see? Yes, I know I can see it too. This is another chance for you to do some explaining. You’re on now – give us some numbers.”

*“Thank you Lucy... We’re heading down in the Time Capsule to show you the sunken city of Nelson!*

*I’m doing a circuit from the south-west. Yes, it looks like they got their long runway – about the same time the big fuel tankers were banned. They even used to have a refinery up north for the crude stuff.*

*Now we’re turning back towards the city. In 2025 the sea reclaimed its original shoreline. This long curvy undersea feature, known as the Boulder Bank, was fully submerged a decade later.*

*Here’s the plaque marking the original waterfront. Poignant!*

*Wow, the place looks like it was abandoned pretty quickly! We know the predictions for sea level rise kept doubling, but I’m seeing signs of sudden panic. Must have been one of the big seas and storms of the late 2040s.*

*This is the main street. Nelson had lots of heritage buildings. Here’s the old post office, built in 1983. It must have been a dearly-loved landmark, as after the climate activist’s bomb attack it was fully restored by local ratepayers.*

How’re we doing Lucy? Loving the air down here! Time for one more clip, OK.

*The architectural merit of the post office tower was often enhanced by hanging banners celebrating other aspects of Nelson’s rich cultural heritage or promoting worthy causes. I can see one has survived all these years! Let’s zoom in for a closer look – Siri, enhance – thank you, yes I can read it now... it seems to be promoting Climate Awareness Week, June 2032.”*

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## Plausible Deniability

Warren Nevill

The scorplings of red dust moved serpent-like, immersed perhaps in thoughts of their own, searching misplaced forgetting's in a time which no longer was. Wisps of hot breath, shifting about my feet, teased tantalisingly close recollections. Snatched glances of that beneath as the dryness altered form from one to another. One moment a desert landscape; the next a dust velveteed highway. That white painted centre line, seen again abruptly gone. Obliterated perhaps that one last time: become instead some outback God-forsaken place, seemingly completely foreign. Rememberings of Brimstone's sulphurous residue assailed all senses. Withered sticks, once branches felled from tortured, blackened trunks, gave drifts pause for reflection. Everywhere it stirred; shimmered as if to relieve itself of the heat cocooned. Then passed on.

Bare metal, as might previously have been a vehicle once recalled, taunted me. Within, four sightless faces twisted slowly in unison. Parchmented skin of each drawn tight. Teeth, bared back by shrivelled lips voiced lost snarls of too little, too late, resentment. Hair, such as remained, merely skeins of some last week's salon's glory. Tiny knuckles, already split bone white, defiantly clenched remnants of that stuffed, go everywhere toy, I recognised too well. Baleful eyes: Stargazy dish reminders, motionless, uninviting yet somehow demanding. Images, etched to memories unforgotten, should only capacity have survived. A hand recalled too late. Blistering on contact, possibly not of mine sensation so deprived. Still, the driver's door swung free. Beckoning. But for that pervading stench: beyond old pies reheated once too often, their existence then ignored. Yet where was I? Did I not belong there? Wherever 'there,' was. The enveloping dust, hanging heavy amongst the Armani shirt's pristine folds, shed from my exposed forearm. Its skin shrivelled and curled denying contact. There was no life here. Not even of my incidental passing.

I'd been trapped in a dream. At least I thought that's where I'd been. Or had I simply been jolted back from some reality confused; where imaginings turned by yet another page, became pointless glimpses of foregone futures wasted? Crusted eyelids, snatched free from dream's denial by tumultuous poundings; my thigh suddenly alive with pain, Sandra's nails no longer gently resting. Such contorted face in the child restraint, her reflected screams mere futile stretchings entreating deafened ears: all sounds deprived except that one, deafening, coda.

We'd been comfortably nestled on the latest Cruiser's smoked grey, precision perforated, Italian leather seating. It could have been the big Tesla, but I wasn't buying into that line. Just another spin by the multinationals. Subdivisions in their thousands, spread thick upon once productive land, blurred by in the merest blink of our, couldn't care less, eyes. All progress driven. All packed thicker than the rice at their respective weddings. Each brimmed full of the latest distractions. Every naïvely switched charging station, fuelled by cheap imported coal. Heat pumps, summer run: as all are built too tight. Not one infrastructure supported; yet each, a two tired family car demand. What other options existed? Call it a bus service? Kids needed to get to school and sports and the motorway: incessantly always there, endlessly reminding especially at night, perhaps they get used to it.

