

School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry

**Life Writing and Rural Queer Studies:
Queering the Spatialisation of Modern Sexual Identities in Australia**

and

Six Hundred Something Kilometres

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Masters by Research of Curtin University

Declaration

To the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

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Date: March 20, 2020

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Abstract

This thesis explores the following research question: how can rural queer studies and life writing be integrated to subvert the privilege afforded to the urban by the urban/rural binary that governs the spatialisation of modern sexual identities? The research has two outcomes: the exegesis, *Life Writing and Rural Queer Studies: Queering the Spatialisation of Modern Sexual Identities in Australia*, and a collection of pieces of memoir titled, *Six Hundred Something Kilometres*. The research explores significant criticisms levelled by academics of rural queer studies—namely an urban/rural binary that privileges the urban and a problematic metronormative narrative that governs the spatialisation of modern LGBTQIA+ identity, politics and academia. Through the practice-led research methodology of Dallas Baker’s “queer life writing,” I argue that creative writing can resist the demands of metronormativity by employing what Scott Herring refers to as a “rural stylistics” and attempt to provide examples of contemporary Australian writers who have done so. In *Six Hundred Something Kilometres*, I attempt to do the same.

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**Life Writing and Rural Queer Studies:
Queering the Spatialisation of Modern Sexual Identities in Australia**

Introduction

This thesis attempts to answer the following research question: how can rural queer studies and life writing be integrated to subvert the privilege afforded to the urban by the urban/rural binary that governs the spatialisation of modern sexual identities? In doing so, the exegesis, and the complementary pieces of memoir that form the collection *Six Hundred Something Kilometres*, explores a significant criticism levelled by academics of Queer Theory about the spatialisation of modern LGBTQIA+ identity, politics, and academia, and attempts to demonstrate that an exploration of subjectivity through practice-led research can queer the privilege this affords to the urban.

Scott Herring (2010) makes this privilege clear when he analyses the manifesto Queer Nation—an LGBT+ activist organisation—released in 1990, which stated: “Let’s make every space a lesbian and gay space. Every street a part of our sexual geography. A city of yearning and then total satisfaction” (Queer Nation, cited in Herring, 2010, p. 4). Herring asks us to read this closely because “every space” and “every street” collapses into “a city” for “our sexual geographies,” which excludes regional and rural lesbians and gays and their experiences. Judith Halberstam (2005) refers to this privilege as “metronormativity,” employing the term to reveal “the conflation of ‘urban’ and ‘visible’ in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities” (p. 67) and is highly critical of the ideological narrative it constructs since, she argues, it misrepresents the rural and the experiences of the queers who reside there. Herring, Halberstam, and other academics of rural queer studies—or what Robert McRuer (1997) refers to as the “regional elision in Queer Theory” (p. 69)—are critical of metronormativity and interested in productive means of resisting it. Indeed, Herring (2010) argues that “queer artists across decades, media, and idioms have fashioned critiques” (p. 6) against lesbian and gay metropolitan norms through what he refers to as a “rural stylistics”.

Through life writing—a description of genre and form of practice significant in contemporary artistic research—subjectivity can be explored as a means of resisting

metronormativity. Dallas Baker (2018) refers to this practice—in which Queer Theory and life writing are integrated—as “queer life writing” but concedes that, currently, it is merely a proposition, an “unfulfilled promise,” because it “has not emerged as a robust literary genre or practice” (p. 2). As such, while Baker discusses its theoretical context, he does not provide examples of queer life writing. By analysing creative nonfiction produced by contemporary Australian writers and charting a number of my own experiences in Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, I attempt to provide these examples through what might be referred to more specifically as rural queer life writing.

Henk Borgdorff (2016) writes that while “there are those who react to artistic research with reserve, if not scepticism or outright rejection,” where “domains of art and academia meet and intersect... something significant happens that could influence how we think, or might begin to think, about both domains” (p. 4–6). Jen Webb (2015) reiterates this sentiment when she argues that “Creative writing can operate as a mode of knowledge generation, a way of exploring problems and answering questions that matter in our current context,” concluding that “writers do research because they are curious about the world or an aspect of it—because they find it intrinsically interesting” (p. 3). This is, perhaps, “the most important reason for doing research”, Webb argues, “beyond any institutional imperatives, beyond getting the details right or finding the best mode of expression, it gives writers the means to develop their own understanding of the world, of themselves as human beings living in that world, and of the creative, practical and ethical ways in which to live better” (p. 3). By integrating rural queer studies with life writing I am coming to know myself and the world better. The result is *Six Hundred Something Kilometres*, which attempts to demonstrate the merit of rural queer life writing as a practice-led research method. Ultimately, I argue that it is prudent to consider the rural in relation to queer identity, politics and academia at a time when Queer Theory is burdened with the increasing normalisation of its subject matter.

Locating the Rural

To subvert the privilege afforded to the urban by the urban/rural binary and the metronormative narrative it produces or reproduces, the urban and the rural must be defined, but this is not without difficulty. Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson and Brian J. Gilley (2016) elaborate on the complexities of the term “rural” and how it has been construed in the popular imagination, where it is “simultaneously everywhere in general and nowhere in particular. It is ever-present and yet a thing of the past” (p. 4). It is strange, and some—Gray, Johnson and Gilley argue—might even go so far as to call it queer. To pick a part the definitional certainties of urban and rural, Herring (2010) argues that we should look to our dictionaries. In the Oxford English Dictionary, we find that urban is defined as “in relating to, or characteristic of a town or city,” while rural is defined as “in, relating to, or characteristic of the countryside rather than the town.” But how do we define “town,” “city,” and “countryside”? In Australia the Bureau of Statistics use the Geography Standard to define “rural” and “remote” against what they classify as “major cities.” These areas are classified as “major urban,” “other urban,” “bounded locality” and “rural balance,” as well as “inner regional,” “outer regional,” “remote” or “very remote.” This Standard measures population against geographic location. Kalgoorlie, which has a population of 30,000, is considered “other urban,” but it is also considered “outer regional” due to its location. A seven hour drive west and you’re in Perth—a major city—but a couple of hundred kilometres in any direction from Kalgoorlie and, other than the town of Kambalda, you’ll find “rural balance” and “very remote” classifications for the area. According to the Bureau’s classificatory system, Kalgoorlie is urban *and* regional—it is a city located in regional/rural Australia. But how do the inhabitants of this strange, possibly queer, place define Kalgoorlie, and how do they define themselves?

Herring (2010) argues that measuring geographic location and population is an arbitrary means of defining the urban and rural and instead posits that we define it socially. He notes that “Designating any area, population, locale, or, by proxy, person as ruralized while defining any

area, population, locale, or person as urbanized starts to seem less like a descriptive act and much more like a prescriptive project. When their semantic surfaces are scratched, the terms ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ become a definitional roundabout” (p. 8). Scratching the surface of the Bureau’s Standard—especially in its attempt to classify Kalgoorlie—reveals this prescription. Because of this, Herring contends that the urban/rural distinction is “as much context-specific, phantasmatic, performative, subjective, and... standardizing as it is geographically verifiable,” and these terms “subsist as structures of intense feeling that help materialize the geo-representations of urban or rural queerness. Space and place are as much act and experience as they are dirt and rock, concrete and steel” (p. 13). Therefore, Herring argues, we should consider these binaries as historically co-dependent and theorise “rural” or “non-metropolitan” settings as “performative geographic positions that have often enabled individuals and group subjects to experience themselves as distinct from dominant spacial performatives of the ‘urban’ or ‘metropolitan’” (p. 13). So how do contemporary queer writers from Kalgoorlie write of themselves?

