

Boy Writes Words

Your end is a dead blue wren.

‘Did you see that, Slim?’

‘See what?’

‘Nothing.’

Your end is a dead blue wren. No doubt about it. Your. End.
No doubt about it. Is. A. Dead. Blue. Wren.

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The crack in Slim’s windscreen looks like a tall and armless stickman bowing to royalty. The crack in Slim’s windscreen looks like Slim. His windscreen wipers have smeared a rainbow of old dirt over to my passenger side. Slim says a good way for me to remember the small details of my life is to associate moments and visions with things on my person or things in my regular waking life that I see and smell and touch often. Body things, bedroom things, kitchen things. This way I will have two reminders of any given detail for the price of one.

That’s how Slim beat Black Peter. That’s how Slim survived the hole. Everything had two meanings, one for *here*, here being where he was then, cell D9, 2 Division, Boggo Road

Gaol, and another for *there*, that boundless and unlocked universe expanding in his head and his heart. Nothing in the *here* but four green concrete walls and darkness upon darkness and his lone and stationary body. An angle iron and steel mesh bed welded to a wall. A toothbrush and a pair of cloth prison slippers. But a cup of old milk slid through a cell door slot by a silent screw took him *there*, to Ferny Grove in the 1930s, the lanky young farmhand milking cows on the outskirts of Brisbane. A forearm scar became a portal to a boyhood bike ride. A shoulder sunspot was a wormhole to the beaches of the Sunshine Coast. One rub and he was gone. An escaped prisoner here in D9. Pretend free but never on the run, which was as good as how he'd been before they threw him in the hole, real free but always on the run.

He'd thumb the peaks and valleys of his knuckles and they would take him *there*, to the hills of the Gold Coast hinterland, take him all the way to Springbrook Falls, and the cold steel prison bed frame of cell D9 would become a water-worn limestone rock, and the prison hole's cold concrete floor beneath his bare feet summer-warm water to dip his toes into, and he would touch his cracked lips and remember how it felt when something as soft and as perfect as Irene's lips reached his, how she took all his sins and all his pain away with her quenching kiss, washed him clean like Springbrook Falls washed him clean with all that white water bucketing on his head.

I'm more than a little concerned that Slim's prison fantasies are becoming mine. Irene resting on that wet and mossy emerald boulder, naked and blonde, giggling like Marilyn Monroe, head back and loose and powerful, master of any man's universe, keeper of dreams, a vision there to stick around for here, to let the anytime blade of a smuggled shiv wait another day.

'I had an adult mind,' Slim always says. That's how he beat

Black Peter, Boggo Road's underground isolation cell. They threw him in that medieval box for fourteen days during a Queensland summer heatwave. They gave him half a loaf of bread to eat across two weeks. They gave him four, maybe five cups of water.

Slim says half of his Boggo Road prison mates would have died after a week in Black Peter because half of any prison population, and any major city of the world for that matter, is filled with adult men with child minds. But an adult mind can take an adult man anywhere he wants to go.

Black Peter had a scratchy coconut fibre mat that he slept on, the size of a doormat, or the length of one of Slim's long shinbones. Every day, Slim says, he lay on his side on the coir mat and pulled those long shinbones into his chest and closed his eyes and opened the door to Irene's bedroom and he slipped under Irene's white bedsheet and he spooned his body gently against hers and he wrapped his right arm around Irene's naked porcelain belly and there he stayed for fourteen days. 'Curled up like a bear and hibernated,' he says. 'Got so cosy down there in hell I never wanted to climb back up.'

