



# 101 STORIES FOR QUEENSLAND

**IN AID OF THE SURVIVORS OF THE QUEENSLAND FLOODS**

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# INTRODUCTION

*Kate Eltham*

The water came up over the river boardwalk in fifteen minutes.

I stood in the Red Box at the State Library of Queensland, elbow to elbow with other Queensland Writers Centre staff, our noses pressed against the glass, just watching with a kind of stunned excitement as the Brisbane River surged and heaved against the riverbank.

And then we left.

As I locked my computer, and gathered my phone and keys and bag, I didn't think much about what would be created by this flood, only what would be destroyed.

I watched restaurants surge downstream and smash into bridges. I pulled children's toys from three feet of mud and added them to piles of debris that formed new mountain chains down flooded streets. I whispered under my breath "hang on, Queensland" as a Category 5 tropical cyclone consumed remote fishing communities and menaced tropical cities.

We've spent so much of the past months mourning what was lost and giving thanks for what was saved. But it's only in the past few weeks I've come to appreciate that much was created.

We created new connections with each other. We suddenly learned the names of neighbours we'd only waved at in the street. We connected on Facebook and Twitter to find donors of food and water and clothes and gumboots and high-pressure hoses and simple, unrewarded, back-breaking labour. We built communities.

But the heart-bursting wonder of that, at least for me, is that the community we built doesn't stop at Queensland's border, or even Australia's shores. It spreads across the globe, to people on every continent who answered our despair with a flood (and I use that word deliberately) of pure-and-simple humanity.

That expression of humanity has benefited Queensland in many ways since and we are forever grateful. There have been bake sales, art auctions and charity events, concerts and raffles and cash donations that make you whistle under your breath at the generosity, all of it to support families still camped on muddy fields where their houses used to be.

But *100 Stories for Queensland* is special, at least I think so. Not because it involves volunteers, dozens of sleep-deprived editors and proofreaders and project managers and writers I've never met in places I've never visited, all undertaking a massive coordinated effort to publish this anthology (although it did). And not because it will raise money, lots of money, thousands of dollars that are still sorely needed even months after the flood waters receded (and it will).

*100 Stories for Queensland* is special because, as a writing community, you created something that will last beyond the flood and the storm. When all the fundraising chocolates have been eaten and the raffles drawn and the concerts have ended, this anthology will remain.

One hundred beautiful stories. Our stories. When so much was lost or destroyed, this was created. That's something that can never recede or wash away.

If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together

AFRICAN PROVERB



# KITTENS!

*by Sam Adamson*

“Mam! Mam! Come quick! It’s opened its eyes.”

The kitten stretched, yawned and kneaded the blanket it was tucked into.

“Gawd, Mam! Look at all them teeth.” Bobby bounced up and down with excitement.

“Robert Elijah Smith, you mind your language,” scolded his mother, the crinkles around her eyes betraying her shared excitement.

The kitten recoiled slightly, hunkering down in the blanket as it caught sight of Bobby’s moon face mere inches from its nose. *Where am I?* it wondered. The last thing the kitten remembered was tumbling over and over in darkness, knocking into its litter-mate as the cardboard box was tossed from the car.

“Dad, where’s the other one?”

Bobby’s father picked the soggy kitten out of the kitchen sink where he’d been bathing it, and held it up at arm’s length, “He’s right here, son. Just needs a dry, then we can put him with his sister.” He placed the kitten gently on the kitchen bench and began to towel it dry. The kitten wriggled round in the towel, clamped its teeth onto his thumb and bit down, hard. Bobby sniggered at the naughty words his father said.

“Don’t encourage him, Marcus. You know how good Bobby is at picking up language like that. I had playgroup on the phone about it just last week.”

“Sorry love.” Marcus plonked the kitten down in the cardboard apple box beside its sibling and stood back, waving his thumb in the air. He managed to resist the urge to suck it while he rooted through a drawer for a plaster.

The kittens nuzzled each other and began to purr.

“Listen Mam, they’re growling.” Bobby’s eyes widened in surprise.

Lucy chuckled softly to herself.

*There’s nothing like your first kitten, she thought.*

“No Bobby, they’re not growling. It’s called purring. Kittens do that when they’re happy.”

“Wow!” Bobby thought for a moment. “Why don’t we purr when we’re happy, Mam?”

“Err.”

“Ha! He’s got you there.” Marcus emerged from the drawer triumphant, a plaster stuck round his thumb. “And who’s been swearing at playgroup?”

Lucy shot him a filthy look and turned back to Bobby.

“We don’t purr because we laugh when we’re happy,” she explained. “All animals are different. Kittens purr, we laugh.”

“What about snakes?” Bobby wasn’t at all sure about snakes.

“They just hiss, son. A bit boring, snakes are,” answered his father.

“Some snakes are poisonous though, Dad.” Bobby warmed to his subject. “They can kill ya if they bite ya. Can’t they, Dad? Are kittens poisonous? I mean, they’ve got teeth like snakes.”

“I bloomin’ hope not,” laughed Marcus, looking pointedly at his thumb.

“No Bobby, kittens aren’t poisonous. They have sharp teeth like that to catch food in the wild.” Lucy had always fancied herself an authority on the natural world.

“What? Like mice and stuff?” Bobby was sure he’d heard somewhere that cats ate mice.

“Yes Bobby, like mice, and voles, and...”

“Mam, what’s a vole?” Bobby interrupted.

“Walked right into that one, didn’t you?” Marcus smirked.

“It’s like a mouse, but without a tail.” Lucy ignored her husband.

Bobby did not look convinced but was diverted from his line of questioning when one of the kittens rolled over on its back.

“Aw, Mam, look. Isn’t it cute?”

“Yes Bobby. Very cute,” Lucy admitted.

Lucy and Marcus left Bobby crouched by the kittens’ box, under strict instructions not to touch them on pain of losing his pocket money for a month. Closing the kitchen door behind them, a conference was held in the hall, Marcus being the first to broach the thorny topic of keeping the kittens.

“So, what are we going to do with them?”

“Keep them,” Lucy announced firmly.

Marcus felt it only right to lay the blame squarely where he felt it ought to be laid. “But you said Bobby couldn’t have a pet until he was ten. He’s only eight. Have you forgotten the puppy debacle last Christmas?”