In the other urban, outer regional, rural-skirted Kalgoorlie the social definition that Herring argues for has been articulated and documented by more than half of the participants (of which, I was one) of *Bright Lights, No City* (2019)—a collection of nonfiction subtitled “stories about growing up queer in rural Western Australia.” Together, they describe its red dirt and gold mines, and the experiences they detail reveal that Kalgoorlie is materialised as a geographical representation of regional/rural. The collection includes a biography from each participant which is telling of this. In his biography, Peehi Blake Tahana writes “the mining town of Kalgoorlie” (p. 30), Laidley Plackett writes “I grew up in Kalgoorlie-Boulder—a mining town in the middle of Bum Fuck, Idaho,” describing it as “a small country town” (p. 21), while I described Kalgoorlie as “a red-dirt town full of miners” in my biography (p. 12). Although the local government subscribes to the Bureau’s Standard and maintain that it is the City of Kalgoorlie-Boulder, it is clear that in the popular imagination of its inhabitants it is an isolated

town. The participants' nonfiction is even more telling. In his, Tahana writes, "Most people say that Kalgoorlie is just a big man's town in the middle of the desert," (p. 26) and details a news station's interest in his experiences at Kalgoorlie Fashion Week, about what it was like growing up in this "other" space. Plackett makes the spatial definitions clear when he writes about tee-ball tryouts: "I was only from Kalgoorlie, of course I wasn't good enough to compete in Perth at state level" (p. 18), alluding to the spatial differences between Kalgoorlie and the urban Perth. I also allude to this sentiment when I write of the six hundred something kilometres that separate Kalgoorlie and Perth and construct a narrative around how I perceive myself, and present myself accordingly because of this perception, differently in each of these places. So, while Kalgoorlie is not considered rural by geographic location or population (according to the Bureau), the inhabitants of Kalgoorlie arguably consider themselves distinct from dominant spatial performatives of their urban counterpart—Perth.

Employing Herring's definitional parameters of the urban and rural, we can explore the urban/rural binary through Perth and Kalgoorlie, but there are a number of important considerations to make. First, Herring (2010) writes that the regional and rural should not be conflated because the regional has "a specific social and aesthetic history" as a contested term "within political, cultural, or social group formations inside or outside urban geographies" (p. 27). Like the rural's hierarchised relationship to the urban, the regional has "also been used to shore up a nationalizing identity as they too function as spatialized language games." However, Herring defines the rural through the social rather than the geographic because he is interested in how rurality and regionality and their stylistics share a critical orientation that can upset the urban/rural binary. This is especially important to consider given the classification of Kalgoorlie as "outer regional" despite the "stories of growing up queer in rural Western Australia" documented by inhabitants of Kalgoorlie in *Bright Lights*.

While the regional and rural are considered distinctive even as their definitional parameters bleed into each other, the urban and suburban share a similar relationship that cannot

be ignored since suburbia both disrupts and stabilises the urban/rural binary. Indeed, Lyn Spiegel (2001) writes, “Gay and lesbian people, homeless people, unmarried people, and people of colour were simply written out of these [suburban] community spaces, and were relegated back to the cities” (p. 33), which points to certain affinities between the suburban, regional and rural—namely that the city was construed as the only inhabitable space, long-term, for gays and lesbians. Karen Tongson (2011) reminds us that contemporary scholarly discourses about suburbia converge with queer theoretical debates about urbanity, regionalism and rurality, and that this must be considered by academics of these fields. Although many of the experiences I document in *Six Hundred Something Kilometres* in Perth are located in suburbia, and although I am interested in the nuances between the urban and suburban, as well as the regional and rural, the focus of my research is the urban/rural binary. It is for this reason that I have construed Kalgoorlie as the rural and Perth as the urban in a broad sense because the relationship between these two spaces, the metronormative narrative (re)produces, and how it has affected me is my primary interest.

While academics interested in the spatialisation of sexual identities are considered and measured in their discussions about the urban, suburban, regional, rural, they also heed criticisms levelled against transnationalism. Indeed, Tongson mentions that transnationalism converges in scholarly discourses in the same manner, while Alan Sinfield (2000) critiques the “globalization of a ‘gay’ identity that replicates itself as a colonial narrative of development and progress that judges all ‘other’ sexual cultures, communities, and practices against a model of euro-American sexual identity” (p. 20). This is especially important to consider given that I am interested in Halberstam’s (2005) directive to “complicate our understanding of sexualities *within* the ‘West’” (p. 70).

There are significant distinctions to consider when exploring the urban/rural binary—not only the classification of regionality/rurality or the effect of urban sprawl, but also the cultural specificities of Australia. While I take up Halberstam’s challenge, I do so narrowly,

materialising Perth and Kalgoorlie through spatial performatives of the urban and rural, and acknowledging the limitations of this research. However, Gray, Johnson and Gilley (2016) note that rural “is almost never used to signify gender or sexual diversity” but argue that “When most people talk about ‘rural and small-town values,’ they are referring at least in part to a culture of sexual conservatism that is generally assumed to be intolerant of gender and sexual diversity at best, if not overtly sexist and homophobic” (p. 4). It is strange, they argue, that “the rural has come to represent many qualities that a lot of people who live there (wherever ‘there’ is) simply do not possess,” (p.4)—including whiteness and heterosexuality—because this does not reflect the diversity of the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people living in rural places. It does not reflect my experiences, which is why I am interested in attempting to queer this binary through my subjectivity—by writing my gay/queer experiences in these two spaces—through rural queer studies practice-led research.

Metronormative Narratives

The spatialisation of sexualities (re)produces a metronormative narrative that academics of rural queer studies are highly critical of and disrupting it is essential to subverting the privilege afforded to the urban by the urban/rural binary. Rural queer studies situates itself within the field of Queer Theory, but it is critical of its spatialisation, and the spatialisation of LGBTQIA+ identity and politics. In *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (2003), Nikki Sullivan recognises Queer Theory as an academic discipline in a perpetual process of “ambiguous (unbecoming)... a discipline that refuses to be disciplined, a discipline with a difference” (p. v). However, it is essential, Sullivan argues, not to endow it with a sense of impossibility since it “function[s] in specific—albeit complex and somewhat ambiguous—ways in particular contexts, and in relation to particular issues” and “ignoring this because of a fear that any attempt to investigate the multifarious, multivalent, and contextually specific practice(s) of Queer Theory will result in assimilation, is politically dangerous and ethically suspect” (p. vi). Sullivan is, like many Queer

theorists, not concerned by what Queer Theory *is*, but by what it *does*. Sullivan's onus is "to queer—to make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimise, to camp up—heteronormative knowledges and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialities that are (in)formed by them and (in)form them" (p. vi). Many academics argue that this involves queering Queer Theory itself. For example, Cathy J. Cohen (1997) levels criticism against dichotomous logic and the "narrow and homogenised political identities... that inhibit the radical potential of queer politics" (p. 441). As such, Cohen argues for "a broadened understanding of queerness... based on an intersectional analysis that recognizes how numerous systems of oppressions interact to regulate" (p. 441). Contemporary approaches to Queer Theory like this, Cohen argues, undermine dichotomies and contest a homogenising identity that can be pervasive to political identity. Rural queer studies is a contemporary approach to Queer Theory primarily concerned with the spatial dichotomous logics that pervade the field—they *do* Queer Theory by attempting to queer the metronormative narrative the urban/rural binary (re)produces, and argue that considering space broadens our understanding of queerness.

There is a body of literature, albeit a seemingly small one, that considers the spatialisation of queerness. In *De-Centering Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis* (2000), Richard Phillips and Diane Watt demonstrate this, writing that sexualities and sexual discourses have traditionally been focused upon centres and margins. They use French Philosopher Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978) as a poignant example (especially since it is one of the most cited works in Queer Theory). Phillips and Watts argue that it has "a (hidden) geography: the legal, medical, religious, and other institutions, which discursively constitute and regulate sexualities, are concentrated in geographical and political centres, broadly speaking metropolitan centres" (p. 1). Herring (2010) makes the same argument of Michael Warner's *The Trouble With Normal* (1999)—a book that attempted to make tenets of queer theory accessible for non-academic audiences—as an example of this. Herring is critical of Warner's local critique that proliferates into an overwhelming global perspective since Warner concludes that "the sexual

culture of New York City serves people around the world, even if only as the distant reference point of queer kids growing up in North Carolina or Idaho, who know that somewhere things are different” (Warner, cited in Herring, 2010, p. 3). This chronic, hidden geography is what Herring makes visible by asking us to read Queer Nation’s manifesto closely—where “our” became collective and “sexual geographies” collapsed into the city. Herring (2010) reiterates this sentiment by naming the rural, and how it is employed, specifically:

the rural... is shelved, disavowed, denied, and discarded in favour of metropolitan sexual cultures... In each the rural becomes a slur, one that has proliferated into an admittedly rich idiom. Suffice it to say that if recent strains of queer theory and recent forms of lgbtq [sic] politics (latent and manifest) share common ground, its usually a dismissal of rurality as such, a dismissal not only common place but, let’s bet the farm on it, chronic. Much of Queer Theory wants desperately to be urban planning, even as so much of its theoretical architecture is already urban planned (p. 5)

Aware of the urban/rural binary that privileges the urban in scholarly debates, activism, and the popular (urban) imagination, Phillips, Watts, Herring and others are interested in interrogating the metronormative narrative that is symptomatic of this binary. On this, Kath Weston (1998) summarises that “The gay imaginary is spatialized, just as the nation is territorialized. The result is a sexual geography in which the city represents a beacon of tolerance and gay community, the country a locus of persecution and gay absence” (p. 40). Expanding on this problematic narrative, Halberstam (2005) describes a dominant “story of migration from ‘country’ to ‘town’...within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy” (p. 67) while Herring (2010) notes that metronormativity often demands a “predetermined flight to the city; a mythological plot that imagines urbanized queer identity as a one-way trip to sexual freedom, to communal visibility, and to a gay village (or at least a studio apartment) whose streets are paved with rainbow pride.” (p. 15). They, and other

academics of rural queer studies, note that examples of this narrative can be found across Western popular culture—in literature, film, television, music, and our media landscape, and offer numerous examples of it.