Slim says I have an adult mind in a child's body. I'm only twelve years old but Slim reckons I can take the hard stories. Slim reckons I should hear all the prison stories of male rape and men who broke their necks on knotted bedsheets and swallowed sharp pieces of metal designed to tear through their insides and guarantee themselves a week-long vacation in the sunny Royal Brisbane Hospital. I think he goes too far sometimes with the details, blood spitting from raped arseholes and the like. 'Light and shade, kid,' Slim says. 'No escaping the light and no escaping the shade.' I need to hear the stories about disease and death inside so I can understand the impact of those memories of Irene. Slim says I can take the hard stories because the age of my body matters nothing compared to the age of

my soul, which he has gradually narrowed down to somewhere between the early seventies and dementia. Some months ago, sitting in this very car, Slim said he would gladly share a prison cell with me because I listen and I remember what I listen to. A single tear rolled down my face when he paid me this great roommate honour.

‘Tears don’t go so well inside,’ he said.

I didn’t know if he meant inside a prison cell or inside one’s body. Half out of pride I cried, half out of shame, because I’m not worthy, if worthy’s a word for a bloke to share a lag with.

‘Sorry,’ I said, apologising for the tear. He shrugged.

‘There’s more where that came from,’ he said.

Your end is a dead blue wren. *Your end is a dead blue wren.*

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I will remember the rainbow of old dirt wiped across Slim’s windscreen through the shape of the milky moon rising into my left thumbnail, and forever more when I look into that milky moon I will remember the day Arthur ‘Slim’ Halliday, the greatest prison escapee who ever lived, the wondrous and elusive ‘Houdini of Boggo Road’, taught me – Eli Bell, the boy with the old soul and the adult mind, prime prison cellmate candidate, the boy with his tears on the outside – to drive his rusted dark blue Toyota LandCruiser.

Thirty-two years ago, in February 1953, after a six-day trial in the Brisbane Supreme Court, a man named Judge Edwin James Droughton Stanley sentenced Slim to life for brutally bashing a taxi driver named Athol McCowan to death with a .45 Colt pistol. The papers have always called Slim ‘the Taxi Driver Killer’.

I just call him my babysitter.

‘Clutch,’ he says.

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Slim's left thigh tenses as his old sun-brown leg, wrinkled with seven hundred and fifty life lines because he might be seven hundred and fifty years old, pushes the clutch in. Slim's old sun-brown left hand shifts the gearstick. A hand-rolled cigarette burning to yellow, grey and then black, hanging precariously to the spit on the corner of his bottom lip.

'Noootral.'

I can see my brother, August, through the crack in the windscreen. He sits on our brown brick fence writing his life story in fluid cursive with his right forefinger, etching words into thin air.

Boy writes on air.

Boy writes on air the way my old neighbour Gene Crimmins says Mozart played piano, like every word was meant to arrive, parcel packed and shipped from a place beyond his own busy mind. Not on paper and writing pad or typewriter, but thin air, the invisible stuff, that great act-of-faith stuff that you might not even know existed did it not sometimes bend into wind and blow against your face. Notes, reflections, diary entries, all written on thin air, with his extended right forefinger swishing and slashing, writing letters and sentences into nothingness, as though he has to get it all out of his head but he needs the story to vanish into space as well, forever dipping his finger into his eternal glass well of invisible ink. Words don't go so well inside. Always better out than in.

He grips Princess Leia in his left hand. Boy never lets her go. Six weeks ago Slim took August and I to see all three *Star Wars* movies at the Yatala drive-in. We drank in that faraway galaxy from the back of this LandCruiser, our heads resting on inflated cask wine bags that were themselves resting on an old dead-mullet-smelling crab pot that Slim kept in the back near a tackle box and an old kerosene lamp. There were that many stars out that night over south-east Queensland that when the

Millennium Falcon flew towards the side of the picture screen I thought for a moment it might just fly on into our own stars, take the light-speed express flight right on down to Sydney.

‘You listenin’?’ barks Slim.

‘Yeah.’