“No, I haven’t forgotten,” Lucy huffed, “but that was different. Getting a puppy would’ve meant spending money, serious money. The shelters round here never have any. These kittens are different, they were free.”

“And what about food, and litter, and...” Marcus racked his brain for

distant childhood memories of his parents' cat, "those squeaky things they like? Where's the money coming from for those?"

"They won't cost much. We'll find the money from somewhere."

"We are keeping them, right, Mam?" Neither Marcus nor Lucy had heard Bobby open the kitchen door.

"Well..." began Marcus.

"Yes, we're keeping them." Lucy's expression dared Marcus to contradict her.

"Good, 'cos I know what we're naming them."

"You've picked names already?" Marcus was impressed.

"Yes, Dad. The ginger one's going to be called Mog after Gramps' old cat, and you already thought of a name for the tabby one."

"I did?" Marcus wrinkled his brows.

"Yeah, Dad, you know, when you was drying him and he bit you. You said his name was Basta —"

"Bobby!" Marcus and Lucy yelled in unison.

In their box in the kitchen, Mog and Basta snuggled into each other and fell fast asleep.

# **DRAKE M. CAUSEWAY: INTERGALACTIC EXPLORER**

*by Tomara Armstrong*

Today I had lunch with my good friend and TV exec, Whitney Malcolm. Don't let the name fool you—while he may be a total 'flamer', he's no lady.

Whitney spent the majority of our lunch yelling into his transmitter, while I picked at my snails. I didn't want to offend my friend so I pretended to eat them. When he wasn't looking, I hid them in my napkin.

"This is why you don't give video equipment to a crack whore!" he yelled. "Replace her... file a claim! I don't care; just get it taken care of. How many other junkies are still filming? Okay... yeah... whatever. Don't call me back."

Click.

Whit's company is producing a 'newer, edgier' series of reality TV shows focusing on the darker side of America: addiction, prostitution, and life behind bars.

The shows are ridiculous. I didn't think anyone still did meth; it's so turn-of-the-century. Whitney had explained that that was the appeal of it. Reality TV is the only reason most people stay on Earth; they want their fifteen minutes of fame.

I'm not sure why I stay on Earth.

My mother has been off-world for the past five years. She hates it here, refers to it as the 'Galactic Trailer Park'. I'm not really sure what that means, but she says it's filthy. She's living it up in some retreat that orbits one of Saturn's moons. Her number is unlisted, and she doesn't call.

After lunch, I talked Whit into stopping by the travel agency with me. I have been experiencing a bad case of spring fever, so I thought I might go ahead and plan a little trip.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked.

"I dunno. I just need to get off-world," I said.

There were about a half-dozen people standing around the kiosks, so we plopped down on the couch and thumbed through the digi-pamphs. The same beautiful hologram taunted me at each travel destination. Whitney was immune to the hologram's intriguing smile; he made sure everyone in the agency knew he thought she was a tranny.

"You look like the type that's ready for an adventure," the hologram beamed. "The shuttle leaves tomorrow for the Asteroid Belt. If cave exploration's your cup of tea, then join me..."

"Do you really think she'll be there?" I said, motioning toward the hologram.

"Good God, Drake, are you really that gullible?"

"She's stunning, Whit."

"She's a fucking hologram."

"I don't care... I could use an adventure." Whitney's cackle drew the attention of an android; within seconds, it was scanning our creds and offering assistance.

"Mr Malcolm," the android addressed Whit. "It's not very often that we get someone of your credentials in our establishment. Can I interest you in a theater viewing? Some of these pamphlets are rather dated, I must say."

"Andy," Whit spat, refusing to call the agent by its proper term, "my friend here is looking for an adventure."

"Why do you refer to me as Andy? My badge clearly reads Agent." The android didn't wait for an answer. "Mr Causeway, an adventure, is it?"

"Er... yes."

"What do you have in mind?"

"I'm not really sure."

"Let me access your accounts and see where we stand and what we can offer you." There was a moment of awkward silence. "Mr Causeway, it appears that your accounts are near negative status. Can I interest you in a horseback excursion through Oklahoma?"

"Oklahoma? How about the Asteroid Belt?"

"It exceeds your funds, sir."

"The moon?"

"It exceeds your funds, sir. Mr Malcolm, can I assist you in your travel plans?"

I was defeated. I didn't even wait to hear Whitney's snarky retort as I left the travel agency.

I'd already made it to the end of the block when Whitney shouted for me to wait up. I stopped and sulked while he took his sweet time to get to me. "What's up with you?" he asked.

"I dunno. Just a bad week... month... year..."

"Do you need to borrow some money?"

“I don’t need your money, Whit. I just... I just need to do something. Go somewhere... live!” I looked up at Whitney hoping he understood, but he appeared to be miles away. “Thanks for caring,” I snorted, and turned away.

“Hey, sorry... I have an idea. Can you meet me at my office in about an hour?”

“Uh... sure.”

“OK, bye,” and he took off at a run. I have never seen him run, and I am pretty sure the boots he was wearing were not meant to take such damage but, whatever. There was a decent pub a couple of blocks away, and I knew I had enough cash to wallow in misery.

I was buzzed when I made it to Whit’s office, stumbling in a few minutes late. He was smiling ear to ear. He had a glassy look on his face as he raised his hands: “Drake M. Causeway: Intergalactic Explorer. What do you think?”

“Wha...”

“We are going to pay you to travel.”

I stared at him.

“We are going to pay all of your expenses,” he continued unfazed. “There will be a small film crew going with you.”

“I knew it,” I growled. “I don’t want to be one of your damn reality TV shows.”

“We are going to make you an intergalactic man of mystery and brand the crap out of you. Everyone is going to want to be you; or better, they’re going to want to sponsor you.”

“I...”

“You can’t say no. I’ve booked your shuttle. You’re off to the Asteroid Belt tomorrow. We’ve even packed your bags.”

I stood there, shifting my weight from one leg to the other. “I guess if I can’t say no...”

“Damn right, you can’t. Go get some rest. I’ll send a car in the morning.” He grabbed my hand and kissed my cheek. “Happy travels.” He smiled, patted my butt and pushed me out of his office.

# THE SAFE OPTION

by John Baird

It's the hottest Friday on record and they're driving to the insurance brokers.

"You know what to do in there?" says Abby.