Although there are a limited number of texts in popular cultural that relate to the rural queer experience, it is unsurprising that a significant number of these reflect a metronormative narrative that rural queer studies academics are highly critical of. Ang Lee's film *Brokeback Mountain* (2006), itself an adaptation of Annie Proulx's short story of the same name, features two closeted men in a tumultuous relationship over a number of years in rural Wyoming and ends in one of the men's violent death. Stephan Elliot's *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1995) tracks two gay drag queens and a transwoman across rural Australia where they experience homophobic abuse and violence. Tina Fey's *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015) features Ronald Wilkerson—a gay man who flees rural Mississippi on his wedding day to a female childhood friend after remaining closeted throughout high school to travel to New York to reinvent himself as Titus Andromedon. The 22nd season of *Home and Away* (2009) introduced lesbian Joey Collins to the Australian town of Summer Bay where Joey comes out to her brother who disowns her, has a brief romance with a policewoman, and then she promptly leaves town (the policewoman, Charlie Buckton, was a mainstay character but, unsurprisingly, after her brief romance with Joey she only has heterosexual relationships on the program). American country singer Steve Grand's "All-American Boy" (2015) and the corresponding music video features the singer pining after another young man at a party set against a rural backdrop, but when he kisses the man the encounter is uncomfortable because it becomes obvious that he is only interested in kissing his girlfriend. Australian Indie musician Vance Joy's "From Afar" (2013) and the corresponding music video depicts a similar tale between two teenage boys in a rural farming setting ("I always knew, I would love you from afar" is, of course, the outcome for the gay teenage boy featured). In his memoir, *Boy Erased* (2016), Garrard Conley recounts his childhood in rural Arkansas and his experience in gay conversion therapy as a teenager; the narrative ends

two years after the events, where our protagonist is living in the city of Auburn and studying creative writing (in the film adaptation he is, unsurprisingly, in New York with his boyfriend). Holden Sheppard's debut novel *Invisible Boys* (2019) traces the lives of three gay teenage boys growing up in the rural town of Geraldton in Western Australia; at its conclusion, two of the boys have come to terms with their sexuality and decide to flee the town for Perth, while the third stays but rejects his sexuality. In an analysis of the national press coverage that followed the murder of Mathew Sheppard in rural Wyoming in 1998, E. Cram (2016) argues that Sheppard's violent death was more or less considered an inevitability given the rural locale. Parallels can be drawn between Sheppard and the Snowton murders in Australia between 1992 and 1999 which the perpetrators orchestrated against those they perceived to be homosexuals and paedophiles (Mason, 2007; Hess & Waller, 2012). This metronormative narrative sequesters violent homophobia and posits the rural as a singularly oppressive space and the urban as, if not the only place for them to survive, then certainly the only place for them to thrive.

In recounting the (re)production of this narrative across mediums of popular culture and offering that it is problematic I do not in any way mean to suggest that there is not truth in this narrative, and I am certainly wary of reversing the binary that I am trying to queer. There *is* truth in this narrative—many LGBTQIA+ people from rural areas of many countries have shared their painful stories of growing up, and living in, these places before finding freedom in urban centres, and it would be imprudent not to mention that roads to greater freedom for the queer community were paved predominantly in city centres. However, this dominant metronormative narrative is not every queer person's experience of the country, and exploring this spatialisation has become increasingly important to consider in contemporary discussions. This informs Gray, Johnson and Gilley's (2016) research which lists a variety of statistical and legislative examples from the United States that counter this metronormative narrative (like Vicco, Kentucky, population 335, "who became the smallest municipality to pass an ordinance banning discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity") to argue that "predominantly

rural regions or states can be unexpectedly supportive of gender and sexual minorities” and that “predominantly urban states can be surprisingly hostile to them,” before concluding: “the spatial politics of gender and sexuality are enormously complicated—far more complicated, certainly, than they are often imagined to be” (p. 5–7). Equally, Halberstam (2005) notes, “many queers from rural or small towns move to the city out of necessity, and then yearn to leave the urban area and return to their small towns; and many recount complicated stories of love, sex, and community in their small-town lives” (p. 67) and provides a number of examples of this in an American context. However, there appears to be a dearth of research in the field of rural queer studies, which is only more significant for geographic areas outside of the United States. As Phillips and Watt (2001) note, “investigations of real and imagined geographies of sexualities are limited” (p. 1) to metropolitan centres (like New York) or colonised spaces (like Africa)—“much less has been said,” they write, “about other liminal or in-between spaces, including the small towns and rural parts of Europe, Australia and North America” (p.1). In the academic spheres of literary and cultural and creative arts, a background search suggests that there is a lack of research being conducted in relation to Australia. However, there are academics in the social sciences investigating the experiences of rural queers and producing papers on the urban/rural binary and the privilege it evidently affords to the urban in LGBTQIA+ identity, politics and the popular imagination. Their work is useful for considering the metronormative narrative and how it might be queered.

A mental health study conducted by Anthony Lyons, William Leonard and Emily Bariola (2015) of lesbians and gay men in rural and regional Australia measured differences between their population and their urban counterparts. The researchers interestingly comment on the metronormative narrative that underlies the research that they are conducting when they write “It is often thought that non-heterosexual men and women who live in rural and regional areas face greater challenges than those in urban areas, due to issues such as stigma and isolation from other non-heterosexual peers” (p. 245). Their findings, of course, indicate that this is not

necessarily true. While they reported that the psychological distress of rural lesbians and gay men rated highly, their distress was near equal to their urban counterparts, which “suggests that these rates are indicative of distress levels within the broader population of lesbians and gay men” (p. 255). They conclude that the mental health outcomes of lesbians and gay men in rural Australia are far more complex than their research renders due to uncontrollable variables, and comment on various other studies in other countries that have produced dissimilar results in which the mental health of rural queers is significantly worse or better. What they argue for is further research on the experiences of rural queers and their mental health in Australia. Although these researchers are not necessarily attempting to disrupt the urban/rural binary, their research is useful for considering how a totalising metronormative narrative pervades academia and the popular imagination. In another study, Andrew Gorman-Murray, Gordon Waitt and Chris Gibson (2008) investigated “the politics of belonging” in the country town of Daylesford, Victoria because the town hosts ChillOut, which is promoted as “the largest rural gay/lesbian festival in Australia.” Gorman-Murray, Waitt and Gibson’s research revealed that “for gay men and lesbians, both residents and visitors, Daylesford was imagined and experienced as a gay-friendly Australian country town.” (p. 17). This was explained through the data that they collected. They discovered that Daylesford had been constructed in the popular imagination as the “gay capital” or “gay heartland” of country Victoria and rural Australia, because of its high residential gay and lesbian population. After surveying 203 attendees on Carnival Day during the four-day Festival and asking, “What does ChillOut do for Daylesford’s identity?” their results were telling. The largest group, at 41 per cent, said that the Festival made the town “gay-friendly” or a “gay centre,” while an additional 25 per cent reported that it indicated that the town was “broadly accepting of social diversity” (p. 17). They note that these views are expressed by the town’s gay and lesbian residents *and* heterosexual residents and conclude that their research, “counters the standard spatialisation of gay/lesbian becoming and demonstrates the ways in which gay men and lesbians have cultivated a sense of belonging in and to rural

spaces” (p. 17). Lastly, Ed Green’s (2009) ethnographic research of gay men in rural Australia considers isolation. He notes that “As a sense of community and belonging may give urban men a sense of selfhood, gay men in rural areas can also find a sense of selfhood living in the bush itself and belonging to the dispersed gay community there” (p. 59). What these researchers, and many others, are pointing to is that not only is rural Australia far more complex than its homogenised rendering suggests, but that we also need to be conducting more research about it. If we return to the participants of *Bright Lights* we can see how life writers are already queering the urban/rural binary and destabilising the metronormative narrative. In “Doing Laps,” Emery Wishart disrupts the closet model of metronormativity, since his life writing focuses on coming out in Dunsborough and a repeated returning to Collie afterwards. Sheppard’s “Fight, Deny, Delete,” similarly disrupts the flight narrative through a returning to and from Geraldton. Josie Boland’s “Words” includes her “coming out” in Esperance, and then concludes with a secondary “coming out” in Perth—where the former is a celebration, and the latter is a nightmare.