It was gentle at first, not even holiday mood dampening. Morphing toward another summer squall, just an intermittent swipe, automatically driven. Clever. Except it wasn't. Neither had the increasing intensity been forecast. With the highest setting self-selected, pushing against the wall of white against the headlight beam was strangely satisfying, even if our usual lunchtime café was mere moments away. Smudges of those passing opposite briefly flickered, although most had pulled aside. Discarded leaves, shaken in our purge of passing. The advantage of elevation: able to progress while lesser carbon soaks, succumbed to skulking onto the shoulder. That's what it's all about. Power. Power and status charged acquisition. Besides, I needed it for the towing. That, and those endless beach house eating miles made cruisy. Admittedly she was a bit out of trim this trip. The matching 450hp Mercs, fitted to the Prestige 50/50's stern heavier than anticipated. Not really needed. The original 300's had plenty of life; but hey, if you've got it, flaunt it. Interest rates were so drop-dead low, why wouldn't you? Just needed another trailer reset. Anyway, the graphics alone, suffice to cause the neighbour to drool pure petrol fumes. Make a change from him banging on about Cindy taxing our lifestyles into oblivion. Doesn't she realise, for us, it's simply about scheming up another loophole? Bet he'll have the 500's next trip up. Another scam as well, no doubt.

Still, Sammy wasn't as enthusiastic as expected. More interested in her birthday foiling board than water skiing with us now. Only eleven, and already set to compete. And Creighton, well at seventeen, the promise of manhood – since he'd started spending most evenings with the girl next door – gnawing at his ankles. As for the after-thought in the car seat. What a future she has lined up. What an inheritance I'll bestow on her. I might put in the unreasonable hours, but hey, there were the frequent long weekends like this to make up for it. Would just need to check the Pro 13

occasionally. All right: half a dozen times or so a day, but no more, how else would the unfortunates know how much fun we're having?

Yet this had bounded enjoyment: thundering now – less rain, more Iguazu – couldn't even distinguish Guns 'n Roses melancholic cacophony from that on the roof. Every wiper's futile action, a frustrated wasted glimpse. A white-caned misfortunate would have made better progress. Then came the cones and cop car spread across the barrier. 'Flooding.' What did they expect? Still, the Toyota should have been allowed through. Hopefully, nothing more than a passing moment's inconvenience: waiting was never my style. Paired blue and red pulsings in each frosted passing, drifted pirouette-like from view. Mouthing an emptiness; each previous decision suddenly regretted, I forced open the door.

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## The Remaking

Julie Nevin

When the sun set behind the hill, the drums began to pound, faster and faster, until they kept time with Kat's racing heart. She felt her body pulse with the sound and clutched her bag tightly. Then, as silence fell and the final boom echoed away around the valley, the Speaker raised her staff.

"Another day ends and we give thanks. Today we had a successful hunt, bringing us meat while helping the forest to stay in balance. Once again, we shared abundant food from our gardens, and the stream ran clear. And we welcome a traveller to our community." People glanced in Kat's direction, but she gazed steadfastly at the Speaker. "But before we look to our future, we must first remember our past."

The Speaker settled onto a mat on the floor and laid her staff in front of her. Rustling around Kat told her others were settling in, too, and she felt herself relaxing slightly. It wasn't quite time yet. She turned to face the fire, flickering under the deepening sky, and pushed her decision away.

*"Before the Remaking of the world," the Speaker began, "There came the Great Hunger. The powerful people of the world felt a growing emptiness. Driven mad with it, they clawed apart the earth, stripping it naked, chewing it up and burning it, turning it into things to feed their hunger, and spilling the waste into air and water and land.*

*"They had forgotten the abundance around them and would not listen to the people who knew that their emptiness could not be fixed in this way. And so the Great Hunger grew and grew until it devoured half of the life on earth, and much of what remained was vulnerable and in service to the Hungry. The balance of the world faltered."* Kat shivered, unsure if it was the chill of the evening wind at her back, or the violence of their shared history, that raised the hairs at the back of her neck.

