



**Feast
Festival**
08 Nov 15-30
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PRIZE WINNERS
Writing Competition



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**Writing
Competition**

summary of entry conditions

Must be original work, not previously published.
3 000 words of prose or 80 lines of poetry
Must demonstrate significant queer content
Entry form and fee required
Deadline: 4pm 31 October 2008
Winners announced: 22 November 2008
Feast festival website: www.feast.org.au

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Books to the value of \$500
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**Wakefield
Press**

Ash Rehn grew up in Brisbane, Australia and on Queensland's Gold Coast. Since the age of 25 he has lived in Sydney, London, Edinburgh and Stockholm. He currently resides in Sydney where he works as a counsellor and therapist and is undertaking an MA in Creative Writing.

Ash is interested the way individual's identities are shaped by the stories of their lives. He has won a number of awards for short stories and enjoys exploring social issues through fictional narrative. His favourite fiction authors include Jeanette Winterson, Mary Renault, Michael Cunningham, Tim Winton, Andrew Holleran and Evelyn Waugh. More of his writing can be found at: www.ashrehn.com

Ash Rehn

The Name of the Game

My friendship with Leo, if you could call it that, was the kind that happens at those times in our lives we are both directionless and pushing at the boundaries of who we are.

It was the late eighties and I had abandoned the academic path laid out by my parents. In an effort to escape the sprawling suburbs I rented a high-rise flat in Surfers' Paradise. It was cheap and I knew it was only for winter. Come the tourist season the landlord would evict me and let it out to pale-skinned Victorians on annual week-long pilgrimages to surf and sunburn. I didn't care. At that time I could not think past the adventure my new life promised: the people I was meeting, the thrill the unknown, the ever-present buzz of *now*.

Surfers' then was a heady mix of trash and opulence. Diamonds and haute couture sold next to shops filled with plush koalas, plastic trinkets and postcards. The rundown remnants of motels from the fifties and sixties cowered under glass and chrome towers. Salesmen, dealers, hookers, surfers, hippies, trippers: everywhere, people on the make and on the take. The entire place seemed to be in transit. I loved this coming together of business and pleasure. I revelled in just walking around, exploring the street life, hearing guys in doorways call out, *Girls in here tonight mate*, so I could shout back, *No thanks, not my thing*. Then stepping into a shop that catered only to Japanese. On top of all this there was the beach. It was awesome.

I had some money. My grandfather had died the previous Christmas and left me what I thought would be enough to play around for a couple of years. I saw no sense in saving it. I viewed my current circumstances as a practice run for a better life, a future time when I would be celebrated and affluent.



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Where these ideas came from I do not know but the Gold Coast was full of kids like me. Ambitious but naïve and unfocussed. Most of them were on the game.

I was wandering around the streets when I met Leo. I spotted him on a corner, a figure all in black with a clipboard in his hand. One of those people you cross the road to avoid as soon as you see them pushing credit cards or subscriptions to childrens' charities.

"Hey man, what's happening?"

"Not much," I replied, studying him. He was dressed in a t-shirt and suit trousers, his slicked, black hair emphasising a sharp jaw line and high cheekbones. His eyes were so striking I had to look away.

"Are you on holidays, dude?"

"No, I live here."

"You live here, right. What's your name, man?"

"Stephen."

"Oh, like Morrissey! *Burn down the disco, Hang the dj Hang the dj Hang the dj*. I love that guy man. He's so cool."

When would the sales pitch start? His greeting wasn't what I expected but I was learning to be prepared for anything.

"You look like a cool guy. What clubs do you go to, man? You go to the Tunnel?"

"I've been there," I said, trying to sound sophisticated. "It's okay."

"What do you do man? You working?"

"Just having some time off," I said. "Having a break from it all."

"You should do this man. Timeshare, ha! It's easy if you're good looking like us." He chuckled again. "You're a real handsome guy," he said. "Girls must love you. You want to hang out sometime?"

We exchanged numbers.

"I'll call you dude."

I hoped so. He intrigued me.

Each morning I headed to the beach for a bodysurf. The absence of the party people and spruikers gave Surfers a different vibe. Delivery drivers and cleaners owned the streets now. Unemployed fashion models wearing huge sunglasses and carrying bottles of water in each hand overtook elderly walkers shuffling along the promenade. In the water I was alone,

watched by a solitary lifeguard in his ute on the beach.

I had imagined living on the Coast would be some kind of glamorous existence. I never cooked, but ate out at cafés or bought takeaway. Even today it astounds me how much I must have spent in those first few months. After swimming I would breakfast and flick through the newspaper, a parade of thoughts my only company.

I wonder what happens to page-three girls when they stop getting paid to wear a bikini and be photographed with the Mayor?

Will that shirt I bought yesterday make me more attractive?

I wandered around shopping malls or, when it was warm enough, lay on the beach working up my tan and perverting on the surfer boys.

When is Leo going to call?

Discovering The Club was pure chance. I was waiting for a pizza.

"Faggots! Cocksuckers!"

At first I thought the abuse from the panel van now throttling up the highway was directed at me standing alone outside the takeaway. Then I noticed a group of three guys going up the stairs of the building next door, laughing, each jostling to be first, their white shirts reflecting the blue glow of a neon light burning with the digits "3030" over the entrance. They disappeared through the door releasing a throbbing dance beat into the night air.

I returned the following evening.

"Five dollars, thanks."

It was the fakest smile I had ever seen.

Inside the music was not so loud but the odour of stale smoke and spilt beer was almost overpowering. Heads turned to check me out. Taking refuge in the toilets, I looked at my reflection and was greeted by a gaze of apprehension.

"You look *ge-orgeous!*" giggled someone disappearing into a cubicle.

I needed a drink.

"West Coast Cooler, thanks."

I gulped it down, the sweet taste reminding me of end of school parties.

"First time here?"

The voice belonged to a smartly dressed guy with immaculate hair. I placed him a few years older than me, probably mid twenties. He looked kind of nervous too which

was a relief.

“Yeah”

“You’ve come on the wrong night. Fridays and Saturdays are better. Mondays too. That’s hospitality night.”