No. Never really listenin’ like I should. Always thinkin’ too much about August. About Mum. About Lyle. About Slim’s Buddy Holly spectacles. About the deep wrinkles in Slim’s forehead. About the way he walks funny, ever since he shot himself in the leg in 1952. About the fact he’s got a lucky freckle like me. About how he believed me when I told him my lucky freckle had a power to it, that it meant something to me, that when I’m nervous or scared or lost, my first instinct is to look at that deep brown freckle on the middle knuckle of my right forefinger. Then I feel better. Sounds dumb, Slim, I said. Sounds crazy, Slim, I said. But he showed me his own lucky freckle, almost a mole really, square on the knobby hill of his right wrist bone. He said he thought it might be cancerous but it’s his lucky freckle and he couldn’t bring himself to cut it out. In D9, he said, that freckle became sacred because it reminded him of a freckle that Irene had high up on her inner left thigh, not far at all from her holiest of holies, and he assured me that one day I too would come to know this rare place on a woman’s high inner thigh and I too would know just how Marco Polo felt when he first ran his fingers over silk.

I liked that story, so I told Slim how seeing that freckle on my right forefinger knuckle for the first time at around the age of four, sitting in a yellow shirt with brown sleeves on a long brown vinyl lounge, is as far back as my memory goes. There’s a television on in that memory. I look down at my forefinger and I see the freckle and then I look up and turn my head right and I see a face I think belongs to Lyle but it might belong to my father, though I don’t really remember my father’s face.

So the freckle is always consciousness. My personal big bang. The lounge. The yellow and brown shirt. And I arrive. I am here. I told Slim I thought the rest was questionable, that the four years before that moment might as well never have happened. Slim smiled when I told him that. He said that freckle on my right forefinger knuckle is home.

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Ignition.

‘For fuck’s sake, Socrates, what did I just say?’ Slim barks.

‘Be careful to put your foot down?’

‘You were just staring right at me. You looked like you were listenin’ but you weren’t fuckin’ listenin’. Your eyes were wanderin’ all over my face, lookin’ at this, lookin’ at that, but you didn’t hear a word.’

That’s August’s fault. Boy don’t talk. Chatty as a thimble, chinwaggy as a cello. He can talk, but he doesn’t want to talk. Not a single word that I can recall. Not to me, not to Mum, not to Lyle, not even to Slim. He communicates fine enough, conveys great passages of conversation in a gentle touch of your arm, a laugh, a shake of his head. He can tell you how he’s feeling by the way he unscrews a Vegemite jar lid. He can tell you how happy he is by the way he butters bread, how sad he is by the way he ties his shoelaces.

Some days I sit across from him on the lounge and we’re playing *Super Breakout* on the Atari and having so much fun that I look across at him at the precise moment I swear he’s going to say something. ‘Say it,’ I say. ‘I know you want to. Just say it.’ He smiles, tilts his head to the left and raises his left eyebrow, and his right hand makes an arcing motion, like he’s rubbing an invisible snow dome, and that’s how he tells me he’s sorry. *One day, Eli, you will know why I am not speaking. This is*

not that day, Eli. Now have your fucking go.

Mum says August stopped talking around the time she ran away from my dad. August was six years old. She says the universe stole her boy's words when she wasn't looking, when she was too caught up in the stuff she's going to tell me when I'm older, the stuff about how the universe stole her boy and replaced him with the enigmatic A-grade alien loop I've had to share a double bunk bed with for the past eight years.

Every now and then some unfortunate kid in August's class makes fun of August and his refusal to speak. His reaction is always the same: he walks up to that month's particularly foul-mouthed school bully who is dangerously unaware of August's hidden streak of psychopathic rage and, blessed by his established inability to explain his actions, he simply attacks the boy's unblemished jaw, nose and ribs with one of three sixteen-punch boxing combinations my mum's long-time boyfriend, Lyle, has tirelessly taught us both across endless winter weekends with an old brown leather punching bag in the backyard shed. Lyle doesn't believe in much, but he believes in the circumstance-shifting power of a broken nose.

The teachers generally take August's side because he's a straight-A student, as dedicated as they come. When the child psychologists come knocking, Mum rustles up another glowing testimony from another school teacher about why August's a dream addition to any class and why the Queensland education system would benefit from more children just like him, completely fucking mute.