"Ask for the manager," nods Viktor, his mind busy with a dancer *slash* glamour model, named Titka. She gets her great looks from her mother, who, it turns out, is a cosmetic surgeon. Viktor can't imagine Abby going for a little nip-and-tuck; more like a nip to the tuck-shop.

He cranks up the aircon. He can't believe anyone could find Abby attractive, despite the Facebook rumour she'd been seeing a guy with a limp.

They enter the retail park. "If the place is busy, just wait." Abby yanks up the handbrake. "You do have your insurance policy?"

"Of course." Viktor grabs a blanket off the back seat, lobs it over a shoulder and adjusts his Soviet army summer hat.

"You look perfect," smiles Abby. "Every bit the mad, dangerous Russian. Aren't you glad people judge you?"

"I abhor *all* stereotyping." Viktor drops open the glove box and necks a gobful of vodka.

He squints at the brokers. In the window is a cardboard character with a huge baseball bat, used, apparently, to *beat* quotes.

Once inside, Viktor is met by a man and woman both flashing practised smiles at him. He blanks the redhead and sidles up to the desk with the man behind it. The tag reads, Kevin Spleen, Manager. *Bingo!* He's about ten years Viktor's junior and has an enviable shock of muddy-blond hair.

A cocked palm invites Viktor to sit. "How can I help?" Kevin's features are lop-sided, reminding Viktor of Lembit Opik.

"You can give me the safe."

Kevin frowns. "Excuse me?"

"The safe, I want it."

"The safe?"

"Do you see a Monopoly board?"

"No, sir."

"Connect4?"

A shake of the head.

"But you think I'm playing games?"

Kevin releases a nervous laugh. "Sir, we provide cover."

Viktor taps a gun on the desk. "Meet my insurance policy. Now, the safe!"

With all pretence of calm forsaken, Kevin bends to unlock a cabinet.

"Cops better not hear anything about this." Viktor turns to the wide-eyed assistant. "You hearing me, Sweetcheeks?"

She nods as the safe appears.

Viktor wraps the blanket and then his arms, around the heavy safe. Drenched in sweat, he staggers off. By the time they drive away he's panting like a dog on a bus.

Abby has one eye on the speedometer, the other on the rear-view mirror. "Once we crack this baby we'll be counting money like Jim Bowen on *Bullseye*."

She swings into the drive of their tired semi. A car screeches up behind them, blue light flashing.

"Cops," she yells. "Do one!"

"How the..."

Forced to flee, Viktor stuffs the gun under his belt and throws himself at a hedge. He expects to hear, "Stop, Police!" But the only sound is a dog barking; a sound that fades as he hurdles a fence.

Five blocks later, Viktor is expecting more cops. Having carted off Abby, they'll be looking for him. With this in mind, he wipes clean the gun, ditches it in an old well and makes plans to leave town.

He turns the corner, into the path of a police officer. The cop is looking for a man matching Viktor's description. Within moments, he's in cuffs.

A half-hour later, Viktor's in a police lineup; standing there amid two young crack-heads, an old tramp, and a policewoman. He pictures Kevin and that ginger gal, the other side of the one-way glass, laughing at him.

An interview follows, in which Viktor invokes his right to keep shtum.

"We searched your house," says a square-headed cop sporting a corner parting. "We found the safe." The cop strokes his chin. "How'd you open it?"

Equally curious, Viktor sits up.

"Okay, I'll try another question: Where's the money?"

Viktor's expression wavers to confusion.

"You get the flashing light off eBay?"

"What *are* you on about?"

"The blue light—the one you left inside the safe."



Reality bites. That flashing light wasn't on an undercover cop car—no more than its driver, hiding under a cap and shades, had been a cop.

He'd been set up. They'd taken the cash.

Viktor's court date arrives. He had tried to cut a deal, by ratting out his wife, but no joy. It had been her idea to do over the brokers, he told them. She'd heard the safe was stacked on Fridays. Insufficient evidence, they said: she never appeared on CCTV. She never held the gun. Her prints weren't on the safe.

Still, Viktor pleads not guilty, citing entrapment.

He looks on at the witness box as the ginger assistant points at him and blurts out how he threatened her.

The thin-faced lawyer shakes his head. "And what of your manager, Mr Kevin Spleen?"

"I don't think he could cope with the shock of it," recalls the woman. "I mean, neither of us had been working there more than a few weeks, when," more pointing at Viktor, "*he* walks in."

The lawyer scans the jury. "And Mr Spleen has yet to return to work?"

She nods. "Kevin's not been back since that day. In fact, he was so shook up he had to leave within a minute of the robbery. The last I saw of him he was limping off to his car."

# THE TURTLE INVENTORY

*by Kim Bannerman*

Mimi's house is a small, modest, split-level in a quiet part of town. It has two steps leading to a porch, bright blue trim and a little turtle-shaped wind chime that jingles when the screen door is opened.

Stepping into Mimi's front hall, you're instantly greeted by an army of turtle figurines—417 to be exact—perched on shelves around the room. Some are large, some are small: wood, stone, metal, wicker, glass, almost every material known to man is represented. Turn left and walk into the living room and you're surrounded by 1573 more. If you head up the stairs to use the toilet, you'll pass another 213 turtles on shelves mounted directly into the wall. Once you've reached the bathroom, you'll discover a turtle bathmat, a turtle toilet-paper dispenser, a turtle soap dish, turtle-themed curtains, a turtle toothbrush and a smattering of turtle figurines scattered around the tub, counter and window-sill.

The garden is similarly decorated. There's a fish pool with nine cast-resin turtles along its edge, 18 turtle garden decorations, a bird-bath with a faux turtle frolicking in the water, and a turtle-shaped hummingbird feeder hanging from the eaves of the garage.

Under every one is a small plastic label, punched out with a circa-1960s label-maker that Mimi keeps in a kitchen drawer. On each label is a name and a number.

The ceramic turtle on the mantle reads, 'Frank—45'.

The stone turtle next to the back door reads, 'Heather—873'.

Under the bird bath (and fortified against the elements with a strip of clear packing tape) the label reads, 'Sherman W.—2164'.

And that little Thai stone wishing turtle? The only turtle sitting on Mimi's bedside table? That one has a label that reads, 'Harriet—3478'.

Harriet—that's me.

And that's the turtle I gave Mimi on her eighty-ninth birthday.