“I’ve done five bucks then I guess.”

“You paid? They saw you coming. Anyway, I’m Richard,” he offered his hand.

“Stephen.”

“What do you think of it?”

At the time I had nothing with which to compare it but The Club was typical of similar establishments in most regional Australian cities. About twenty or so men, disparate ages, stood around on their own or sat at the bar chatting and gossiping. The few women present seemed to have been brought for a purpose. They drove the intoxicated, stood in as dance partners, consoled the heartbroken. They came and went like decoration for those who brought them. Every so often a couple would step onto the dance floor, which was smaller than the average bedroom, and break into the latest moves: knees bent, feet stepping and open hands alternately reaching forward to the beat of Rick Astley or Madonna. They looked like puppets from *Thunderbirds*.

“Well it’s sort of... quiet.”

“Like I said, it’s better on weekends.”

Richard had grown up on the Coast and appeared to have been a fixture at the Club ever since he was old enough for the door staff to risk his admission.

“And what do you do, love?”

“I’m not doing anything much right now,” I said. “Just having some time off.”

“I see. A working-boy, huh?”

“No,” I said louder, thinking he must have misheard, “I’m not working at all.”

“Don’t be embarrassed, most of this lot are.”

And it was true. He went around the room revealing their intimate details. Apparently almost everyone there was open to offers so long as those offers involved the exchange of cash.

“But don’t go thinking they’re all poofs. Some are pay for gay.”

“What about that one?” I asked looking at a guy in a suit.

“Business, love, business,” he said winking. It was the year it all became a little obvious thanks to the advent of the mobile

phone. The really serious ones all had them but still tried to avoid any candour about their activities.

“Says he’s a Volvo dealer,” he continued. “Well, his father is.”

Others were more blatant, their appearances giving them away. They sat at the bar, in cut-off shredded jeans and loose singlets and ordered Bacardi & Cokes. The bar staff knew. Everybody knew.

Richard had no interest in renting himself. He had a respectable bank job. He couldn’t be openly gay but at least it was legitimate work. And of course he had The Club. That was his refuge. Even when one of the straight places on Cavill Avenue put on a big dance party for the Brisbane queens, he refused to go along.

“I don’t queue darling,” he would say as we dressed for another night out and then, turning and posing, “Calvin Klein, Stuart Membery, Country Road: who says they can’t be worn together?”

Leo finally called me and we started meeting up. I liked shopping with him. It was fun watching him chat up the sales girls. I decided to tell him where I had been spending my evenings.

“The music’s good.”

“But that’s a gay bar, man. That’s for homos.”

“They play the Smiths.”

“Do they? Oh right. Actually I’m probably bisexual man. I think I might be. I’ve never done it with a guy or anything.” He gave me a coy smile. “But maybe I’d like to.”

He was an enigmatic guy and I had expected the sex to be wild and passionate. He had a nice body, wiry but broad shouldered, and his chest hair was as thick as an animal’s. But in bed Leo was strangely passive, mostly just lying there, returning kisses softly, touching me gently, yielding to my body.

“Do you want me to continue,” I asked him in the midst of it.

“Yeah, it’s nice,” he replied, but he didn’t seem turned on.

“You have nice hands.”

Afterwards he wanted to be held and stay the night, sleeping in my arms. We did it again a couple of times so I could make sure his lack of responsiveness wasn’t just first time nerves. But the pattern repeated itself on each occasion. After that I made excuses to avoid having him stay over. The only challenge left was how to remain friends with this behind us.



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The next time I saw him the timeshare thing was not working out too well and his boss had dropped the promised retainer. Leo had started to consider alternative sources of income.

"Hey I met this guy. He asked me if I wanted to make some money. Having sex! With him! He didn't look like a homo that dude. And he was rich."

"What did you say?"

"I told him I'd have to think about it. Actually I asked him if he wanted me to bring a friend and pay us double. I was thinking of you."

"You what?"

"C'mon man I can't do it alone. I don't know about all that homo stuff. But you could suck him off or something, couldn't you?"

I laughed and told him to forget it. Prostitution was not something I wanted to get caught up in.

"You have nice eyes," he said. He seemed sincere but I couldn't help thinking it was a line he had heard someone say about himself.

I was at the Club several nights of the week. I was infatuated with another boy, a blonde gymnast who called himself Braden after some American soap star. Braden was from the country. He refused to say from where exactly. One of the guys at The Club tried to get a basketball group together so I went along just to be around Braden. When he did a back flip my heart followed and I pleaded for a repeat performance. He ignored me.

My romantic pursuits and sexual opportunities never seemed to coincide. Guys like Leo made themselves available on demand but others like Braden seemed unattainable. I watched him as the DJ played Blackbox's *Strike it Up* and he danced with another surfy looking guy until a hand came from behind and stroked my arm.

"Someone's in lurve." It was Richard breathing in my ear. "Too campy for me. I like a man with hair on his chest."

"He's athletic."

"Love, it doesn't matter how big their muscles are if all you end up doing in bed is rubbing your pussies together." He strutted off to the dance floor.

I found out Braden also went with men for money and I contemplated how many nights of passion with him my

dwindling inheritance might purchase. That there were so many of these beautiful boys who would charge for the privilege of their time seemed as implausible as the number who were prepared to pay. Yet put simply it was supply and demand. And the Gold Coast had plenty of both.

Richard moved into my flat. I sensed he had a crush on me but I knew the money would soon run out if I had to pay all the rent on my own. I was a man of leisure and the days arrived unplanned and unpredicted which was the way I liked them. In contrast, Richard's life was programmed and scheduled into a pattern he refused to change, even for me. He shopped, worked out and partied at pre-arranged times and nothing could alter this routine. He refused to bodysurf with me.

"I will not enter that filthy ocean, not where all those rednecks have relieved themselves the night before. The twenty-five metre at Club Mirage suits me fine. Exclusive, that's me."

He was different to the other guys at the Club and not just because he worked business hours. He was constantly falling for every new stranger but had the self-respect not to push his affections to the point of embarrassment. I did not find him attractive, or a challenge, and these were the two criteria I set for anything more than friendship.