Mum says when he was five or six August stared for hours into reflective surfaces. While I was banging toy trucks and play blocks on the kitchen floor as Mum made carrot cake, he was staring into an old circular make-up mirror of Mum's. He would sit for hours around puddles looking down at his reflection, not in a Narcissus kind of way, but in what Mum

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thought was an exploratory fashion, like he was actually searching for something. I would pass by our bedroom doorway and catch him making faces in the mirror we had on top of an old wood veneer chest of drawers. ‘Found it yet?’ I asked once when I was nine. He turned from the mirror with a blank face and a kink in the upper left corner of his top lip that told me there was a world out there beyond our cream-coloured bedroom walls that I was neither ready for nor needed in. But I kept asking him that question whenever I saw him staring at himself. ‘Found it yet?’

He always stared at the moon, tracked its path over our house from our bedroom window. He knew the angles of moonlight. Sometimes, deep into the night, he’d slip out our window, unfurl the hose and drag it in his pyjamas all the way out to the front gutter where he’d sit for hours, silently filling the street with water. When he got the angles just right, a giant puddle would fill with the silver reflection of a full moon. ‘The moon pool,’ I proclaimed grandly one cold night. And August beamed, wrapped his right arm over my shoulders and nodded his head, the way Mozart might have nodded his head at the end of Gene Crimmins’ favourite opera, *Don Giovanni*. He knelt down and with his right forefinger he wrote three words in perfect cursive across the moon pool.

Boy swallows universe, he wrote.

It was August who taught me about details, how to read a face, how to extract as much information as possible from the non-verbal, how to mine expression and conversation and story from the data of every last speechless thing that is right before your eyes, the things that are talking to you without talking to you. It was August who taught me I didn’t always have to listen. I might just have to look.

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The LandCruiser rattles to chunky metal life and I bounce on the vinyl seat. Two pieces of Juicy Fruit that I've carried for seven hours slip from my shorts pocket into a foam cavity in the seat that Slim's old and loyal and dead white bitzer, Pat, regularly chewed on during the frequent trips the two made from Brisbane to the town of Jimna, north of Kilcoy, in Slim's post-prison years.

Pat's full name was Patch but that became a mouthful for Slim. He and the dog would regularly sift for gold in a secret Jimna backwoods creek bed that Slim believes, to this day, contains enough gold deposits to make King Solomon raise an eyebrow. He still goes out there with his old pan, the first Sunday of every month. But the search for gold ain't the same without Pat, he says. It was Pat who could really go for gold. The dog had the nose for it. Slim reckons Pat had a genuine lust for gold, the world's first canine to suffer a case of gold fever. 'The glittery sickness,' he says. 'Sent ol' Pat round the bend.'

Slim shifts the gear stick.

'Be careful to push the clutch down. First. Release the clutch.'

Gentle push on the accelerator.

'And steadily on the pedally.'

The hulking LandCruiser moves forward three metres along our grassy kerbside and Slim brakes, the car parallel to August still writing furiously into thin air with his right forefinger. Slim and I turn our heads hard left to watch August's apparent burst of creativity. When he finishes writing a full sentence he dabs the air as though he's marking a full stop. He wears his favourite green T-shirt with the words *You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet* written across it in rainbow lettering. Floppy brown hair, borderline Beatle cut. He wears a pair of Lyle's old blue and yellow Parramatta Eels supporter shorts despite the fact that, at thirteen years of age, at least five of which he has spent watching Parramatta Eels games on the couch with Lyle and

me, he doesn't have the slightest interest in rugby league. Our dear mystery boy. Our Mozart. August is one year older than me but August is one year older than everybody. August is one year older than the universe.

When he finishes writing five full sentences he licks the tip of his forefinger like he's inking a quill, then he plugs back into whatever mystical source is pushing the invisible pen that scribbles his invisible writing. Slim rests his arms on the steering wheel, takes a long drag of his rollie, not taking his eyes off August.