While texts like Elliot’s *Priscilla* and Sheppard’s *Invisible Boys* may reflect a metronormative narrative, it is important to consider that they can simultaneously queer it. At the conclusion of *Priscilla*, the transgender character decides to stay at a rural resort to work because of a burgeoning romantic relationship, and throughout *Invisible Boys* Geraldton is established as more complicated than its rendering as a town of gay romantic and sexual absence and homophobic persecution. Conversely, Wishart’s piece concludes with him moving to Perth where he meets, befriends and lives with other queer people, which partly adheres to a metronormative narrative. Indeed, Weston (1998) writes that “the same narratives that use urban/rural contrasts to set up the gay imaginary may also contain elements that disrupt the characterization of rural-urban migration as a move from surveillance into freedom and isolation into community” (p. 45). However, what such examples make clear is that the spatialisation of modern sexual identities in Australia is complex. The privilege afforded to the urban by the urban/rural binary and the metronormative narrative it fosters is problematic and pervasive, but by investigating its nuances,

by analysing texts that consciously or unconsciously grapple with it, this privilege can be subverted.

Rural Stylistics

Herring (2010) argues that metronormativity functions through a dominant metropolitan stylistics, but that there is a rural stylistics to counteract it. In discussing stylistics, Herring refers to a body of work by academics like Anthony Fraitas, Susan Kaiser and Tania Hammidi. Fraitas, Kaiser and Hammidi (1996) discuss “the interconnections between queer communities and cultural spaces in the context of style” and argue that “citizenship in the G&L communities, like any community, may be marked through the deployment of style. In other words, communities may use style to signify membership, separation from a more general culture, and expression of common feelings and values.” (p. 85). Herring also refers to Barbara Ching and Gerald W. Creed’s discussion of rural style as a cultural value attached to rural places and people in *Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy* (1997); Creed and Ching explain that the urban/rural binary is lived by people through “mundane cultural activities such as their selection of music (country versus rap) and their choice of clothing (cowboy boots versus wing tips),” that this is a “means through which identity is commonly expressed” and that this generates “social identification” (p. 2). Ultimately, Herring aligns himself with Karen Tongson who calls for “the centrality of style as a concept constitutive of metronormative queer discourses, as well as alternate spatial genealogies for queer life and for a model of queer style that asserts its rural and suburban roots” (cited in Herring, 2010, p. 190) or what he refers to throughout his work as rural stylistics. In doing so he, in part, employs the term to signify the social identification generated by the urban/rural binary.

In arguing for a rural stylistics that challenges metronormativity, Herring (2010) extends our understanding of metronormativity through an analytical framework that considers six axes;

I argue that in doing so he makes the work of rural queer life writing less challenging. These axes are the narratological, racial, socioeconomic, temporal, epistemological, and aesthetic, and this framework allows Herring to make a number of important considerations. First, that the metronormative narrative imagines queers as young adults, occluding queer children and their experiences. Second, that metronormativity frequently traffics in a normative ideal of whiteness, yet it simultaneously operates on “the unfounded assumption that urbanized areas are more racially diverse and racially inclusive than ruralised ones.” Third, that it also assumes a “leisure-oriented urbanism as bourgeois privilege and as niche market”—a gay capitalism that stifles critical, political sensibility. Fourth, that there is a “hierarchized assumption that a metropolitan-identified queer will always be more dynamic, more cutting-edge, more progressive, and more forward-looking than a rural-identified queer, who will always be more static, more backward, and more culturally backwater.” (p. 16). Fifth, that this is geographically relational—the closer to the city centre a queer, the better a queer. Finally, that there is a “cosmo-urbanism—a dominant queer worlding.” (p. 16). All of this “helps support, sustain, and standardize the idealizing geographies of post-Stonewall lesbian and gay urbanism, an urbanism that facilitates the ongoing commodification, corporization, and de-politicization of... queer cultures in many locales” (p. 16). These axes operate in part through a metropolitan stylistics, and Herring offers numerous examples to illustrate this.

American novelist Edmund White’s epigraph in *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America* (1980) is cited by Herring as an clear example of these stylistics. In it, White writes that New York gays are the authority: “our clothes and haircuts and records and dance steps and decor—our restlessly evolving style—soon enough become theirs,” (cited in Herring, 2010, p. 18), where “our” refers to urban gays and “theirs” refers to nonurban gays. He goes on to detail these stylistics—which engender an aesthetic norm because a gay and lesbian urbanism informs metronormativity and consolidates itself as queer urbanity—in more detail:

Such urbanity functions as a psychic, material, and affective mesh of stylistics informed by a *knowingness* that polices and validates what counts for any queer cultural production; a *sophistication* that demarcates worldliness, refinement, and whatever may count as “the latest”; a *fashionability* that establishes what counts as the most up-to-date forms of apparel, accessory, and design; and a *cosmopolitanism* that discriminates anybody or any cultural object that does not take urbanity as its point of origin, its points of departure, or its point of arrival (p. 16)

Herring concludes that “these four aesthetic components are most often referenced” as “trendy fashion,” “chic,” “style,” and sometimes even “lifestyle,” and exemplified by what one queer magazine—*Out Magazine: Fashion, Style, Celebrity, Opinion for the Modern Gay Man*—alphabetises as “Production Promotion Proenza Schouler Project Runway Protest Chic Puma Quotes Raf Simons Ralph Lauren Ray-Ban Rehab Roberto Cavalli Samsonite Black Label Sexiest Designers Shoes Shopping Sports Street Style Icon Sunglasses” (p.16). Herring provides a number of other socially and historically specific examples of how a normalising metropolitan stylistics exemplifies queer urbanity through “a process of tastemaking—of incorporating or refusing or disputing the dominant stylistics of a social space that established the boundaries of a particular social class,” which “is both a conscious and unconscious effort that plays itself out on anybody’s affects and effects.” (p. 20). Hence we can see how a normalising stylistics—like White’s clothes and haircuts and records and dance steps and decor—embodies queer urbanity because “taste, a class culture turned into nature, that is, embodied, helps to shape the class body” and “succeeds in incorporating queers into an assimilated ‘stylistic affinity’ of urbanism.” (p. 20). Herring notes that while these stylistics have been “subversive strategies for negotiating the physiological and psychological abuses of heteronormativity,” they also work internally to “intimidate, to normalize, and to box queers” (p. 21) and this is what he is critical of. In an Australian context, Peter Polites’ novel *The Pillars* (2019) documents a metronormative urban stylistics in Sydney. In Chapter 16, Polites’ protagonist and his housemate go to a picnic in the

Botanic Gardens with two other gay men who wear Hi Top sneakers, tank tops and jean shorts. Their hair is cut short, they have tribal tattoos of their spirit animals on their muscled bodies, and drink charcoal-activated water. The conversation turns from work to the film awards season and the best and worst of the red carpet. They live in expensive apartments in areas that “used to be filled with tranny hookers” before gentrification (p. 114). Polites uses his protagonist to criticise the stylistics of these urban Australian gays and their attitudes and beliefs. It is important to note that while Polites’ does this from a suburban context, the clear criticism he levels against gay urbanites in his writing is of interest for considering a metro stylistics in an Australian context and how a stylistics in opposition of metronormativity may be employed. Of course, Herring (2010) argues that where these metropolitan stylistics are confirmed, upheld, and discarded they can also be manipulated through a rural stylistics, which chart “how stereotypically ruralizing stylistics of rusticity, stylelessness, unfashionability, anti-urbanity, backwardness, anti-sophistication, and crudity, try to undercut the metronormative demands made on queer life” (p. 22) and provides a collection of examples of this.