*"Finally, the Gods had enough," the speaker continued. "The seas rose ever higher and the storms came ever more fiercely, to wash away the damage. The seasons changed and food became scarce, so the people were forced to remember what true hunger was. Some turned on each other. Many were lost, and there was much pain."* At this, Kat felt a sharp tug inside, where her old grief hid, and tears escaped, unbidden.

*“Within this turmoil, some people remembered their inherent connection to all things. They sought instruction from those who had not forgotten. They reconnected to each other and to life and, in so doing, filled their emptiness. They felt sorrow for the world and that gave them new meaning. As the old ways spread once again, the Great Hunger ended and the Remaking began.*

*“Today, we continue the Remaking and we renounce hunger in all its forms. Here, we make sure all people and all our brothers and sisters in the natural world with us have enough. We seek contentment and to stay connected with each other and with all things.”*

The Speaker finished her retelling and sat in silence. Sparks flew from the fire into the growing dark as everyone sat quietly with their own reflections.

Kat’s thoughts flicked back to her decision, almost despite herself. She stroked her bag absently as she vacillated between one choice and the other, the softness of the leather soothing her. After a long moment, a man across the circle from her rose and reached down for the staff.

“I have hungered,” the man said. “I sought healing knowledge, asking for time and expertise from our healer. I - I wanted it for myself - to feel less vulnerable to injury and illness. Now, in sorrow and hope, I offer myself to the community, as healer and teacher.” He replaced the staff and returned quietly to his place, and a woman stood abruptly. Trembling as she clenched the staff in white fingers, she spoke fiercely.

“I *still* hunger. I am so angry!” she shouted to the stars, shaking the staff in emphasis. “I feel the seasons still changing, and fear next summer’s drought, and I am so *angry* at those who came before us - my mother and father, and all of yours - who were part of it. I hunger for justice! And,” she paused, taking a deep, shaking breath, “And I ask for your help, to let go of my hunger.”

The Speaker held the space for a long moment, waiting. When no one else rose, she turned to Kat, and Kat knew it was, finally, time to decide.

She stood, picked up the staff, and faced the centre of the circle, taking in their faces and the weight of the staff in her hands. Some had become familiar in the short time since she had arrived, stumbling from the slowly regenerating bush into the community’s lush food forest, as surreal as a dream. She suspected some could quickly become dear to her. But could she trust them? Could this really be as good as it seemed? Finally, she spoke.

“I have hungered my whole life. I have wandered for nearly as long as I can remember, and I was lucky if I ever found enough food to fill my belly.” She opened the clasp of her bag and pulled out her things. The knife she had stolen from a mouldy, abandoned home, just after her parents died. A carefully wrapped children’s book, from before. A fish hook and line. A thin rope for trapping. She laid each on the ground, in turn. Finally, most difficult of all, the pack itself, which had been her father’s. “These things are all I have. They have helped me survive.” She paused. “They remind me how alone I am.” Another pause. She had only trusted herself for so long that it was hard to let go, but she knew what she had to do.

“Thanks to your generous welcome, today my belly is full. Now I am hungry to belong, and to be part of the Remaking. In sorrow and hope, I give all that I have to the community. My belongings, my knowledge, my skills, and myself.”

As one, the whole community stood, and took hands, including her, smiling at her. “We see you,” they said.

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## The Oasis

Katie Shaw

Pulling herself up, Jesi stumbles over to her up-turned skateboard, dragging her backpack from the gutter. At least they hadn't seen her. Back down the street, the concrete buildings crowd in from all sides. Dust and smoke years ago conspired to block the light. Streetlights were rare. Power, like everything else, was rationed. Used where it did the most good, they said. Syphoned to the areas where people still counted, they meant.

She pushes her dark hair back under her hood, shrugging into her backpack. She's lost them for now, but she has to be sure. She can't risk being followed. Better to leave them waiting than lead the city wardens back. Still, she'd had no choice but to throw the rock. The others had needed the distraction. She just had to make it back to D5.

D 1 - 5 that's what they were now. Where there had been suburbs, they were now just numbers on a grid, spiralling from the centre until they hit the walls. She doesn't remember a time when that wasn't the case—and she's fifteen. At least she'd made it to D4. That was something. She'd catch her breath, then move on—too many were relying on her.

Sighing, she looks down at her torn pants. She closes her eyes. The wardens are free to move around the city, and they won't give up easily. Stepping back, she flinches as her knee protests, her gasp loud against the silence. At the edge of the city limits, D.5 is a night away, a lifetime away.