'What's he writin' now?' Slim asks.

August's oblivious to our stares, his eyes only following the letters in his personal blue sky. Perhaps to him it's an endless ream of lined paper that he writes on in his head, or maybe he sees the black writing lines stretched across the sky. It's mirror writing to me. I can read it if I'm facing him at the right angle, if I can see the letters clear enough to turn them round in my head, spin them round in my mirror mind.

'Same sentence over and over this time.'

'What's he sayin'?'

The sun over August's shoulder. White hot god of a thing. A hand to my forehead. No doubt about it.

'Your end is a dead blue wren.'

August freezes. He stares at me. He looks like me, but a better version of me, stronger, more beautiful, everything smooth on his face, smooth like the face he sees when he stares into the moon pool.

Say it again. 'Your end is a dead blue wren.'

August gives a half-smile, shakes his head, looks at me like I'm the one who's crazy. Like I'm the one who's imagining things. *You're always imagining things, Eli.*

'Yeah, I saw you. I've been watching you for the past five minutes.'

He smiles wide, furiously wiping his words from the sky with an open palm. Slim smiles wide too, shakes his head.

‘That boy’s got the answers,’ Slim says.

‘To what?’ I wonder.

‘To the questions,’ Slim says.

He reverses the LandCruiser, takes her back three metres, brakes.

‘Your turn now.’

Slim coughs, chokes up brown tobacco spit that he missiles out the driver’s window to our sun-baked and potholed bitumen street running past fourteen low-set sprawling fibro houses, ours and everybody else’s in shades of cream, aquamarine and sky blue. Sandakan Street, Darra, my little suburb of Polish and Vietnamese refugees and Bad Old Days refugees like Mum and August and me, exiled here for the past eight years, hiding out far from the rest of the world, marooned survivors of the great ship hauling Australia’s lower-class shitheap, separated from America and Europe and Jane Seymour by oceans and a darn pretty Great Barrier Reef and another 7000 kilometres of Queensland coastline and then an overpass taking cars to Brisbane city, and separated a bit more still by the nearby Queensland Cement and Lime Company factory that blows cement powder across Darra on windy days and covers our rambling home’s sky-blue fibro walls with dust that August and I have to hose off before the rain comes and sets the dust to cement, leaving hard grey veins of misery across the house front and the large window that Lyle throws his cigarette butts out of and I throw my apple cores out of, always following Lyle’s lead because, and maybe I’m too young to know better, Lyle’s always got a lead worth following.

Darra is a dream, a stench, a spilt garbage bin, a cracked mirror, a paradise, a bowl of Vietnamese noodle soup filled with prawns, domes of plastic crab meat, pig ears and pig

knuckles and pig belly. Darra is a girl washed down a drainpipe, a boy with snot slipping from his nose so ripe it glows on Easter night, a teenage girl stretched across a train track waiting for the express to Central and beyond, a South African man smoking Sudanese weed, a Filipino man injecting Afghani dope next door to a girl from Cambodia sipping milk from Queensland's Darling Downs. Darra is my quiet sigh, my reflection on war, my dumb pre-teen longing, my home.

'When do you reckon they'll be back?' I ask.

'Soon enough.'

'What'd they go see?'

Slim wears a thin bronze-coloured button-up cotton shirt tucked into dark blue shorts. He wears these shorts constantly and he says he rotates between three pairs of the same shorts but every day I see the same hole in the bottom right-hand corner of his rear pocket. His blue rubber thongs are normally moulded to his old and callused feet, dirt-caked and sweat-stunk, but his left thong slips off now, caught on the clutch, as he slides awkwardly out of the car. Houdini's getting on. Houdini's caught in the water chamber of Brisbane's outer western suburbs. Even Houdini can't escape time. Slim can't run from MTV. Slim can't run from Michael Jackson. Slim can't escape the 1980s.