When I gave Mimi the Thai turtle she accepted it warmly. "Oh, Harry," she said, as robust as a rhino, "it's lovely!"

I sat down next to her on the living-room couch. The party guests had moved into the garden for a game of croquet. Only Mimi and I sat in the house together.

"I saw it and thought of you," I said. She laughed as I looked around at the thousands of wise heads and variously decorated shells. "How many turtles do you have now?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said and waved her hand dismissively.

I wasn't fooled. I knew she knew the precise number and she knew I knew she knew, but this was Mimi's way of moving the conversation away from her worldly possessions. Material things were just that—*things*. Mimi never bought anything except the necessities of life.

"Well, you certainly do love turtles," I said, half to myself.

Mimi laughed again, a light girlish giggle and said, "Oh, I hate the little buggers."

My jaw dropped.

"It's true, Harry!" she whispered, in case any relatives had come inside to use the toilet. "I can't stand turtles! They smell horrible. They're crawling with disease!"

"But you have so many!"

"I was given a pretty one for my sixtieth birthday. Then my cousin Clementine, in California, she thought I might like a second one and then a third one showed up. I figured they made a perky trio, so I put 'em together and BINGO-BANGO!" She clapped her hands together. "Everyone mistakes it for a collection."

"You really don't like turtles?" I stared around at the deliberating jury of little lizard-like heads, looking down on us, smirking at us. Dear God, the woman had over three thousand of them! I took a little blue one from the lamp table and flipped it over. It read, 'Judy at library—2287'.

"Why do you number them?"

"Ah!" Her eyes brightened. She opened a drawer in the coffee table and pulled out a thick ledger. When I opened it, I found page after page of lists: more than three thousand names, dates and addresses. This book was a vast inventory of turtles. Every gift had been charted in Mimi's impeccable script, including the name of the giver, their relationship to Mimi, the date of receipt. On a few occasions, a short note added in red ink if the turtle had been broken.

"A lifetime's culmination of unwanted gifts, my girl," said Mimi. Then she held one spidery finger to her lips and said, with a mischievous wink, "Don't tell anyone. This is our secret, you and me."

“So why the binder?” I asked.

Mimi held up the Thai wishing turtle I’d just given her and examined it.

“When I hit ninety, I got a special birthday gift I’m gonna give to myself.”

One corner of her mouth drifted up in a smile.

“I’m gonna give every last stinking one of ‘em back!”

Mimi tipped back her head and cackled.

This wasn’t the inventory of a dedicated collector, but a carefully planned act of revenge. And, given the ugliness of some statuettes, a particularly vicious one.

I dropped my gaze to the turtle in her hands. “If you want to start early, Auntie Mimi, I’ll take it back today.”

But she laughed. “Oh, Harry, this one, I’m gonna keep!” She pressed a kiss to my cheek. “It’s only taken thirty years, but I finally got a turtle I actually like!”

# TEA WITH MR CHRISTOPHER

*by Michael Barton*

It's early afternoon on Christmas Eve and the door bell rings. I run and jump into the arms of the man dressed like Father Christmas. He used to bring two sacks. One for me and one for Jack. Jack's my big brother, but he went away two years ago. He used to cough a lot and, in bed, he breathed funny. It sounded like coins rattling in your pocket. Daddy told me Jack went to play in heaven. He said we would see him again soon. Father Christmas only brings one sack now, so I don't think Jack's coming home. I miss him.

Jack told me Father Christmas is really Daddy. I think Daddy knows Jack isn't coming home, too. Mummy cries some mornings, when she is looking at a picture of Jack on his bike. When she cries I cuddle her and she cuddles me back. Then she stops crying.

I've got Jack's bike now. When I ride it, I pretend Jack is on it too.

Mummy laughs when she sees me jump into Daddy's arms. His red coat is thick and furry. His hat has a bell on it. He tickles me and I start laughing. Then he takes my presents and puts them around the tree for the morning. He leaves, saying he has to visit other children. Five minutes later he comes back as Daddy, dressed in his work clothes. Soon he'll take me to the shops to buy Mummy a present. I want to get her some perfume. It makes her smell like flowers.

After we have been into the shop, we walk back to the car park. We haven't done our good turn for Christmas yet and Daddy says I can choose. It should be Jack's turn because I picked last year, when we took some turkeys to a big house where old people live.

On the corner of the street, there's an old man dressed in dirty clothes. He's got a grey beard like a wizard. A bit of cardboard hangs around his neck

with writing on it. I ask Daddy what it says.

“Cold and hungry, please help’,” he tells me. I pull on his hand and he comes down to me so I can whisper in his ear.

“Hasn’t he got a Mummy or a Daddy?”

Daddy shakes his head.

“What about a brother? Do you think his brother is playing in heaven, with Jack?”

Dad swallows hard, like he always does when I say Jack’s name. I stand there for a moment, and then I ask Daddy another question.

“Can we take him home, for dinner, for our good deed? For Christmas?” I say. “Jack would think it’s a good idea, if he was with us.”

I ask the old man his name.

“My name? You can call me Christopher.”

Fifteen minutes later, I’m sitting at the dining room table with Mr Christopher opposite, playing with his beard and smiling.

I hear Mummy and Daddy arguing in the living room. I don’t think Mummy’s happy. Suddenly it goes quiet and Mummy comes into the dining room. She looks at Mr Christopher.

“You must be James’s Mum,” he says, holding out his hand. “It’s a great pleasure to meet you. I must say your son is a credit to you. As is that exquisite smell coming from the kitchen.” He sniffs the air and with a big grin says, “I’ve always been partial to home-made sausage rolls and,” he sniffs again, “warm mince pies.”

Mummy smiles and shakes his hand. Then she calls out to Daddy.

“John, can you take our guest upstairs and find him some clean clothes?”

At the dinner table, Mummy puts out some Christmas crackers and wine. There is a big plate of sausage rolls, some crusty bread with cheese, and mince pies with thick cream. Mummy and Daddy sit at each end. Mr Christopher is wearing Daddy’s favourite fluffy red dressing-gown.

With every mouthful, Mr Christopher seems to get fatter. His face gets redder and his beard gets whiter. I start laughing, even though Mummy and Daddy are very quiet. “You look like Father Christmas!” I shout.

He laughs, long and loud. For a few seconds the room is filled with the sound of his big, deep laughter.