Limping, Jesi shuffles towards the closest building. The concrete is rough against her hands. She presses against the wall, melting into the dark with her black backpack, her hood up. She can't be found with illicit cargo. She'd sleep rough, miss a meal or two, nothing new there. One less mouth to feed meant

more for the others. At least they'd gotten away, scattered when the window broke. They'd reconvene in D5. At the Oasis.

The Oasis had been a garden back when there were plants. Then the dust came. Crops died out, but the weeds persisted, eking out their existence in the cracks.

The parkour runners found it first, dancing across rooftops, between the migrant trains, scavenging for food and freedom. It was an oasis in the night. And it became theirs. The rest came after. A few at a time. Basking in the freedom of the night. Lovingly nurturing the only thing they had left to nurture.

The slamming car door echoes. She slinks closer to the building, crouching in a doorway. So much for riding out the night on the street. She was still too close to D1, too conspicuous. She holds her breath. Under the thin light, she can barely make out the wardens. They hadn't seen her yet. They were just being cautious. A broken window could be easily explained if they haven't found the rock. These days the buildings were degrading, glass perishing. They won't risk the 'kopter, not this time of night. A broken window isn't worth it. A tile falls from a nearby building, the clatter of grout and dirt piercing. The warden pulls his taser, its double blue lights flashing. Jesi flinches. She should be relieved it's just the tasers, but tasers mean questions. And sneers, and bruises, and large hands ripping through her backpack. Tasers mean losing her cargo, losing their hope.

A rat darts out to inspect the fallen rubble. Taser shots spark through the dark, a voice echoing after. "Vermin. They just attract the fivers looking for food." Jesi holds her breath, body ridged against the door. They'd come too far to fail now.

J.B. had appeared at the Oasis six months ago. A scrawny, black, science-kid in too big fatigues and broken glasses. He'd come from the outside. And he had a book. A book filled with pictures. The flowers they'd recognised from the Oasis. But these were not their scraggly weak flowers that battled their way to life. These were strong flowers, dark-inked. Then, further on, a picture surrounded by underlined letters. They'd crowded in questions falling out of them, thirsting for answers.

"What is that?" She'd been first to ask.

"It's a tomato plant. Grows in the dirt. You can eat the fruit." J.B.'s reply was full of knowing. "They haven't managed to get tomatoes yet, but they got other fruits. I seen one once."

The anger struck then. "Fake news, propaganda, crazies." Sneers verged on violence. In the city, nothing kills faster than hope.

"My parents are gonna grow food in D1." J.B.'s chin tilted high in defiance.

Rydr's jaw had clenched. Jessi had stilled. The others had shuffled in the silence. Rydr had shot his eyes to her. She'd widened hers in answer. What if? Did they dare? She'd willed him to leap. Rydr's shoulder had lifted a fraction in a shrug. It's not like they had much more to lose anyway.

A skittering to her left makes her jump. Another rat, undaunted by the earlier skirmish. She crowds in closer against the concrete wall. She reaches up, flailing blindly, catching the baton on her third try. Inching the ladder down slowly, she keeps the screeching metal to a minimum. Hoisting the skateboard up beside her, she scraps her hands as she scrambles over the concrete parapet before tumbling onto the rooftop. She can just see the torchlight's thin beams swirling in the distance, then blinking out. Jesi breathes out.

Leaning back against the parapet, she opens the backpack a fraction. Inside sits the unassuming envelope, bent and stained but incalculably precious. She slits the flap, gingerly sliding out the folded cloth. She stares down at the tiny brown dots nestled in the grimy fabric. They'd really done it. They had the seeds. Seeds that could grow food. A small smile flickers across her face before she can stifle it. Hope is a dangerous thing.

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## **Carpe Diem**

Kate Shaw

She wakes to the chill of a silent apartment. Her threadbare blankets are irreplaceable now. It's quiet.

It's always quiet.

If she wanted, she could stay in bed.

If she wanted, she could never get up.

She stares steadfast at the window. The tepid light stares back. Shaking her head, she pulls herself to sitting, her bones creaking as her body grinds into motion. Her cold muscles warm slowly now. They've given over seven decades of service. She can afford them a little time.

Time is the one thing she has, after all.