Herring (2010) defines rusticity as “an intersectional opportunity to geographically, corporeally, and aesthetically inhabit non-normative sexuality that offers new possibilities for the sexually marginalised outside the metropolis as well as inside of it” (p. 68). As an example, Herring uses *Country Women*—a journal produced by a collective of gay and lesbian working-class and lower-middle-class women in the rural community of Albion—as an example of this, since it attempted to present alternative aesthetics to the dominant gay lifestyles of urban-based gay magazines like *Advocate*. Herring (2010) describes the cosmo-urbanism of *Advocate* as a “sea of glittery ads for Persian rugs in Melrose, or skimpy underwear, or *Art World*, or swank nightclubs, or Eye Mystic jewelry, or David’s Divine Dining, or Glendon’s fine crystal, or Dresden kennels for your beagles, or advice for buying your perfect boat, or hat stores, or New Look loungewear, or glass tabletops” (p. 72). He concludes that the *Advocate* “imagined gay readers as ‘heavily capitalized’ consumers and interpellated them into a normalized racial and class identity via an

aesthetic of chic and fashionability” (p. 71). Or, what José Esteban Muñoz (2002), when discussing performances of queer citizenship in New York, terms “the dominant imprint,” “a blueprint of gay male desire and desirability that is unmarked and thus universally white” (p. 129). The aesthetic of *Country Women* is stark in comparison: on the cover, “one woman harvests hay, another picks apples, another sows a field. Though each is singular, these women are braided together through an illustrated border of grape and pumpkin vines” (Herring, 2010, p. 83) and Herring concludes that this utopian scene presents “an alternative collective, a rusticity that ‘naturally’ separates from the ‘man-made’ ‘institutions’ of urban gay print cultures” (p. 84).

Herring (2010) uses Michael Mead’s photographs of Eastaboga—a neo-confederate rural town of 4000 in the United States—to explain backwardness. The photographs, Herring writes, capture their subjects as they “play cards, piss together, chug beers, hold cockfights, share pornography in the cramped quarters of a trailer home, embrace each other in the nude, brand each other with their initials, drape themselves in Confederate battle flags, mill about an art studio, and sit shirtless to eye the camera in poses that possibly indicate homoerotic desire, if not actualization” (p. 99). The reaction that the photographs elicited from urban queers was extremely telling of the metronormativity it undermined—that of fascination, repulsion and aggravation. Commenters either fetishized the subjects of the photographs, expressed disgust and pity over their misfortune, or mistook them as urbanised performatives of “trailer trash.”

Herring (2010) defines unfashionability as a component of metronormativity’s ensemble, “a hyper-awareness of how queer urbanity can normalize via a sartorial stylistic of fashionable chic, of how citified queers heirarchize themselves when they don... the trendy, the up-to-the-minute, the modish, and the sandpapered” (p. 127). He demonstrates this through a critical reading of D. A. Miller’s celebration of urban gay male culture: “The men of the Muscle System or the Chelsea Gym, who valuing tone definition over mass give as much attention to the abs and glutes as to pecs and lats; who array their bodies in tanks and polos, purchased when necessary in the boys’ department, in spandex and speedos, in preshrunk, reshrunk, and, with

artisanal care, perhaps even sandpapered 501s—let us hail these men” (cited in Herring, 2010, p. 126). Herring argues that Miller takes pleasure in the queer excess as he celebrates the urban gay male fashion of Chelsea and demonstrates that fashionability is central to the imaginary constructions of queer stylistics. Unfashionability counteracts the ongoing metronormativity of modern apparel. Herring (2010) uses Sharon’s Bridgforth’s performative *no mo blues* as an example since the rural-based characters, the performative overalls and swamps and oral histories that Bridgforth presents “occupy a time outside of fashionability” (p. 144). For Bridgforth this performance offers “the chance to celebrate the rural/southern working-class Black Bulldaggas, who were aunty-momma-sister-friend” (cited in Herring, 2010, p. 145), and for Herring it “fashioned a queer anti-urbanism in excess of any fashion-laden urban system past, present or future.” (p. 148).

These are but a few in a plethora of cultural artefacts that Herring critically examines searching for rural stylistics that undermine metronormativity. Herring (2010) submits that there are many “to be found in raggedy-ass clothing, in RFD [a queer Magazine] queendom, in sho-lo haircuts, in bumpkinish memoirs, in not-so-slick oil paintings, in molasses-thick Kentucky accents, in plain and crude do-it-yourself journals, in downtown nightclubs, in hillbilly farmhouses, and in double-wide trailers” (p. 183). The purpose of identifying these stylistics is to undermine a dominant, and therefore problematic, urban stylistics. In doing so he does not mean to replace the urban with the rural—he is not interested in presenting the rural as more authentic—rather, he is interested in destabilising the binary. However, while Herring carves out the rusticity, backwardness and unfashionability of a rural stylistics that can be utilised to subvert metronormativity in the United States, and while there are certain parallels between the U.S., Australia and other countries in the West, there are evident distinctions that will become apparent through the analysis of contemporary queer Australian work. The rural stylistics that are employed through the exploration of subjectivity in life writing reflect the specificities of their culture. Therefore, while I adopt Herring’s rural stylistics to undermine the axes of

metronormativity that operate in contemporary Australia—the rusticity, the backwardness and the unfashionability, and a stylelessness and crudity that suffuse these—I also consider a particular Australian humour (that of larrikinism—a celebration of boisterous misbehaviour—and self-deprecation) to be an integral rural stylistic. As Morton W. Bloomfield (1976) writes, “We cannot unify the definition [of stylistics] by method, for beyond the demand for accuracy, exactness, and rationality—qualities we demand of any science—stylistics proceeds by a variety of ethos and above all else rests upon those vague qualities of intuition and common sense. Its method varies by the nature of its particular text or writing and by its goals” (p. 272.) and while Herring uses a variety of cultural artefacts (many of them images) I am only interested in life writing. While this makes it, at times, difficult to clearly identify and articulate a rural stylistics in the writing of contemporary Australian writers and to employ it in my own writing, it clear that rural queer life writers have been, and are, doing this work.

Queer Life Writing

Life writing paired with rural queer studies, or what Dallas Baker defines as queer life writing, can be used to explore subjectivity while employing a rural stylistics to undermine metronormativity. Donald E. Hall (2004) asserts that we are constantly being asked to “rethink, express and explain our identities by a wide variety of authority figures and institutions: parents, school guidance counselors, best-selling self-help gurus, talk show hosts, and even advertisers” (p. 1). As such, he defines identity as “that particular set of traits, beliefs, and allegiances that, in short- or long-term ways, gives one consistent personality and mode of social being,” while subjectivity “implies always a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity, at the same time allowing a myriad of limitations and often unknowable, unavoidable constraints on our ability to fully comprehend identity” (p. 4). Thus, subjectivity “invites us to consider the question of how and from where identity arises, to what extent it is understandable, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control.” (Hall, 2004,

p.3). Since identity became thoroughly politicised in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, “the textuality of the self as a system of representations has become a singularly important arena of investigation and speculation” for literary and cultural critics (Hall, 2004, p. 5). Thus, explorations of subjectivity are explorations of the self as a text—which is central to life writing.

Discussing autobiography—which has been adopted, along with biography and many other forms and practices of life writing into the area of life writing—Jerome Bruner (1995) makes this clear. He writes that “life is created or construed by the act of autobiography. It is a way of construing experience – and of reconstruing and reconstruing it until our breath or our pen fails us. Construal and reconstrual are interpretive” (p. 161). This is particularly important for marginalised subjects—as David McCooey (2017) notes there has been a shift in the last two decades in life writing and its exploration of subjectivity because it has been heavily underpinned by feminist and post-colonial theory due to the rise of cultural studies. This is exemplified by the “critical attention given to auto/biographical subjects previously silenced, such as women, people of colour, Indigenous peoples, and (more recently) children” (McCooey, 2017, p. 277), and I would, of course, add LGBTQI+ people to this list. Bruner also describes this exploration of subjectivity as self-making and world-making, where world-making, according to Donna Lee Brien and Quinn Eades in *Offshoot: Contemporary Life Writing Methodologies and Practice* (2018) “describes the process through which marginal communities create connections, opportunities, networks and a sense of stability” (p. 297). Brien and Eades call for a conception of life writing described through this “where the construction of the self (or selves) in narrative creates a kind of stabilising force that spreads outwards from the subject and into the culture or world in which that self writes.” (p. 297). They argue that, “through the enactment of life writing methodologies and the multiple and multiplying theoretical perspectives that currently frame writing practice as both self and world-making that both subaltern and (hopefully, also majority) voices can be in a position to interrogate their own understandings of identity and subjectivity” (p. 297). This

approach, rien and Eades argue, “has displayed considerable potential to bring together a range of varied perspectives” (p. 1), and it is the approach that I take.