“If I *was* Father Christmas, what would you ask me for?”

“Please, don’t tease my son,” Mummy says.

“Tease him?” Mr Christopher says, before peering at me from over the rim of his round glasses. “Do you mean to tell me this innocent young boy is a non-believer?”

“No, no! I know Father Christmas is real!” I say, looking at Daddy, and

then Mummy. They both sit quietly and I tell Mr Christopher what I would like for Christmas. "I want Jack to come home. So I can show him how I can ride his bike now."

Mummy starts crying and Mister Christopher puts her hand in his and says, "Christmas is a time when the very strangest of things happen."

"Now, I really must be on my way. You have plenty of things to do before tomorrow. Thank you for your hospitality and a most delightful meal." He picks up the last sausage roll before leaving the room and disappearing down the garden path, still wearing Daddy's fluffy red dressing-gown.

Mummy and Daddy just sit, wide-mouthed and unable to speak.

On Christmas morning, I am first up. I am sitting in the living room when Mummy and Daddy come in.

"Can I open my presents now?" I ask, jumping up and down.

My Daddy smiles a big grin and then says to me, "Your Mummy and I have some good news."

He touches Mummy's tummy and gives me my best Christmas present ever. "You're going to have a little brother soon."

# LISTENING TO THE MUSES

*by Cath Barton*

It was so good to stretch. We'd been squashed in the back of the small car for three hours after the coach broke down in Birmingham. But now it was just a short trundle up to Sun Street and our first view of The Music Room across its own paved square. Lights blazed out of the windows above to welcome us, though the café on the ground floor was dark behind its big arched window.

We cosied into the little flat and our twin beds. In the morning we squeezed out of the tiny door onto the icy roof. The church spires and turrets of Lancaster lay around us in little wisps of mist and smoke. Only after greeting the day outside did we turn the big key in the lock of the Room itself and walk tentatively into the presence of the nine Muses, tumbling in plasterwork over its walls and ceiling. A white Sistine Chapel, commanding silence and respect. I walked over to the piano, lifted the lid and played a phrase on the cracked keys. The notes sang around the room.

"Come on," said Edwin. "We need a good breakfast."

And that became our pattern for the week—the outward view of the town followed by obeisance to the Room before breakfast; each of them a hunger to be met in its own way. The place embraced us and we it. We walked the grid of the town and out along the canal, scattered with winter debris under, over and through the ice. I sorted through the mothballed heaps in the vintage market and pulled out a green tweed hat. My Lancaster hat, I call it now. In the accordion shop we bought little flutes and some tattered sheet music. Edwin tried it out on the piano, pronounced it "too difficult" and retreated to the sitting room above to do his crosswords.

I stayed to practise the song I was learning. The Muses shone around me in the afternoon light.

"You can do better than that."



Edwin was upstairs. The door was shut. Perhaps it was someone in the café below. I sang through the complicated vocal line once more.

“Yes, that was much better.”

I whirled. No-one there. But this was not coming from downstairs. I shivered. The ceiling was high and the heaters were not powerful. As I locked the door I heard girlish laughter. Up in the flat I couldn't get warm, not for ages, even though that little room was snug. I didn't tell Edwin about the voice. He doesn't react well to things like that. He's a rationalist.

That night I dreamt about the Muses. Euterpe, the Muse of Music. Polyhymnia, the Muse of Rhetoric. And the others. Edwin and I had learnt all nine of the names and tested one another until we got them right. In my dream they were taking tea together in the Room. Sitting on chairs covered in white drapes. Sitting in a very proper way, in spite of their *déshabillé*. Their talk was racy and, I think, in French. Why French I have no idea. I thought they were Greeks. Things get awfully muddled in dreams.

In the morning I asked Edwin what he thought but he was stuck on a crossword clue so I crept out. My footsteps echoed on the wooden stairs and I could hear noises from the café. I felt reluctant to enter the Room. As if it was too early and the Muses might not like it. So I went down to the café. It was welcoming and warm. The coffee came with the shape of a flute embroidered on its froth and a small cake. It felt very daring, to be eating cake for breakfast. As if I was in a foreign country.

“You staying up there?” The barista was young and beautiful, with flowing locks. Like the Muses.

“Yes,” I said. “Have you seen the Room?”

“I go there every day when no-one's staying. Sometimes when they are too. I know when people are out.”

He told me he played the flute.

“Just like Euterpe then,” I said.

“Just like Euterpe,” he replied, with a smile.

When I got back upstairs Edwin didn't seem to have missed me. He'd made coffee though, so I had another cup. Not as nice as the one in the café. But I didn't tell him that.

“Shall we go to the café downstairs today?” he asked. “Try it out?”

“Sure,” I said. “Be good to try it out.”

The day was bright with winter sun and we went for a long walk up to a domed monument to some worthy local gentleman. Below us the pattern of the streets was cut out with sharp shadows. We could see The Music Room and its square quite clearly, away on the other side of town.

“Edwin, I think there's someone on the roof,” I said.

“Can't be,” he said.

I thought of the barista flautist with the golden hair. There could be, I

thought. But I didn't say that.

When we got back to the café there was a girl serving. I wanted to ask about my friend—I thought of him as a friend, even though we had only met once—but of course I couldn't. The stone of the building opposite turned rose in the late-afternoon rays and I heard flute music being played above. French, I think. Something by Fauré.

“What's that piece of music, Edwin?”

“What music?”

I knew it was the boy. I didn't care what Edwin thought any more. I ran out of the café and upstairs. The door was unlocked but there was no-one in the Room. Apart, of course, from the Muses. I swear the smile on Euterpe's face hadn't been there before.

That night Edwin and I made music together in the Room. Real music, with Euterpe smiling down on us.

# THE SPEAKING TREE

*by Alan Baxter*

Since I was a child the old fig tree spoke to me. At first I thought it completely normal. Why shouldn't a tree speak? I must have been about five when I first ran through the paddock to the shade of the great, old thing and fell to the ground among its serpentine buttress roots. Tears poured down my cheeks and the tree said, "What's wrong?"

I panicked, thinking someone had followed me. "Who are you?" I called out.

"Just an old tree. I've stood down here in the corner of the field for so long and I get lonely."

"My sister hates me," I said. "She hit me."

"What did you do?" asked the old fig.