By November the Coast was gearing up for the annual influx of tourists. Leo's dabbling in sex work was becoming less casual. I was privy to it all. A major in the army. A pathologist staying overnight for a conference. A Qantas pilot. He was getting better at it and had even started hanging out at the Club, plying for trade. He held up the bar with the trashier looking beach types contrasting with them in his black outfits, charming his way to free drinks with those magic eyes.

"I'm not gay, man. I just like to dance," he explained to Richard over sushi in our apartment.

When Leo went to the toilet, Richard fanned himself with the takeaway menu.

"Phew! Rough trade that one. I'm having one of my flushes."

"Off you go then."

"I couldn't do that!" Richard retorted, and then, "Have you been there?"

I didn't want to stoke his jealousy so I just adopted a scowl



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and re-filled his glass. We had already had quite a few drinks.

"I'm leaving you to it," I whispered and disappeared out to The Club before Leo could return. For once I was alone and free. As I sipped on my Bacardi and Coke I checked over the crowd. Braden was on the dance floor as usual. Why couldn't I just have what I wanted?

"They look like they're having fun."

I turned to find a middle-aged guy in a suit standing beside me. He gestured at my drink.

"Relaxing after a hard week at work?"

"No, I'm not working," I told him, "Having a break," although the way I was spending I knew this mantra was almost over.

He shifted uneasily and offered to buy me another which I declined.

"Look, I don't do this often so I'll cut to the chase. Perhaps you'd like to come to my hotel?"

On the dance floor Braden thrust his hips to the beat, bare chested, his t-shirt dangling from the waist of his cut-off Levis.

"I'm flattered but..."

"I'll make it worth your while."

The guy dancing with Braden pressed his hands into that tanned six-pack then hooked his thumbs into the Levis and drew him close. I had seen enough. I was surrounded by people who were making things happen with a signal, a gesture or a word.

"I'll leave first and meet you at your hotel," I said. "Where are you staying?"

I didn't tell Leo about going with the businessman. I certainly didn't tell Richard. When I went to find Leo he was in his usual place, clipboard in hand. I sensed the chemistry between them had not been right.

"I met this girl, dude."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, she's really nice. I haven't been out with her yet but... you know." Then, looking around cautiously, "I'm straight, man."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah." He tried to hide a smile. "But with you it was different."

"Sure. Hey, whatever happened with that guy who wanted

the threesome?"

"Him? Yeah I've seen him around. I've got the number somewhere."

"Call it," I said. "Count me in."

It looked too rough to swim the next morning. A big swell pounded the shore, the waves closing out, strong rips sucking back the water and gutting the beach. Offshore the sandbanks were constantly shifting, new ones forming where the ravaged beach had been washed through. I hesitated on the edge of the wet sand, scared to go further but in awe of what was occurring around me. Was this my experience or did I belong to it? Behind me a lifeguard called a warning through his megaphone. But I could not make out what he was saying. All I could hear was the crashing of the surf.

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Amelia Walker is a writer and performer who runs writing workshops for schools and community groups. She has recently published her second poetry collection, 'Just Your Everyday Apocalypse'. For more information visit <http://www.freewebs.com/ameliawalker>

Amelia Walker

The Truth About Mermaids

I am flotsam: wordless, wooden, wrecked by endless thoughtless waves. Pieces of me break off, bob, blunder, break some more. No sting as the salt seeps into my open wounds, sterilising. Where am I? There's an arm, there a toe, nipple, oesophagus, frothy white clumps of mind. It's all the same now, all drifting, dressed in seaweed and a stomachful of sand to consume what I can't. I want to swirl down, down 'til there's no more light, let the weight of the water end this lurching. Waves, like promises, break. They wrap round me, swallow and swirl me in their black throats... they choke, splutter, spit me out. Sunlight glares, winds laugh, rocks shred me like a void contract.

This is one ending. There are others.

You sleep with your knees bent. Your face and arms are tanned, your chest pink like the flesh of a broken crab. Your skin smells sour and salty. So does mine. This is the you I fell for that first night. The naked, unwritten you. The you of breath: rising, falling, rhythmic as the nearby shore. The you I could clothe howsoever I dreamed.

I don't like the way you dress yourself: all collars and labels, neat speeches written by your lips, nothing deeper. They are speeches, never speech. Your friends said I didn't talk much! I was lucky to snare you, a girl like me with no name. You pulled me up into a better, brighter world. If they realised the true depths from which I come... Stories are strange things. Tell them enough times and they become a kind of truth. But I did not capsize into your world. It was you who ran against the rocks, fell thrashing into mine. You might have drowned if I hadn't chanced along. Imagine the social pages: promising young lawyer dead on strip club toilet floor.



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I was dressed as a mermaid, though *dressed* overstates it. Rheebea was the sea witch. Her flesh swelled luminous from a green leather corset. She caught me peeking through the curtain on my break and sidled over, landing a playful slap.

"Which one?"

"Nobody."

"Bull."

She squeezed beside me and peered out. You were alone, clasping your sixth cognac, swaying slightly.

"Oh Mari, no. He's got a face like a Disney character – poor Bambi searching for mum."

"You can talk."

Rheebea's nostrils flared.

"I'll have you know I'm the *original* sea witch. None of that crypto-fascist money making tripe."

"That crypto-fascist money making tripe was my favourite movie as a kid."

Rheebea drew a breath; her cleavage, impossibly, bulged even more. She'd just finished her dominatrix dance and her sweaty skin shone. The scent mingled with generous splashings of Brut aftershave. She preferred men's to women's scents, on her own body at least.

"And did anybody ever tell you the *real* story about mermaids?"

"The only story my Daddy ever told me was how my dumb cow mother left him and even at three I could see exactly why."

"The real mermaid never gets her prince. And she sacrifices more than speech to enter his world. As a woman, every footstep is broken glass. Still she smiles and dances for the prince, pleases him like an eager child. But she doesn't speak and they can't connect. He proposes to someone else. The sea witch offers the mermaid an enchanted knife. *Kill the prince and you can become a mermaid again. Otherwise it's the original deal, flotsam.*"

"She doesn't!"