Baker attempts to actualise this potential through queer life writing—which marries Queer Theory and life writing. Baker (2013) theorises this through a Foucauldian ethics of the self and adopts Foucault’s *aesthetics of existence*—“an ongoing assembly and disassembly of subjectivity” (p. 363). Foucault (1997) describes this process as collecting “what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self” (p. 208). As Baker (2018) notes, “subjectivity itself can be seen as an aesthetic practice; the making of the self is an art... it could be said that all life writing emerges from such a struggle” (p. 3) and, given this, “all life writing can be seen an appropriate site for ethical interventions in subjectivity and for explorations into how we might remake ourselves in pleasing and radical ways” (p. 4). Baker (2018) references reflective writing as a principal example supplied by Foucault “as a technique used in an ethics of the self” (p. 2). As John Ambrosio (2008) notes “the practice of [life] writing can provide a means by which individuals... transform themselves, reconstitute themselves as ethical subjects through reading... reflection, and practical experimentation” (p. 265). Baker (2018) concludes that “for Foucault certain kinds of life writing are a practice involved in the production and maintenance of the self... this can be said to be more so when that writing is informed or organised by a philosophy of some kind that is applied as a way of life” (p. 4). In this model rendered by Baker (2018), subjectivity is produced through practice—“a subjectivity that reflects not an essential, inner identity, but rather the discourses with which it has engaged (or struggled)” (p. 5). The “way of life” Baker (2011a) argues for is Queer Theory, concluding that “works of life writing arising out of a queered aesthetics of existence would be models that strongly influence the ongoing *becoming* of queer subjectivities” (p. 11). Baker (2018) posits that this queering of the self/subjectivities allows the writer to occupy “a wider range of reading and writing positions in ways that enrich both the creative act and the writer’s personal development,” (p. 7) which is facilitated by reflexivity in reading and

writing. On reflexivity, Baker (2011b) explains: queer practice-led research projects “gather ‘data’ in three primary ways: through traditional research; through practice (both creative practice and the practice of self-bricolage); and through reflexivity” (p. 39), where reflexivity is defined by David Matless as “reflection upon the conditions through which research is produced, disseminated and received” (cited in Baker, 2011b, p. 39). It also enables writer-researchers with the means “to explore the notions of sexual and gender difference in ways that produce more than a theoretical understanding” (Baker, 2018, p. 13), and, as Baker reminds us, Foucault (1978) argues in *The History of Sexuality* that “one cannot hope to obtain the desired results simply from... a theoretical discourse, however rigorously pursued” (p. 5). Thus, Baker (2018) summarises that “using non-theoretical ways of exploring and communicating knowledges produced in life writing practice are... a means of equipping queer theory inspired life writers with ‘technologies of the self’ that resist heteronormative discourses and normative models of subjectivity.” (p. 13). This model of self and subjectivity allows the life writer to occupy “a wider range of reading and writing ‘positions’ in ways that enrich both the creative act and the writer’s personal development” (Baker, 2018, p. 14).

However, Baker offers little by way of examples of queer life writing, so my practice has involved applying rural queer studies as a way of life in this Foucauldian ethics of the self—this queered aesthetics of existence—to struggle with metronormativity and provide examples of what queer life writing might look like when actualised. This has meant writing, reflecting on this research and writing, re-researching, re-writing, and so on, to grapple with my subjectivity as a Catholic-raised, biracial, gay/queer boy/adolescent/man from Kalgoorlie. It has also meant attempting to provide examples of, and critically analysing, other contemporary Australian writers.

Contemporary Queer Life Writing

An analysis of contemporary Australian life writing demonstrates how a rural stylistics can be employed to subvert the privilege afforded to the urban by the urban/rural binary. In the last decade there has been a proliferation of literature capturing the experiences of rural LGBTQIA+ people and capturing the Australian popular imagination. Although these writers may not purport to be conducting rural queer life writing, their work can nevertheless be critically analysed to reveal the rural stylistics that have been employed to undermine the axes of metronormativity that contribute to a homogenising narrative.

In “A Country Practice” (2018) Peter Taggart returns to his hometown in south-west Queensland to relay his complicated experiences of navigating his sexuality against the rural backdrop of the 1990s in St George—a town 500 kilometres south-west of Brisbane. He immediately points to the metronormative narrative that he is employing these rural stylistics against: “I spent my first seventeen years there, riding my pushbike on the outskirts of town, dodging swooping magpies and daydreaming about what life might be like in a place big enough to have its own McDonald’s” (p. 103). However, he makes clear that this is not a story of heroism—one in which he overcomes “issues of identity to not just survive, but flourish in outback Queensland”—rather it is about a closeted teenager desperately hunting for porn. In doing so, Taggart does not attempt to reinstall the rural in place of the urban and balances his humorous narrative with the details of the difficulties he experienced there. He employs a rusticity through language and an anti-urban and larrikin sensibility in the opening:

a dusty trek down the Moonie Highway to a country of cotton farms and cattle.

The lifeline of the district is the mighty Balonne River, which rivals the Brisbane River in all its muddy-brown glory and eagerness to flood. The community itself is known for raising rugby league players, the occasional politician and even more occasionally, pescatarian homosexuals with failing eyesight (p. 102–3).

He also employs a stylelessness and unfashionability when he describes that in St George “Masculinity was the ultimate prize, bootcut was the only acceptable variety of jean and *Brokeback Mountain* had not yet been released, ruining the Sherpa trucker jacket for everyone.” (p. 104). The conclusion to this sordid tale of gay pornography in the country is of particular interest. Taggart writes about leaving St George for university, and the pressure that he put on Brisbane surrounding his expectations: “I expected the simple act of moving to the city at seventeen to change my life in innumerable, impossibly beautiful ways... There were more gay people, certainly, but there were also more people to shout things at me from passing cars” (p. 111). Here, Taggart primarily taps into the narratological and aesthetic axes of metronormativity. Not only did he situate himself as a young gay boy in his rural hometown but he unsettled the notion of the city as a gay safe haven while negating the dominant metronormative narrative.

In “Country Speaks To Us” (2018) Steven Lindsay Ross spins a “Meandering Fishing Yarn” about his identity as a gay Aboriginal man and employs a number of rural stylistics. Set in rural southern New South Wales, where Ross grew up, he describes his connection to country and his cultural heritage, as well as his own personal queer community. Primarily focused on fishing along the Murray river, there is an anti-urbanity and an acute rusticity in his language:

It was one of those dusty, oppressive, hot days in southern New South Wales, where a cold beer tastes like the best thing in the world and where buzzy clinging flies become body accessories. I was trying to slip a slippery river shrimp onto my hook, a process I never loved, in between big swigs of ale that barely touched the sides. I hooked my finger instead, in a flurry of swearing, sweat and blood (p. 9)

He also employs a stylelessness, anti-sophistication and backwardness when he describes his grandmother: “[she] was a crack fisherwoman. Actually, in my mind she was a superhero. A hunting, fishing, animal-skinning, mussel-diving, wild Salvation Army tambourine-swinging, one-eyed Wonder Woman” (p. 9). Ross also employs an anti-urbanity against the queer community he found in the city of Sydney at university, where he was instructed to relinquish his

Aboriginality, writing “The tension created by contested identities becomes tough when you’re out, because the gay community is just as racist or ignorant as the general community. I remember my lovely ex-boyfriend telling me snippets of what white gay men say about Black gay men in all-white company: ‘Aboriginal men are so secretive,’ they say. Maybe we’re just sick of constantly explaining ourselves.” (p. 13). Ross also describes a moment when he is visited by his dead grandmother at a fishing hole, in which he is with another Wamba Wamba gay man who helped Ross live openly in the rural town of just 8000, as well as his sister’s girlfriend, Sharnie. It is important to note that there is a distinctly conscious Aboriginal tradition and voice in this work and that Ross’ experiences of the rural and “Country” are far more complex than can be discussed here, but his work is still an interesting example of how the urban and rural are construed in life writing. By employing these stylistics Ross undermines the narratological, racial, temporal, epistemological and aesthetic axes of metronormativity. Describing his childhood, he explains his grandmother likely knew of his sexuality because she clearly noticed his fascination with male tennis players’ legs when they watched Wimbledon on TV. He also makes obvious the normative ideal of whiteness that operates in the metropolis and challenges the assumption that the urban is more racially diverse and inclusive when he writes of the other gay men he met at university. At the conclusion of this piece of life writing, Ross makes clear that queers can not only exist in the country, they can also do so without secrecy, and that they can make a queer community of their own.