"Nothing!"

"Really?"

"I spoiled her doll's dress. But I didn't mean to!"

"And she probably didn't mean to hit you," said the tree.

So I went home, said I was sorry. Carrie said that was okay and she was sorry for hitting me.

After that I often sought solace among those deep, winding roots. Happy or sad I'd sit in the cool, loamy shade and when I needed counsel the old fig would always tell me what I needed to hear.

It helped me get through the bullying in year two. It consoled me when Sally Johns said she wanted to kiss Declan Baker when I was ten. She'd always kissed me before.

When I was twelve and a bunch of my friends thought smoking was cool they called me a sissy because I didn't want to try. I'd heard my grandad wheezing like an old, broken car and before he died he said, "Promise me, James, you'll never be stupid enough to smoke like I did."

“Do you really care if your friends call you sissy?” asked the old fig.

“They’re my friends,” I said, hurting inside, torn in two directions.

“Are they?” asked the tree, shivering its branches so its leaves danced gently above me.

When I turned fourteen I thought I was a man grown and hadn’t been to the tree for ages. Stupid kid’s stuff, because everyone knows trees don’t talk. So I went through the paddock to prove it and sat in among the roots and didn’t say a word.

After a while the tree said, “Cat got your tongue?”

I jumped in shock and said, “I didn’t think you were real!”

“Of course I’m real,” said the old fig. “You’re sitting among my roots aren’t you?”

“Of course the tree is real,” I laughed. “But the talking. I thought I’d dreamed it all.”

The tree laughed too, deep and full. “Maybe you did. Dreams, reality, who’s to say what’s what?”

When I was seventeen and Julie Hyland made a man of me in the back of my dad’s old Holden, just weeks after I’d got my licence, I went to tell the tree. I had to tell someone. It sounded pretty surprised and if I didn’t know better I’d say the old fig was embarrassed. But really, what could embarrass a tree with hundreds of years of life in its sap?

Then I finished school and went away. University, jobs, socialising. Life. I missed my old friend, giant and calm, its long low branches reaching shade out across the grass. I missed those winding, cool roots I could hide among and disappear for hours at a time. It hadn’t always talked to me and sometimes it talked for a while and then went quiet, but not before it told me what I needed to hear. Which is just as well, as I’ve never been so good at listening to people. I don’t know why I trust a tree more than humans, but I do.

And now here I am again. I haven’t sat among these roots for nearly fifteen years. It’s ridiculous to think a tree can talk, isn’t it?

“You there?” My voice sounds ridiculous.

No answer. What did I expect? I was dumb as a kid and a teenager, but I really am grown now. Trees don’t talk.

“Whatever, I need to tell someone.” It helps sometimes, just to speak out loud. “I have a wife and kids now, old fig, did you know? How could you? Well, I do. They’re beautiful. But the world is changing around me. Here it’s always the same and I envy you that. But I lost my job and that means we might lose more. What am I supposed to do?”

“Perhaps you just need to talk to them,” old fig says.

I leap to my feet, stunned. Even after all these years, the tree really does talk?

“You sound different,” I say, wondering if the tree is a little out of breath. Do trees breathe?

“We’re all getting older, James.”

I smile. “Even trees, eh?”

“Even trees.”

“Just talk to them?” I ask. “My wife and kids? Tell them about it?”

“Of course, James. They love you and they’ll help you. The people around us, whoever they are, always want to help when things get tough.”

I smile and turn, pat the old fig on its deep brown trunk in thanks. It’s obvious, but sometimes it helps to hear these things from someone else. Or something else. I really should learn to talk to people more.

“Is he gone?”

David wiped sweat from his brow with an old kerchief. “Yeah, he just drove off. Hopefully to talk to Gill and the kids.”

Sophie smiled at her aging husband, ran a hand over his wisps of sweat-soaked white hair. “You okay?”

David laughed. “I nearly killed myself running through that paddock. I’m getting too old for this!”

“Sounds like James isn’t too old to talk to his tree still.”

David hugged his wife. “Our boy has always been a strange one. Whatever works, Soph. Whatever works.”

# SURVIVING THE KITCHEN TILES

*by Jessica Bell*

Lily looked at the kitchen floor tiles. Movement. Like slimy brown worms wriggling inside a murky polluted river. The tiny sporadic black lines changed position. Every night. Especially when the moonlight glimmered through the leaves of the apricot tree just outside the kitchen window. The shadows haunted her. And she was afraid they'd come to life—swallow her like polluted quicksand, in the dark, when she needed to get out of bed to pee.

Every night, Lily would tackle the tiles with Russell, in the hope that he would protect her from the worms.

“Turn the light on,” Russell would whisper.

But, despite being tall enough to reach the switch, she couldn't do it. If she did, something would happen. Something she wouldn't be able to reverse.

*I'm not ready.*

So, Lily would put herself through the fright, with Russell's arm around her shoulders. Sometimes they would even run across the moving kitchen tiles without needing to go to pee, for kicks—to see if they could survive it, again and again, without turning the light on.

On the other side of the kitchen, Lily would close the yellow shiny door behind her as fast as possible, panting as if she had just escaped a police chase after committing a horrible crime.

“We made it by the skin of our teeth!” she'd whisper to Russell, inconspicuously trying to determine whether the worms were following them or not.

“Tell me about it,” he'd respond, clicking his tongue with attitude.

Lily would comment on the scale of difficulty the kitchen tiles posed that night and if it wasn't for Russell, they'd both be ‘goners’. She'd try to

imagine what Russell had done to save them, and why, but her imagination would trail off like the concentration span of a toddler. The action and reason was beside the point—it was the dialogue that mattered most.

Russell would then keep guard by the glass wall while Lily caught her breath sitting on the cold black toilet seat. She'd close the toilet door with the foot free from dangling knickers.

"Sorry Russell. No peeking!" she'd giggle, trying to maintain her dominating tone, yet hesitant volume, so as not to attract any strange creatures toward the dark glass wall. But most times she couldn't pee and she'd sit waiting, for at least a little trickle to hit the water inside the toilet bowl. But when she took too long, Russell would disappear like fog.

Luckily for Lily, when she decided it was time to go back to bed—to sleep—Russell would rematerialize, wish her 'sweet candy dreams' and disappear again through her closed window. Condensation would blur the glass and the room would go cold. But the cold wasn't uncomfortable. It was like walking into an ice-cream shop on a hot summer's day. Lily would write 'I heart Russell' onto her misty window, then rub it away with her pyjama sleeve—just to be safe.