Unsteady on her feet, she rises. Across the room, the open curtains hang limp, the light outside too thin.

While you breathe, you endure.

She's still breathing.

Pulling her brittle frame tall, she squares her shoulders, crosses to the kitchen. Unrolling a cloth reveals a tattered pile of tea leaves. Overuse has left them almost depleted. Half a cup of water remains in the tin saucepan, and she sprinkles the dried leaves on top. Rationed to the minute the water turns on from eight 'til nine. She doesn't waste a drop. She used to love cut flowers. Now, even the memory feels brazen.

Without bees, there are no flowers anyway.

The gas will last another ten minutes. Freedoms roll hour by hour, district by district. The city interns for weeks at a time.

No one in, no one out.

Home becomes a sanctuary.

Home becomes a prison.

Turning from the window, she moves back to her bedroom. She throws the wardrobe doors wide. Her face softens. Her eyes strafe the garments. She breathes full. Colours faded but true fill her eyes, permeate her soul.

Outside, the world is bare.

Nothing left but the here and now.

No occasions to save for.

She takes a moment to admire the fabrics, moments in time enduring through silk and thread. From the bouquet, she chooses the cotton maxi dress. A resplendent floral. It's soft now, not stiff like the synthetics. The heavy cotton sits wide across her collarbone, so nearly off the shoulder. She supposes she would wear pearls around her neck if they had survived. Lifting a small walnut box from the wardrobe floor, she sets it on the table. The thin light barely glints off the inlay. Lifting the lid reveals a treasury of pottles and tubes. Most are flaked dry, but a few still hold their cherished contents. She chooses carefully. Scraping the walls with her finger, she applies a dark red to her lips. The oil is thin, the tint barely visible. Still, it's something.

It's intention.

That's what matters.

She steps out into her living room, the gown swirling around her ankles. The leaves are steeped, the water lukewarm. The light strains to filter in through the smeary window.

There's no need to wash them anymore.

There's nothing left to look at.

She's seen too much already.

The shaking of her hand clinks the teacup against the saucer, breaking the silence.

Nobody noticed the bees. Warning signs were easy to ignore. There was always something more important. It was the birds that made people take notice. No more sparrows spotting crumbs outside cafes, no more blackbirds roosting on tree-lined streets as dusk fell, and no more pigeons.

Who'd have thought people would miss pigeons.

Her slippers glide across the bare floor. She perches on the armchair. Her cup and saucer rest daintily on the side table, at her feet books yellow. Time passes unrelenting. The world inches onwards. Closer to what they are unsure.

1984 has come and gone.

Fake news was a transparent veneer. Information co-opted. Talk was cheap.

The truth is inescapable.

The radio in the corner is silenced. No news is good news seems far too literal now. Ever the opportunists, bookies put odds on the next species to

go. Insects are getting harder to find, which in turn kills off the crops. Farmers are doing quite well with the bookies.

For what it's worth.

Humans are sitting at fifty-to-one, but – with seven species gone in the last six months – the odds are getting shorter.

Rats and cockroaches are tied.

Odds-on favourites to outlive everything.

She sips from her cup. The warmth is comforting. If she closes her eyes, she can almost taste the faint strains of the leaves, bitter on her tongue. Still, she prefers anaemic tea to the cardboard they call food now. With food crops failing, Bio-edibles became 'trendy' a decade ago.

Nutrition in a packet.

Easy to make, easy to use.

But then the ground thawed, flooded, stripped bare. Arable land left barren. Where some saw portents, others saw a way to make a buck. Bio-edibles, once the height of fashion, suddenly became vital.

Demand and supply.

Supply and demand.

Mass production, quick and dirty.

Some provide adequate nutrition. Still, nobody gets enough anymore. Blame was assigned, companies were brought to account.

Too late.

Even doomsday sayers and whistle-blowers laid down their signs and pushed off their keyboards.

Not like there's anything left to fix.

She lowers the teacup to the saucer, steadier now for the ritual. She watches as her hands rest on her lap, her skin, soft as silk, pillowed on the faded floral. Rings adorn her fingers. Tethers to people she's lost. Her eyes trace the veins on the back of her hands, bluing ridges visible through her skin. She reaches across the side table to the pottle behind her saucer. Today she will paint her nails dark red to match her lips.

If there is only here, she is content.

If there's only now, she's going to savour it.

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