"Sadly, no. She watches him sleeping and can't, so she's hunks of wood and filthy foam."

"That's a horrible thing to tell children."

"It wasn't written for children. Hans Christian Andersen was bi. The guy he loved married a woman. Pain and muteness represent his inability to be himself in a world that wouldn't understand."

"Woman! Save it for your thesis."

Rheebea was doing a masters in queer literature.

"And have thought any more about study? I'll help you apply."

Her green eyes fixed me.

"Time I got back on the floor."

Later I found you on the ladies' room floor. I helped you up and asked if you had friends in the bar. You shook your head, then stammered your address and produced car keys.

Your apartment was in the block I had often gazed at; right on the esplanade, a twelfth floor view. Inside did not disappoint: polished floorboards, chrome kitchen appliances. While you slept I surveyed myriad photographs: you smiling from the seat of a speedboat, gliding effortlessly on water skis. I couldn't figure why you seemed familiar, then I found the social pages clippings. Some photos were face down. I peeked. A girl with brown hair and wistful eyes.

I returned to you: still sleeping, a naked tangle of toned flesh and Egyptian sheets; cognac infused with sweat. I waited, watched you, like now. Except then I knew nothing; now I know less. That was when I dressed you. I trawled my wardrobe of childhood fantasy and teenage escape: Disney cartoons. Molly Ringwald. Dolly Fiction... stories: a million stories, all the same story. I began drafting stories about myself, stories to tell you. Like I said, they're strange things.

"You told him whaaaa?" Rheebea's eyes rolled.

"Supermarket nightfill. It accounts for the hours. And nobody from his circles would do that work, so I won't get caught out."

"What if he comes back?"

"He won't. It was only because his fiancé left him that he got plastered. He thinks we met at a jazz club."

"Still, nightfill! Lies should at least be interesting. Will you show him your poetry?"

"Of course not! Rheebs, his people own speedboats and go to charity balls. Bisexual surrealism won't sit."

"So he reckons you're straight?"

"If it works out... maybe I am."

Andy burst in, sucking on a cigarette. "Girls, it's dead out there. Time you two pulled the big guns."

Rheebea pouted.

"Why Andrew, whatever do you mean?"

Minutes later we were on the floor, or I was. Rheebea



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towered over me. Her corset was purple and the colour reflected in her eyes. She grabbed me the way we'd rehearsed, making it look rough when she was really gentle, so gentle. The drunken crowd cheered as she fondled me, as my tongue skimmed flesh. She bit my neck and whispered:

"Seriously, how long do you think you can keep up the act?"

Nine months, as it turned out. Nine months of jazz, beachside walks, even the odd social pages snap. Nine months of smiling at your parents and skirting my supermarket career. *Just don't say much*, you advised me, *Dad prefers quiet women*. Nine months of not explaining my real job. As for poetry, I stopped writing. Nine months of sex that probably woke the whole apartment block; sex that swallowed whole nights, often fused them into days. And days on end. Not in the beginning, mind. Our first forays left me stunned and silent while you slumbered. It was a delicate issue. I had to guide you so as to let you believe everything was your initiative, Mr. Dynamo. You decided we should get out of the bedroom, explore other rooms, other angles. You dreamed up the balcony, the sea-breeze drowning us in flurries of rot and rebirth. *The best sex you'd ever had*, you exclaimed. Your face fell a little when, after those words, I stayed silent.

Last night you dropped the bomb. She wants you back. *It's not that I don't like you. You're a fun girl, but Ari and I have these conversations... I can't explain. We both love poetry*. I nearly laughed. In nine months you'd never once mentioned poetry.

Mari, don't cry! You hugged me. I breathed your hair gel, your washing powder. Our bodies locked together as they had so many times before. I suppose it was only habit that your hands found their way into certain warm places, that we wound up messy as Pavlov's dogs on the kitchen floor. Your cries surged, engulfed me; I became my body, rocked in your arms like so much dead wood.

I am still here, watching you, wondering whether to stay. I experiment with hating you, but the reaction fails. How could you love someone you don't know? We both delivered speeches, never speech. I became things I thought you wanted. Perhaps the favour was returned? You're a stranger. I scraped you naked from the floor, fallen emperor, dressed you in fine threads of nothing. We both liked the way it looked, that suit, but I guess it didn't do much for the cold.

The best sex you ever had, you said again last night. You love her,

but your body wants me. Could I be your flotsam woman? Or would I rather stick the knife? I could find your address book right now and phone her. Or stab deeper: the social pages. I could say who I am, how we met. It'd humiliate both of us, but have I ever had anything to lose?

Strangely, I don't want to.

What if you actually did ask me to marry you? Would I say yes? I remember the night I danced with Rheebea, her question, her heat on my neck.

She still tells me I should try study. She says she likes my poetry, that I could publish, even. After she told me the truth about mermaids I googled it to see for myself. She was right that Disney changed things, but the flotsam ending was already one of two. In the other version – and nobody knows which was Andersen's original – the mermaid became half woman, half bird.

Your balcony is on the twelfth floor. I lean out, feast on laughing breezes. A stripper, like a mermaid, is less than a woman, and more. I am not a stripper, nor a mermaid, nor a wife. I don't need to jump. There's nothing to prove. Only one person needs to know that I can fly.

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Peter Mitchell lives in the Rainbow Region (NSW), writing poetry, short fiction, a range of journalism, memoir and literary criticism. He has been published in *Australian Literary Studies*, *Campaign*, *Australian Book Review* and *Sydney Star Observer*. His poetry has been published in *New England Review*, *Eucalypt: a tanka journal* and *fourW nineteen: New Writing*. His first collection of poetry, *The Scarlet Moment and Other Poems* is being published by Picaro Press (Warners Bay, NSW). He is working on his second collection of poetry and life writing, *Notes from the Devil's Sidewalk: A Memoir*.