Lily didn't know where Russell went every night, but she hoped it was somewhere special; somewhere he would be able to take *her* one day—perhaps like Peter Pan.

Most nights Lily would lie awake in the semi-darkness, watching the shadows on her wall change shape with every passing car, until she drifted off to sleep. Russell would lie beside her—stroke her forehead—silently hum an unknown tune.

Lily was the only one who could hear him—she knew it, deep inside. She hoped Russell could understand what went on inside her head. That she was afraid to lose him. But she knew, no matter what, he would be there when she needed to pee; when she needed help getting through the tantalizing kitchen and into the glass-walled outhouse. He'd be there for as long as she needed him.

But Russell knew something else. Lily refused to turn the light on in fear of seeing what the kitchen tiles were *really* made of. The worms in the tiles weren't scary. They were just little growth spurts. And by turning the light on, Lily would activate them—and grow up. But she wasn't ready to grow up. Not yet. She wasn't ready at all. Because then Russell wouldn't come out to play. And he wouldn't be *real* any more.

# A NEW WOMAN

*by Sharon Birch*

I came out of the hospital refreshed, ready and raring to go. My heart did a little dance. The final check-up with the gynae doctor had gone well. I could sing, dance, Hoover, try to get back to my old self—or perhaps, an improved, better self. The last few years hadn't gone well, what with various health problems. I actually felt in my prime—hadn't felt so good in ages.

I sent a text, hoping he'd be as thrilled as I was.

*You have a new woman! Be prepared tonight!*

I skipped to the shops in the spring air, seeing beauty in everything: the shimmer of the village pond, the ambiance of schoolchildren in the high street at lunch time, the street-cleaner in his little motorised van. I bought flowers, salmon steaks, gnocchi and parsley for garnish. The expensive bottle of red would be a rich, smooth accompaniment. I popped into the hairdresser's and asked for Shelly.

"Do you think you could book me in for a cut and colour? Now?"

She squeezed me in between old Mrs Smith with a purple rinse and Tasha Coleman, who just wanted a pin up.

"You might have to wait a little while... Is that okay?"

It was totally fine. I had a few hours spare. It was a done deal. I browsed the smooth strands of twisted hair in the large booklet, fingering each one as I passed them over. I wasn't keen on the silver strands that had sprung up around my hairline and along my centre-parting. Wasn't forty too young for going grey? Being so naturally dark, they stood out like the stars at night, but not so beautiful. Lighter, younger, something cheerful. I picked one, then two, then three... Perhaps she could give me a combination of the individual streaks? The striking rich colour of the autumn leaves: tawny brown, russet, rich red, burnt orange, and thick chocolate. Forget the cost—I was worth it.

I left Shelly's Shawn Sheep hairdressing shop four hours later, swinging



my new collar-length bob around my neck. I hugged myself with a smile. I couldn't wait to see Pete.

By the time I arrived home, he still hadn't replied—no phone call, not even a text. After another hour of waiting, desperate to share the good news with my gorgeous husband, I rang him.

"I'll speak to you later!" he snapped.

The phone cut off. I thought he'd be pleased. It had been tough on him, the last few months, looking after me. He must be busy, I assumed, though I was hurt by his attitude. I set about making dinner for two and even dragged out the candles and soft music. I wanted tonight to be so special.

He arrived home at six thirty with whisky on his breath and anger in his head.

"A new woman! How the hell have I got time for a new woman?" he snarled, as he shrugged himself out of his overcoat.

"I thought you'd be happy!" I fought back the brimming tears and shook my head, confused. What was wrong with him?

"I was in an important meeting. Then you text me that! I don't know where you get your ideas from. A new woman indeed!"

"I thought you'd want to know what the hospital said. I'm sorry—I presumed..."

A drop spilled over and trickled down my flushed cheek. I'd heard men sometimes go off their wives after a hysterectomy. Maybe he wasn't as thrilled as I was.

"Look," his tone softened, "I'm glad you're finally well. But where do you get this idea of me having another woman? I work all hours as it is. I haven't the time for a tart! It's rubbish, Jenny." His voice heightened once more. "I've been so considerate to you and you think I've got someone else. I just don't know..." He leant against the kitchen worktop with arms on his hips, shaking his dark tousled head at me.

"I never said you had another woman!" I had no idea why he thought that. It wasn't supposed to be like this. How had it gone so wrong?

"Is that why you've had your hair done? Put that Barrowman fellow's CD on? Set light to the candles?" He stomped out of the kitchen and into the dining room, blowing the candles out, spraying hot white wax onto the red silky tablecloth. "This some sort of effort to win me back? From someone I haven't been with?"

Then it dawned. I laughed. Oh, how I laughed.

"You daft lummo! I didn't mean you had another woman! Read the message again." I grabbed my phone from my handbag, found the 'messages

sent' and showed him. "Look... it says, '*You have a new woman*', meaning me—I'm a new woman. The doctor said I was in tip-top condition and I don't have to go back to see him. That's what I meant!"

He blushed, and grabbed me around the neck with a strong arm. He pulled me into him. "Oh... I'm sorry... really sorry." Then he kissed me.

Sheepish, coy, we fell into each other's arms, easing away the tension and leaving salmon and gnocchi for another night.

# RIDDLES

*by Ev Bishop*

“Why’d the chicken cross the road, lad?”

Evan looked up, brow furrowing. Were those smile-wrinkles at the old man’s eyes? Was the question a joke then, or was he supposed to answer?

A rough hand, a *strong* hand, clamped down on his shoulder and he flinched. Not because it hurt. He just wasn’t used to—didn’t like—people touching him.

The old man sank down onto the hard-baked grass beside Evan, surprising him, and pulled two cans of soda from a dented tin lunchbox—a crazy thing, really old. Evan didn’t think stores even sold that kind anymore.

The can made a hiss and pop when he opened it and the fizzy sweet liquid was cold and fresh. He’d had cola before, of course, but it tasted different here. Better.

For a long minute they just sat staring down the road that went nowhere, sipping. Evan held his can with two hands and it struck him as funny when he noticed the old man did too.

“So, you figure out an answer?”