Nonbinary, queer writer M’ck McKeague’s “You Can Take the Queer Out of the Country” (2019) less emphatically employs a rural stylistics but it is extremely critical of the axes of metronormativity. They write:

This is the story that we all know and love: angsty artsy/alternative/queer kid escapes oppressive country town and lives happily ever after in a progressive metropolitan wonderland. It does get better! Thank goodness. This is the story I told others (and myself) for years. I learnt quickly from the disgust-fear-sympathy

trifecta reaction that the shame I felt about coming from the bogan beef capital was precisely what I should feel. I learnt that distancing myself from my history as much as possible, and as fast as possible, was the only way to be taken seriously in the “progressive” landscape I now occupied. (p. 94)

There is a sense of rusticity to their language, and a clear anti-urbanity and they touch, if lightly, on backwardness and anti-sophistication, that undermines the narratological axis. They employ a stylelessness and unfashionability when they write of the parts of themselves that were unpalatable to “queers who grew up in the city”—namely “a penchant for XXXX Bitters and low-brow nu metal” (p. 95) which was cause for humiliation. They also write that for country queers, there are only two acceptable narratives: “1. It is awful here; I’m really struggling; please help me get out of here because I obviously couldn’t do it without your incredible, glittershitting self. And 2. It was awful there. I really struggled. I’m so glad I am out now and that I’m allowed to shit glitter almost anytime I want” (p. 98). In doing so, they employ a crudity. They also touch on racial and socioeconomic axes when, in relation to their “escape,” they ask “What would my story look like if I had needed to financially support my family when I got that job at fourteen? What would my story look like if I wasn’t white?” Finally, McKeague considers the temporal and epistemological axes in their conclusion when they write of the “Good People,” the “critical thinkers, people with a good grasp of classism, sexism, ableism, and so on,” who dismiss the experiences of people from regional and rural backgrounds, finishing with: “You can take the queer out of the country, but you can’t take the country out of our queer histories.” (p. 99). While the rural stylistics throughout their piece of life writing are less emphatic than other writers, the criticism of the spatialisation of modern sexual identities in Australia that they level is impressive.

Finally, Boland’s “Words” (2018), mentioned previously from *Bright Lights, No City*, employs a rusticity through language, a stylelessness, anti-urbanity, backwardness and crudity when she describes herself as a tomboy, writing:

Growing up in Kalgoorlie, people preferred it when you could fit in with the boys and I did that pretty well. Kalgoorlie's highest achievement for a young woman like me. I could outdrink the best of them and talk shit till the miners came home. I wasn't afraid to get my hands dirty and was always good for a laugh... We had the best of times. Playing COD for hours, shooting homemade potato guns, bush bashing in scrappy cars (p. 23)

Her life writing primarily undermines the narratological axes since her piece describes her coming out in the rural town of Esperance. "I was free. For so long I had been hiding who I was. Who I loved. Now the weight was finally off my shoulders" (p. 24) and her second coming out in Perth, "They said okay, but they didn't get it... I felt sick. I was cold but I was sweating and I wanted to throw up" (p. 25).

In all of these examples, contemporary Australian writers employ a rural stylistics to subvert the privilege afforded to the urban in the urban/rural binary that governs the spatialisation of modern sexual identities in Australia. As they describe their experience in and outside the city, as they explore their subjectivities, they undermine the metronormative narrative. The secrecy, suspicion and persecution of the narrative we know are not always necessarily absent from these stories, but it is clear that the experiences of queers in the country are far more complex than their homogenised rendering suggests.

My Queer Life Writing

A critical analysis of the life writing I produced for *Bright Lights* reveals a metronormative narrative that is simultaneously upheld and disavowed. I write:

Sometimes I think I'm not me in Kalgoorlie; when the *Welcome to Kalgoorlie* sign blinks past I collapse in on myself, like a butterfly crawling back into a cocoon, like some sort of reverse trick. Shrinking instead of the opposite. (p. 9)

However, at a pivotal moment in the narrative, I am outed by a friend at the Gold Bar amidst a group of miners, but their reaction, one of amicability, disrupts the tension built into this rural queer narrative. What I make clear is, despite my anxiety, it is possible for a queer to exist openly in Kalgoorlie and I employ a rural stylistics to do so. There is an unfashionability when I describe the process of picking an outfit for the pub; there is a rusticity to the descriptions of the town and the pub; there is a crudity to the language (“You gotta be drunk at the G-bar... I need the grog to wash me out... before taking a drag of my durry”). There is a backwardness and anti-sophistication built into the miners that are unaffected by Daisy’s revelation.

This piece of life writing, that I wrote a year ago, is not what I am writing now. It is not a part of the collected pieces of memoir that have been included in the project. Indeed, it was only through queer life writing that I came to rural queer studies as the focus of my research—that I came to rural queer life writing. This process was a fraught one; I was extremely reluctant to make Kalgoorlie central to my project at all. As Baker (2018) reminds us: queer life writing is framed as “an intervention into the self or subjectivity and works of life writing as artefacts that both document this interventional process and express or disseminate new subjectivities arising from that process” (p. 14). The first memoir that I wrote for this collection, titled “A Private Sermon” was initially a cyclical narrative that began and ended with the sentiment “All gays go to hell.” It was through reflexivity that the many versions of this piece led to the final version. In this final version the complexities of a gay kid from a Catholic family living in rural Western Australia is fleshed out in a more meaningful way. The result is a piece that challenges the notion that being gay and having a faith are antithetical to each other, and that this is possible for children in the country to experience and explore. The other pieces of memoir all similarly attempt to disrupt the metronormative narrative by employing a rural stylistics.

As I worked through the research, writing, editing, re-researching, re-writing, re-editing, and so on, my biraciality became an important facet of the memoir. In a piece titled “Expand Your Discovery Settings” I attempt to displace the urban/rural binary while simultaneously

being careful not to re-install the rural in place of the urban. This piece focuses on dating and sex in a rural context, but considers how other factors, like race, play a role in this and harks back to Cohen's argument for intersectionality in discussions about queer identity, politics and academia. Indeed, as the project unfolded, I focused more and more on this while trying to maintain place as the focus of my criticism. Other stories centre around wearing nail polish, playing with Barbie Dolls, eating curry, "coming out," gay dating apps, queer nightclub culture in Perth, and the marriage equality debate. In each I attempt to employ rural stylistics to queer the urban/rural binary.

I want to concede that it is possible I employ other elements of rural stylistics that have gone unremarked, and other axes of metronormativity that are potentially specific in my own experience of the Australian context. As Herring (2010) notes, we should not let the definitional contours of metronormativity remain static, and although he has identified six structural attributes of metronormativity, he also writes that "we must attend to their historical specificities as well as their historical dynamism as we pluralize them" (p. 27). Uncovering these requires the ongoing process of rural queer studies research and the practice of life writing. In producing this collection of memoir pieces I have merely attempted to provide further examples of queer life writing that are sorely absent from the literary genre.

Conclusion

It seems that there is a dearth of scholarship where rural queer studies is concerned generally, which only deepens when we look towards Australia. Herring (2010) concludes that "the gaps and the silences that accompany the perpetual urbanisation of lgbtq [sic] politics and queer studies are demonstrable" (p. 6) and argues that far more research needs to be conducted in the field. This sentiment is mimicked by Baker and Thompson (2015) where queer life writing is concerned, because there exists "a lack of recognition accorded to queer creative writing as a research practice and its products as research outcomes," (p.12). Indeed, they demand "further

scholarly and creative discussion around the diverse manifestations of creative writing practice and research” (p.12).