Peter Mitchell

Doors

1.
Batik prints anoint the wall. Ted and I curl
into each other. Nervous anticipation
shivers my spine. Ted raises my legs over

his shoulders, our fingers and tongues
calligraphies of pleasure. He penetrates me,
our climaxes shaking the love-shack door.

2.
Uncertainty ripples the blue air in the
waiting room. I sit, pen-in-hand, the black
print benign. A four-page survey: medical

history, diet, sexual practices, drug use. The
consulting room door opens, my name
echoing around the room of dazed faces.

Lymph nodes are pressed, blood fills glass
phials. 'That's a healthy colour'. Questions
repeated. Use of marihuana? I frown, a blue-

armed fist thumping my front door. 'All the
information is confidential'. A mantra of
reassurance. Three weeks of moth tread

on thin ice. Second appointment. Same old,



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same old. Uncertainty roils my stomach.
'The technology for testing is still primitive.'

Results: two negative, one positive. Great betting
odds. I spring-step out the door, walk on a
layer of air down Oxford Street to the bus home.

3.

I push through two flaps of clear, hard plastic.
A room with eight beds, one metre apart,
flush against the wall. Lamps cast a bluish

halo towards the ceiling. Bed 3. My hard
plank of respite in 17 South*. A longitudinal reading.
The cannula embraces my left wrist, a reminder

of the tumour hugging the rear of my tongue.
I walk along the corridor, glancing into the other
rooms. Death tattoos some of the men.

4.

I float through the door at the end of my
known world. Sitting in a chair, I frown
left-to-right, left-to-right, deciding whether

to hand back time to the silence in the
tunnel of long-burning candles or annexe
tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,

winds gusting me to amphitheatres of ruddy
health: air light as champagne on my skin as I
take long walks on wide boulevards into the future.

* Ward 17 South was the ward for patients experiencing
complications from living with the Human Immunodeficiency
Virus (HIV) or Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
(AIDS) at St. Vincent's Hospital, Darlinghurst.

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08 Nov 15-30
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**Writing
Competition**

Highly commended

James May is a writer based in Melbourne. He enjoys writing plays and short stories with inner city themes: queers, social misfits, dysfunctional relationships, homophobia and HIV/AIDS. He's currently woking on a novel about a year spent in a crack infested hotel in San Francisco.

James May

Darling It Hurts

The whole thing was a bad idea from the start. Judy invited me to dinner and she was too stoned to cook so we ate Tim Tams instead. Her friend rolled the joints and scabbed my cigarettes and we got smashed on cheap wine. Judy left us alone and we curled up on the sofa. I should've got to know him better, but we were pissed and stoned and he was good in bed; the first time anyway. After that he was as reliable as any speed freak - broke and messed up, psychotic or unconscious most of the time.

I should've known it was a bad idea when I arrived at his place at three in the afternoon and he was still in his dressing gown, watching *The Young and the Restless*. I thought it was just a phase. I didn't realise he had no aspirations aside from watching soap operas and getting high. I should've known when angry strangers showed up, demanding he pay his drug debts. A Scottish girl tackled him in the yard and kicked him in the balls, saying he owed her two hundred dollars. He denied every word and I believed him for some stupid reason; love is blind, I guess. Not long after that, Judy kicked him out for rent arrears and he pitched a tent in Moore Park. Foolishly, I invited him to crash at my place and that was the beginning of the end.

He decorated the house with the junk he collected from alleys in Darlinghurst; street shopping, he called it. He took a trolley out at midnight and returned with a stash of merchandise. I heard the wheels of a trolley rolling down Bourke Street from Taylor Square at dawn. There were more shopping trolleys in our back alley than the supermarket down the road. If only there was a gig for renovating squats and inner city hovels; he could've been an entrepreneur. Unfortunately



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his creativity was dependent on his drug habit like everything else; his passion, sex drive, enthusiasm.

He stayed home and did fuck all but it was nice for awhile, sharing a bed and waking up with another man. It was heart warming; cooking meals, shopping and holding hands on the couch. Everyone said he was charming, funky and handsome; everyone said he was a hoot. He opened the door when I came home from university and pulled me close, admiring me with a sparkle in his eye. I wanted it to last forever.

His teeth were falling out but he looked great when he didn't open his mouth. He had bad breath and he used to sweat at night but I could live with that. I asked him to use mouthwash and I kept a towel beside the bed. I told myself not to be judgmental or superficial. He was who he was and I had to respect that; he could do his thing and I could do mine. He said I was the first guy who didn't complain about his lifestyle and I guess he took that as a licence to do what he pleased.

He stopped paying the rent, he stopped lifting a finger and he stopped spending time with me. After feeling adored and falling in love, I felt chewed up and spat out. I had to cover his rent and explain to flat mates why he had nothing for bills. Most of them moved out and a bunch of idiots moved in. I came home from class and found junkies pissing up and shooting speed in the lounge. He had a desk in the bedroom where he sat on his throne, cutting up speed and handing it out to wretched queers in tracksuits. The door knocked constantly and the phone never stopped ringing; it was the most popular pharmacy in Darlinghurst.

I felt like a nagging wife, spoiling the fun and laying down the law but he didn't listen anyway. I wrote letters pouring my heart out and he threw them in the recycling bin. I was living with a stranger; an outcast in my own home. He refused to do the dishes unless I brought his smokes, so I threw a kettle at his head. I found a photo of him and his sugar daddy in a hot tub in Kings Cross so I made copies and pinned them on lamp posts on Crown Street. He only came home when I wasn't there; he used the place like a squat.

He loved the Cross. He knew all the dodgy cunts on Darlinghurst Road; the addicts, the dealers, the whores. They were his heroes. He shopped for suits at *The Brotherhood* and convinced everyone he was a photographer and a model. He made business cards and said he was moving to New York to be

an interior designer when his agent gave the go ahead. In the meantime, I lost track of who he was, where he was and what he did for a living.