'*Terms of Endearment*,' he says, opening the passenger door.

I truly love Slim because he truly loves August and me. Slim was hard and cold in his youth. He's softened with age. Slim always cares for August and me and how we're going and how we're going to grow up. I love him so much for trying to convince us that when Mum and Lyle are out for so long like this they are at the movies and not, in fact, dealing heroin purchased from Vietnamese restaurateurs.

'Lyle choose that one?'

I have suspected Mum and Lyle are drug dealers since I found

a five-hundred-gram brick of Golden Triangle heroin stowed in the mower catcher in our backyard shed five days ago. I feel certain Mum and Lyle are drug dealers when Slim tells me they have gone to the movies to see *Terms of Endearment*.

Slim gives me a sharp look. 'Slide over, smartarse,' he mumbles from the corner of his mouth.

Clutch in. First. Steadily on the pedally. The car jolts forward and we're moving. 'Give it some gas,' Slim says. My bare right foot goes down, leg fully extended, and we cross our lawn all the way to Mrs Dudzinski's rosebush on the kerbside next door.

'Get onto the road,' Slim says, laughing.

Hard right on the wheel, off the gutter onto the Sandakan Street bitumen.

'Clutch in, second,' Slim barks.

Quicker now. Past Freddy Pollard's place, past Freddy Pollard's sister, Evie, pushing a headless Barbie down the street in a toy pram.

'Should I stop?' I ask.

Slim looks in the rearview mirror, darts his head to the passenger side mirror. 'Nah, fuck it. Once round the block.'

Slip into third and we're rumbling at forty kilometres an hour. And we're free. It's a breakout. Me and Houdini. On the run. Two great escapologists on the lam.

'I'm drivvvvvvvvvvvvvvvving,' I scream.

Slim laughs and his old chest wheezes.

Left into Swanavelder Street, on past the old World War II Polish migrant centre where Lyle's mum and dad spent their first days in Australia. Left into Butcher Street where the Freemans keep their collection of exotic birds: a squawking peacock, a greylag goose, a Muscovy duck. Fly on free, bird. Drive. Drive. Left into Hardy, left back into Sandakan.

'Slow her down,' says Slim.

I slam the brakes and lose footing on the clutch and the car cuts out, once again parallel to August, who is still writing words on thin air, lost in the work.

‘Did ya see me, Gus?’ I holler. ‘Did ya see me driving, Gus?’

He doesn’t look away from his words. Boy didn’t even see us drive away.

‘What’s he scribblin’ now?’ Slim asks.

The same two words over and over again. The crescent moon of a capital ‘C’. Chubby little ‘a’. Skinny little ‘i’, one descending stroke in the air with a cherry on top. August sits in the same spot on the fence that he usually sits on, by the missing brick, the space two bricks along the fence from the red wrought-iron letterbox.

August is the missing brick. The moon pool is my brother. August is the moon pool.

‘Two words,’ I say. ‘A name starting with “C”.’

I will associate her name with the day I learned to drive and, forever more, the missing brick and the moon pool and Slim’s Toyota LandCruiser and the crack in Slim’s windscreen and my lucky freckle, and everything about my brother, August, will remind me of her.

‘What name?’ Slim asks.

‘Caitlyn.’

Caitlyn. There’s no doubt about it. Caitlyn. That right forefinger and an endless blue sky sheet of paper with that name on it.

‘You know anyone named Caitlyn?’ asks Slim.

‘No.’

‘What’s the second word?’

I follow August’s finger, swirling through the sky.

‘It’s “spies”,’ I say.

‘Caitlyn spies,’ Slim says. ‘Caitlyn spies.’ He drags on his cigarette, contemplatively. ‘What the fuck does that mean?’

TRENT DALTON

Caitlyn spies. No doubt about it.

Your end is a dead blue wren. Boy swallows universe.

Caitlyn spies.

No doubt about it.

These are the answers.

The answers to the questions.