“What?”

“To the question, why’d the chicken cross the road?”

Evan knew his face got all pissed-off-looking and he wished he could control his emotions better. After all, someone had taught his dad how to land a punch, right?

“It’s one of those things you can ask all day long. You can make it a joke, sure, or try to ignore it. Maybe even attempt an educated guess, but you can’t really know, can you?”

Evan took a big swallow and kicked a rock. It dislodged from the crumbling earth like it had just been waiting to escape all along. The old man was nuts.

The man copied him—well, he took another drink, anyway. He didn't kick anything.

"When your dad first left, I used to ask myself that all the time. Why'd my son go and leave? But I might as well've asked a chicken for an answer."

Evan looked at the face so near to his, so like his, just skinnier and wrinklier, but he still didn't want to talk about chickens.

"But now he's brought you here and he's gone again."

Here it comes, thought Evan, and the worry that had brought him out here to the road in the first place flared again. He didn't know where he could go...

"And I finally know the answer. It doesn't matter why a chicken crosses the road. We don't have to drive ourselves nuts about chickens."

The old man put his empty can in the lunchbox, closed it up and got to his feet carefully. He was a lot taller than Evan, like an oak tree or something.

"Your Gran's got dinner in the oven—she seems to think you like ham and mashed potatoes. You've still got time to sit a bit, though. I'll see you inside."

Evan looked up, still had no words. But it didn't seem to matter; the old man nodded and left.

The sky above the mountains was orange and red—really pretty, even with the sun gone—when he finally got to his feet. His toe caught a loose stone and he looked down. The rock he'd kicked earlier had left a hole, dislodging the smaller one next to it. He nudged the little rock back into its place, tamping it down with the ball of his foot. Buttery potatoes and gravy carried in the air. Suddenly starving, Evan hurried.

Then he smiled. He still didn't know a good answer for the one about the chicken—but he had a good joke about a skeleton that might do.

# THE MOVING SUN

*by Megan Blandford*

As a little girl, I used to sit on the rooftop. I sat there every evening as the sun set. The colours, the sun moving—I know, the sun doesn't move, but it felt that way—and the breeze just starting to shift south and cool the long, hot day. I loved it.

I remember when it started to feel different. When I noticed the moment the world shifted from day to night, when the sky wasn't just a mass of pink clouds any longer, when it became part of me. It started to feel like magic.

Unfortunately, moments of magic didn't last long at our house.

"Sarah! Where are you?" My mum's voice would ring out loudly from below me. *Here we go*, I'd think, waiting for the rest. "I cook for this ungrateful mob and they go wandering off," she'd mumble.

Then Dad would start, booming voice emerging from his usual evening spot, the dark brown armchair in the corner of the lounge room. "She's prob'ly on the bloody roof again."

"Bloody hell. Sarah! Are you on the roof again?" Mum would storm outside, walk the three steps from the decking to the grass and stand back, looking up. "Geez, that's bright," she'd complain, shielding her eyes from the sun as it just peeked out from the top of the roof.

*Bright? I'd wonder. Bright? Is that all you have to say about this beautiful sky?*

"Sarah! Get down here," the yelling would continue. "Sarah! I'm telling you, get down or you won't get any tea." She'd say it as if it were a threat.

Then she'd clomp back up the steps and walk inside, the fly-screen door slamming shut behind her. I'll always remember that sound; the door squeaking, then a moment's silence as it hesitated, and then—BANG—it'd slam shut, then open slightly again and—BANG. Finally, decisively, shut.

I'd stay silent on the roof, wondering why. Why did I have to belong to

this family? Why couldn't I just fly away like those parrots, so brilliantly coloured and free? Like the kangaroos in the distance; they were so lucky, just coming to see what was going on and when they found out they didn't want to be here anymore, just hopping away.

Each evening, I'd hide on the roof to feel the magic. And each evening my parents would ask me to be more like my brother and sister. Max and Jess didn't climb roofs and lose track of time as they watched the sky.

It happened every night, until this one evening. After they called me down, I walked to the edge of the roof, slid down quietly and peeked in the window. There they were: Mum in the kitchen, sweating in the heat as she turned the chops (chops again!) in the pan, Dad sitting in his armchair, reclining with the paper, Purple the dog lying at his feet dozing, Max and Jess watching telly.

*Nah, I don't want to be here, I thought. I'm a kangaroo and I can just go somewhere else, somewhere better.*

I turned from the window and hopped along. In my mind I had big, bouncing paws, red fur and funny, pointy ears. In my mind I looked as unique as I felt inside.

*Imagine if I could keep going, and going and going.*

"What's all that racket?" Mum walked outside—another magical moment gone. "Sarah! Stop jumping on the deck. It'll break and then you'll be in trouble." She shook her head. "Why can't you just watch telly with your brother and sister? Your tea's nearly ready."

I kept hopping.

"John!" Mum called inside. "Come and deal with your daughter." And she went back inside, back to the chops.

"Sarah!" called Dad. "Listen to your mother. Don't make me come out there."

Still, I hopped.

"Right, that's it," he yelled.

I heard him throw the paper down and his heavy footsteps started through the house. Then the screen door (*squeak*, silence, BANG... BANG) and a rough hand came quickly toward me.

He lifted me by one arm, hurled me off the decking, rubbed his hands together as though they'd done a satisfying job, and said, "Now jump. Go, go on." He said it like it was a dare. "You wanna jump? Get outta here, then. Get lost." Like he couldn't wait to be rid of me.

And all I could think was, *I don't want to be here.*

He went back inside. I heard the sound of that door—*squeak*, silence, BANG... BANG—for the last time.

And I hopped. I hopped through the garden gate, through the paddocks and up the driveway. I hopped right out of that place.

I looked at the sky and I could have sworn the sun was moving. It was magic. I was nine years old. And I was free.

When the sun drops and the gum leaves start swaying, something changes a little bit. The breeze is just enough to scare off the flies that have been relentless all day; enough to cut through the stifling heat. But it's more than that.

When the gum leaves sway and the sun moves down, I look at my daughter and think of that night when I was nine years old. The same age my own little girl is now.

I climb up the ladder and lie next to her, and we watch the sun set together. Just the two of us, lying on the rooftop. And every night I whisper to her, "Dream. Look at the pink sky, the orange sun, and dream. This magic will make it all true."