When he came home, we whacked up crystal meth and he escorted me to parties like I was a handbag, introducing me to the deadbeats of Kings Cross. The speed made me feel good for awhile and it brought us close again. I forgot how fucked up it was till I came down the next day, imagining spiders on the walls, trembling like a leaf. I was putty in his hands when he seduced me with amphetamines. My senses spun out through the universe and I joined him in outer space. He had an outfit ready to go; leather pants, a studded belt and a muscle top from the op shop. He dressed me up like a mannequin in a store window and told me I was gorgeous. That's all he had to say to make me jump like a dog because I felt lousy without his approval.

He dragged me through the Cross scoring speed and pills, dropping into one house after another. His heroine was a fifty year old ketamine dealer named *Saffron*. She lived in Darlinghurst for twenty years and took more drugs than the gay community combined. The last time I saw her, she was roaming down Bourke Street with my boyfriend on her arm like two kids in a candy store. They hijacked a taxi on Cleveland Street and sped away with two banana lounges and a point of crystal to Coogee Beach. Saffron was rumoured to be hiding out at a warehouse near Taylor Square with speed psychosis. She was in a catatonic state with a jumper over her head, rocking back and forward, mumbling to the fairies in the garden. The residents made sure she was breathing every hour, spoon feeding her twice a day.

Toby owned the warehouse with his partner, Shaun. They met at the *Midnight Shift* and were two of the most prominent queens in Darlinghurst. Shaun had a thing for wayward teens and accosted them at *The Wall*. He offered them money and a room in return for sexual favours. He chauffeured the boys to the warehouse where Toby made them over with hairstyles and designer clothes. The boys kicked their heels up in front of cable television while Toby prepared the amateur porn set with toys and props. The industry was booming in the States and Shaun saw a lucrative business opportunity. He performed sex acts with the runaway teens while Toby rolled the camera, prepared refreshments and loaded syringes with crystal meth.



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My partner said there was a certain novelty, spending time with the wealthy, but he didn't have the discipline to keep a job. That's how he befriended Shaun and Toby. They drove through the affluent streets of Potts Point to find valuables on hard rubbish night. My partner dove into dumpsters outside busy restaurants and wealthy apartments, retrieving white goods, electrical appliances and antique furniture. Toby waited in the car with a complimentary shot of speed if he found anything Parisian. My partner was a sucker for a free hit of anything that killed brain cells.

They had a ceiling high cabinet of speed, ecstasy and prescription drugs in the kitchen and a grand dining table where they entertained business colleagues. My partner and I spent Christmas at the warehouse before the most incredible spread of gourmet food. Four of us took a seat in the living room with leather chairs and polished floors, beneath a spacious sky light. Shaun offered us h'ordeurves and we passed a straw down the line, snorting Colombian coke from the jungles of Bogota. Toby said grace but our appetites were ruined and we threw our napkins down, excusing ourselves from the table. Shaun huddled behind a chair like a naughty child and Toby chased him with a feather duster, scolding him for spoiling another Christmas dinner.

We drove to Obelisk Beach, swallowed ecstasy and swapped partners. I still remember Shaun hiding from Toby under a rocky outcrop, injecting the last of the crystal meth, sprawled in the sun with blood streaming down his arm. Naked Europeans and Americans paddled in the ocean and crawled out of the bushes with twigs in their pubic hair. My boyfriend did cartwheels on the sand; nothing pleased him more than the rush of a pill kicking into his system. I discussed our futile relationship with Toby who lamented Shaun's recent stay in a psych ward. Neither of us were satisfied with our boys or confident about the future. Life in Darlinghurst was unpredictable, to say the least. There were no presents or Christmas carols that year, but fireworks erupted over the Opera House, yachts sailed on the harbour and Centrepont Tower soared into the sky like a giant syringe.

One night I got a call from the warehouse, asking me to collect my partner because he was making an arse of himself, to put it mildly. When I arrived, a teenage boy passed me in the hall with a new outfit and a cheesy grin; another satisfied

delinquent. A camera sat on a tripod and my partner was spread eagle on the floor, wearing a jumpsuit. He passed out after a three day drug binge, flat on his back like a starfish. He started writhing in fits when Shaun squirted him with a water pistol, laughing on the sofa; the paunch of his stomach flopped out like a walrus. I kneeled down and tapped my partner's face before he came to his senses, choking on his own tongue. Shaun escorted us to the door, telling me to stop by if I wanted a makeover or a fuck.

I carried my partner through the alley but he stopped whenever he saw a pile of trash with decorating potential, ransacking the garbage like a stray dog. He had an appetite for the high life but it was the low life he aspired to. He enjoyed shaming himself in public, falling in gutters and passing out in dingy bars. He had dignity in my presence but maybe I had so little, I was easily fooled. He claimed he was intelligent and I assumed he kept his wisdom to himself - a streetwise conman who played his cards close to his chest perhaps? He said I was too honest and that's why I got fucked over; he did the best job of all, in the end.

That's how it was in Darlinghurst; one sleepless night after another, one drug binge after another. Every faggot succumbed to speed psychosis or overdosed but he was too hardcore for that. He'd be the last man drinking Long Island teas and dancing on the podiums at Stonewall. He told me to keep my opinions to myself because he was older and wiser and could handle more amphetamines. He was right about that. I was terrified of winding up in a nut house, even though I lived in one already.

He spent more time at home in Winter, taking a bath and drinking cups of tea like a true Englishman. He watched porn and said he was going to make it big in New York City, but he never got out of bed. He said he was going to buy a truck and sell his stash at the Paddington Markets but he never left the house. He said he was going to be the wealthiest drug dealer in Darlinghurst but he whacked it all up his arm and there was nothing left but baking soda.

It was just him and I in that hovel on Bourke Street with the murals on the walls, the rotten carpet, the leaky plumbing and the cockroach infested kitchen. There were no more compliments; he said I was boring, predictable, a nag, no fun at all. I told him someone had to cook and clean and pay the bills.



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Someone had to keep a roof over our head and food in our stomachs. We were aboard a sinking ship and no one was coming to the rescue. We went for moonlight walks to *Pretty Street* and tried to rekindle our romance. It was the first place he courted me; a dead end street with flower beds of daisies, geraniums and quaint English cottages. He had an eye for beautiful things but his soul was more polluted than Botany Bay.

He had a charming smile, a rugged accent and flawless skin. He had tattoos and piercings; tall, suave and handsome. He could dress like an executive, a slick businessman or a sexy playboy and I felt so inadequate in comparison. Now and then we tried to get close but his breath smelled like death and I couldn't kiss him without feeling sick. Now and then he barged into my room in the middle of the night and tried to seduce me but it wasn't the man I loved.

He said I should be grateful he was making an effort; I had no right to complain or ask a thing. He came into my world and blew it apart like a hurricane, leaving a trail of devastation behind him. I couldn't see it coming and I did nothing to stop it because I didn't know how; at the time. Nothing changed when I found out I was positive. He stayed in bed till three in the afternoon that day too. I walked around in circles, feeling insane, wanting to throw myself under a truck. I drank alcohol and took sleeping tablets to knock myself out and I prayed never to wake up.

He told me I was stupid for having the test. He didn't know if he could be with a positive guy; he'd consider moving out or going back to England. I walked in circles again, bawling my eyes out in the subway, blubbing like a baby in Hyde Park. Meanwhile, he spent more time down the Cross living it up and screwing around at *The Pleasure Chest*. Friends told me I was a fool; it was a big slap in the face. I should've used a condom, I should've known better. I hated him so much but I didn't want to be alone. We argued, we avoided each other, we shot up speed, we fucked. He acted like it never happened, but I couldn't pretend. He went for a test in the end and came home like a lost dog with his tail between his legs; we're in this together, he said.

I was going to stay with him. I was going to catch up the rent, move on, forgive and forget; but things had changed. It felt like I had the flu and it wouldn't go away. My legs were as heavy as lead, my skin broke out in rashes and my breath smelled as disgusting as his. I needed reassurance but he was nowhere to be

found. I went to the Albion Street Clinic and sat in a sterile room with stark white walls, fluorescent lights and sad men with their face buried in the queer press. I sat through their tests, questions and patronising remarks. They jabbed me with needles, counted my T Cells and told me how everything was. I had to take medication or progress to AIDS. I'd go blind, I'd go mad, I'd shit my pants and die. I took their brochures about antivirals, clinical trials and HIV services and walked out feeling like a leper.

I waited for my partner to come home and make a go of things but he never showed up. He might roll in after midnight and raid the fridge before leaving without a word for another day or two. Junk was all he cared about, junk was all he lived for. He said he loved me but he was too numb to feel a thing. I left him in that terrace house with the mouldy bathroom, gloomy bedrooms and the piss soaked alley out back. I left that house with the rickety clothes line in the courtyard, strewn with cigarette butts and beer bottles; everyone had gone and there was no sign of life.

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Ash Rehn

Makeover

Our lives are covered with dust.

With sandpaper and rubber gloves we have worked the flaking ceiling back to smooth. We have scraped at the uneven walls and filled them with plaster then sanded them again. A fine layer of powder has settled everywhere. It's through our hair, up our noses, down our throats. It's crept its way into the intimate parts of us. It is something we are sharing, if nothing else.

"This is really boring," Zane complains. "Why don't we start painting?"

I turn to answer him, but he has his back to me.

"There's no point starting that until we get all this done. Then we need to wash the walls."

He doesn't respond but continues on rubbing the skirting. At this point we are barely talking. It seems better than arguing.

A shaft of sunlight has broken into what is generally a dark little flat. I want to see a million dancing possibilities but all I see are tiny particles of paint floating in air. Probably lead-based paint.

"If we do the preparation right," I explain trying to find my mask, "everything else will follow."

"Why don't we go out for a drink?"

"You go," I say. "I want to get this finished."

Our builder arrives to measure up and give us a quote. Her pit-bull is on such a short leash she struggles to tie the bitch to the staircase.

"She can come in," I say, concerned the balustrade will give and another savaged child will appear on the front page of



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tomorrow's *Advertiser*. "There's nothing left she can destroy."

"No worries about her, she's used to it. This the bathroom? Are you rippin' out the tiles yourselves?"

I shoot Zane a look.

"Ah, no, I mean we don't have any experience and we might stuff it up."

"Pussies!" she scribbles some measurements in a notebook. "By the way, I can say that, you can't," she winks. "Where's the bedroom?"

"Here," I say, showing her through. "I know there won't be much room once the bed is in here but we still want built-ins."

"Of course you do. Mirrored doors as well," she leans towards me. "How about one on the ceiling?"

Zane rolls his eyes. Personally I can't remember how long it's been. She scribbles some more dimensions.

"Right, that it? Lulu's getting tetchy."

"Um, yeah. When will you..."

"I've got your email. I'll send a quote through later today."

Three days pass and we have heard nothing. I call her.

"Fifteen grand?"

"It's a big job, mate."

I'm staring at this shelf recessed into the wall and wondering what to do about it. *A feature alcove for figurines*, the agent had said, stressing the last syllable in yet another gesture to remind us he was family.

Zane has left a box of *stuff that we might need* on the floor. I see champagne flutes, half wrapped in newspaper, sticking out of the carton. I wonder if it's the pair we nicked from the hotel bar on the night of the auction? We staggered towards the river, glasses in hand, half surprised by the final bid, half shocked we now had a mortgage. We were celebrating the promise of doing something other than sex and shopping. Zane was enraptured at the prospect of doing it all ourselves. I agreed to the painting and had imagined doing it in our undies, like those guys on the reality TV series a few years ago. Instead here I am in baggy green cargos that I never wear and an ugly turquoise T-shirt Zane was given for waiting in line outside a new computer shop. And I am doing it alone.

I give up for the day, have a shower and fall asleep on the inflatable mattress.

I am explaining our plans to Nigel downstairs when Zane appears. I can tell he's had a big night.

"We are definitely getting the acoustic foam," I say. "We can't do it without."

"Well I think that is best," replies Nigel, his dentures clicking. "Otherwise I would hear everything!"

"Oh and there is so much to hear," snaps Zane.

Nigel and I both look at him and he shrugs before heading upstairs.

"Look," frowns Nigel, "I don't mind what you boys get up to in there but I have a right to my privacy."

"Of course, everybody does."

When I was a student I rented a tiny flat in a house partitioned to squeeze in as many low-income recipients as possible. My entertaining of various male guests in the middle of the night was greeted by the rapping of a broom handle on the ceiling underneath me. I persisted with a different kind of banging in defiance to what I took to be an attack on my identity. Meanwhile the patriarch of a family of eight was doing his best to preserve his family's sleep.

I return upstairs. Zane has crashed out on the airbed.

"Why did you say that?"

"He's a homophobe."

"Nigel? That's *La Traviata* playing on his stereo! Anyway he's our neighbour. We need to get on with him."

"You get on with him. I want to sleep."

So here we are; the painting abandoned, half the carpet removed, drop-sheets, power tools, tile samples, masking tape: our mess competing for space.

The plumber is here. He's ruminating over an S bend and exposing a severe case of plumber's bum. It's not pretty. His 'boy', as Zane later describes him, loiters in the corridor, oblivious to what the 150 kilo master is doing. He must still have a couple of teenage years to go and is cute and fit. I catch him grinning at Zane.

"She said nought about this. You got the mains tap right here. That won't work for this kinda suite. I need extra dosh."

"She told us everything was included in the quote, so you'll have to work that out with her."

I turn around and squeeze at my temples, attempting to ease the swelling of my frontal lobe. Now the boy is smiling at



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me. There's something cherubic about his curly black hair and smooth, pale skin, but something disturbing about his urgent masculinity. I shift focus back to Zane who, from the mattress, delivers me a stare, eyebrows raised.

"Nope. You definitely got to do something about this cock. It's in the wrong place. Unless you want to conceal it?"

Zane and I are sitting on an apricot coloured lounge opposite a man who spends his days listening to others dump.

"Was Love the foundation for this relationship, or something else?"

We sense he has not finished.

"Was it Desire? Or Friendship?" he continues. "Maybe you wanted someone to cook and clean for you?"

I glance at Zane just as a smirk is gathering across his face.

"D. All of the above."

Counselling was my idea and now my ears burn red with embarrassment.

"So they were all in there for you Zane?"

"Sure."

"So I want to ask this question of both of you. How much of Love's foundations live on in your dreams and plans?"

We take the tram to the beach. The therapist has suggested *doing things together*. Neither of us speaks. From my supine state I can see sky, jetty, sand, deep water and Zane who is playing a game on his mobile. A man and woman walk along the pier pushing one of those double baby strollers, the kind that take up half the footpath.

"Maybe we should get a couple of Maltese," I offer.

"He's Greek."

"Who?"

"The boy."

"Oh come on."

I should have a swim. I would get up and jump in the water but I know it will be cold and my resolve is shallow. Instead I submerge myself in our familiar silence. I make a mental list of the litter around us: an empty soft drink can, cigarette butts, a Gaytime wrapper. It's the refuse of other people's lives.

"You know," I say, "I'm getting tired of your cheap comments."

"You were checking him out."

I roll over. The baby stroller has disappeared. Across the street new apartments have been built right along the seafront. Their beige facades and unused balconies are as anonymous as their inhabitants. I imagine what it must be like to look across a row of pine trees to water every morning and start questioning whether having views would make a difference to our lives. There is a gust of wind that scatters sand and blows the Gaytime wrapper into the gap between us.

"Ew, yuk!" says Zane.

We have been invited to bring our fears to the apricot coloured couch. Zane, as usual, defers to me, so I decide to let rip.

"You know that expression *the honeymoon is over*? Well I keep thinking: is this the end of the beginning or the beginning of the end?"

I wish that lava lamp were not on. I hate them. Zane on the other hand would have one in every room if he could convince me. I watch the fluorescent bubbles break and wobble around, already regretting what I have just said.

Our therapist toys with his soul-patch.

"So if this was the end of the beginning, where would you commence the next stage of construction? Building walls? Or an extension? Or..."

I hear Zane snifle but I won't look because I don't want confirmation of what can only be tears.

"I think sorting out the plumbing is a pretty important place to start," I say.

"Plumbing huh? And what's happening for you now Zane?"

Against my better judgement, we have moved in before the floor is down. Zane has convinced me we can lay it ourselves so we've bought the most expensive soundproofing underlay we can find. We've been careful with the glue so it doesn't squeeze out of the joint. The engineered timber boards click together easily but my knees are starting to hurt.

"Should have worn my rollerblading pads," says Zane.

"Plastic. They'll scratch the surface."

"Oh. Yeah. How about a towel to kneel on?"

"That's a good idea, thanks."

Nigel's opera is leaking up through the substrate. I don't suppose we can complain after we spent the morning knocking



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down loose floorboards. Zane returns from the new bathroom and hands me a bathsheet. A thick grey one from the set we chose together.

“Hang on,” I say, and down tools. “I’m stuffed.”

“Let’s stop and finish it tomorrow.”

I look around at the clutter.

“What about all of this?”

“Well it’s alright with me if it’s alright with you.”

Another shaft of rare sunlight has penetrated the living room. It is the dust particles themselves that allow us to see it, reflecting the light as they drift through its course. Zane waves his hand through the beam and they spin and whirl away, responding to air currents he has created, dancing in the turbulence of this precious moment.

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Peter Mitchell

The Good Chair

The wood worker
is enamoured by a rubric of evergreen:
a dream of camphor laurel one-and-a-half women high,
wheatgreen-green leaves showering the air,
a branch the thickness of a forearm on ground,
the crescent of chair-arm arcing her love.

She walks the stand of camphor laurel, knows the passion of trees: the
tenderness of leaves as familiar as the life-lines etching her palms,
the slow accretion of growth a tranquil as the evolution of her love.

Mystery guides her hands:
fingers circling solidity of axe handle,
slant of blade in white wood.

The tools of her trade speak to her:
the susurrations of metal plane smoothing
crystalline roughness,
the plangent harmonies of nails singing
the orchestrations of hammer.

Appreciation emeralds the wood worker's eyes.
Her love's hair waterfalls the back of the chair,
her love's long, white arms embroidering the scroll of arm.

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