Herring (2010) asks us: “If queers way out there—broadly conceived—have too often been stamped with scarlet letters that spell out backwater, rube, hillbilly, hayseed, redneck, shitkicker, and bumfuck, then what happens when this terminology turns against itself? What happens when countrified queers challenge the representational systems that underlie the perpetual citification of modern lgbtq life?” (p. 6). Ultimately, this is the question that this exegesis responds to. However, Herring concludes that “queer artists—across decades, media, and idioms—have creatively used rural stylistics to fashion critiques against lesbian and gay metropolitan norms. Though dismissals of the rural are routine in urbanised lesbian, gay, and queer studies, rurality can be and has been redeployed to promote a critical form of queer anti-urbanism.” (p. 6). The writing of contemporary Australian writers analysed here demonstrate this and contributes to an ongoing body of work that makes it clear that the rural is a contested space eliding easy classification. The corresponding collection of memoir pieces I have written attempt to do the same—to subvert the queer the urban/rural binary. The reflexive process of queer life writing has allowed me to explore my subjectivity while contemplating my own gender and sexuality, it has also enabled me to consider how place has played a role in this and forced me to consider race and class as well. Ultimately, it has allowed me to inhabit a wider range of reading and writing positions and enriched both the creative act and my personal development. It has helped me know myself, the world, and my place in it, better—which is arguably the most important reason for doing research.

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Six Hundred Something Kilometres

A note

The short pieces of memoir that form this collection are my own experiences. I have done my best to reproduce the events and conversations from my memory but this a flawed process; after all, memory is a lie and truth is subjective. As per the practice of creative nonfiction, what may seem fictitious is merely the use of literary craft. There were caterpillars in my backyard, for instance, but I employ them as a metaphor here in a manner that did not necessarily resonate with me during that time.

For the purpose of this thesis I have used the names of family members and friends who read my work and felt comfortable giving me permission to do so. I have changed the names of acquaintances and strangers who I am no longer in contact with but feature in this collection to obscure their identity.

‘A Private Sermon’ was written for the purpose of this Masters but published in February of 2020 by *Westerly Magazine* in an online special edition for the Literature & Ideas Weekend of Perth Festival.

A Private Sermon

When I was thirteen, my dick belied my Catholic education.

By then, I had undergone four of the seven sacraments: Baptism, Reconciliation, Holy Communion and Confirmation. I was bathed in holy water in infancy, forgiven for my many confessed sins at the age of nine, consumed the body and blood of Jesus Christ during Year 4, and, finally, gained full membership to the Church with a reaffirmation of my faith on the cusp of puberty: a period of sparse upper-lip hair in which arousal could be induced by the shifting direction of the wind.

I was simultaneously burdened with the weight of thousands of years of religious scripture at a private school that refused to teach sex education in a town with the World's Tallest Bin.

In Kalgoorlie, you can fry an egg on the pavement during the peak of summer. In our science class at John Paul College, Mrs Murphy taught us about heat conduction by demonstrating. And on that broiling day, our Year 8 class felt the seconds trickle into minutes with the sweet and sour and sticky sweat that gathered on our brows and between our thighs and slid down the arches of our backs while the trees in the courtyard outside our classroom wept under the beat of an indignant sun.

After you marvel at the sheer height of the famous forlorn waste cylinder as it rises against the coral gum trees that climb around it, after you've waited patiently for the sun-baked pavement to deliver breakfast while sweat drips into your eyes, you become desperate to find something to fill the empty space. The space between Kalgoorlie, Coolgardie, Southern Cross, Merriken, Doodlakine, Meekering, Northam, Bakers Hill—and all the other small towns and the monuments to ghosts between the gaping pit they dug and Perth. The space between the dripping seconds.

For many, religion became the something, and losing yourself by flitting between the thunderous pages of the Bible is better than losing yourself in the end of a yellow-streaked meth pipe—according to the employees of the Smile Dental Clinic, anyway.

My family went to St Mary's Church to worship, and my siblings and I attended the adjoining Catholic primary school. Of the eighteen churches in the town, it was arguably the most striking and had existed since Kalgoorlie was founded at the end of the 18th century with the auspicious discovery of more than three kilos of gold by the infallible Paddy Hannan.

Every Sunday morning my mother roused us for 8am mass. Kristen, Troy, Blake, Laine and I dragged our feet in protest. We pleaded with our keeper, every week, to let us spend a morning curled between the sheets of our beds, but to no avail: "Today is God's day, and our day to worship him for all of his work," she commanded.

So, every week we piled into the minivan and wound our way through the muted streets of the town until we arrived to join the other families of sleepy children in their Sunday best, or what counted for it, out the front of God's sanctuary.

Red bricks rose to meet clouds; prodigious arched windows held a myriad of colours; soft sun-stained tiles peaked at an overbearing height; potted plants stood guard at heaving doors.

Inside, past rows and rows of wooden pews that lined white-washed walls, a strip of Hollywood-red carpet led to the steps of the altar where a gilded cross towered. Fans were mounted above the pews; in summer, they circulated the red dust about the place and one, perpetually broken, emitted a faint clicking noise. Below them, *The Passion of Christ*—a dozen-some paintings that depicted Jesus' crucifixion—reminded us of his sacrifice, and our corresponding fortune.

It was bloody beautiful, and there was a warmth there, developed through repetitious congregation and ritualistic practice. Even if my siblings and I hadn't developed the shared

conviction of our parents and grandparents and the priests and clergymen who oversaw us, we knew that we were part of a community and we *felt* it.

But there were conditions.

During mass, after we had all queued to eat the body of Christ, there was a moment of reflection—to give thanks for all that we were blessed with. Before I was attuned to my sexual desire I used to pray to God and thank him for my family, for friends, for arbitrary material possessions.

When I was thirteen my thanks became pleas as it became obvious that it was the toned, near-naked body of Jesus Christ suspended above the altar that had me harder than the floor we kneeled on, and not the tepid gust of air from the *click, click, click* of the broken fan.

At night, under my Holden duvet in the sanctity of my bedroom, the glow from my chunky laptop held Buddy Love and Ginger Lynn in pixelated sodomy. I worked tirelessly to follow Ginger but it was Buddy, poised behind her, gasping in ecstasy after grunting and pushing himself into her and out of her and into her, who got me off after I spent thirty seconds tugging on my dick.

Afterwards, I would lie there, a scrunched-up piece of cum-sodden paper towel beside me, and an overwhelming unease would consume me until I fell asleep, exhausted.

I would sink in to and through my bed and wrap myself in layers of a star-speckled sky while my dreams became porno. I was Ginger, laid out on amber silky sheets and velvet pillows, and Jesus was Buddy, and there was no fear or shame, only pleasure and pain swirling together in rapture. But I would wake up with sticky underwear and curse the Son of Morning.

I bargained with the almighty figure residing in his cloud-space star-kingdom to forgive my sin, and free me. In the glittering light from the scintillating stained-glass windows of the church I squeezed my eyes shut and clasped my hands together. Tight.

On the Monday following Sunday Mass I'd wake up convinced that God had touched me with his microwave fingers, but, again and again, I'd find myself with a bottle of lotion and a

few sheets of paper towel, flitting between Buddy and Ginger out of guilt but only interested in the curls of Buddy's chest hair and the curve of his dick.

During Mass, I watched the warm weather cede to autumn winds and the fans gather red dust. Inside hallowed halls there was no breeze to blame so I took to singing with my community. They sung loud, loud, loud—so that they could fill the empty space—and I sung loud, loud, loud to empty myself.

But JC was a hottie, and my erections during the Word of God proved it.

So, I'd clench my hands into fists with such force that, if I hadn't compulsively chewed my nails beyond their beds, they would have bled me. Gaping holes in my hands like Jesus Christ himself.

Paranoia set in and I was convinced others in the congregation knew—could see my eyes wandering to Jesus' body pinned above the altar when I should have been listening to the Priest's homily, responding to the *Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus*, and *Agnus Dei*.

Glory to God in the highest, the Priest sung half-heartedly. *And peace to his people on Earth*, the congregation chanted in unison, while I mumbled behind them.

I was particularly paranoid about Mrs Hicks—the matriarch of the largest, best-known family in Kalgoorlie. Generations of her blonde-haired, blue-eyed progeny had attended and still attended Sunday Mass. At every offertory she fingered a crisp fifty-dollar note; when the baskets were passed among the pews, she was poised, ready to donate. Her milky eyes seemed all-knowing, and I imagined that she was sent by God as a part of an inquisition that ended with my own crucifixion—with my sparsely-haired body suspended above the congregation of St Mary's Church.

One morning, at Mass, Mrs Hicks frowned at my anxiety-induced, sweat-licked body. The crease where her silvered eyebrows met demanded of me: *Catholic or dick hungry?* I darted away from her, took my seat in my family's pew, and stared at the dust-caked gaps between the

jarrah floorboards beneath me. That day, my prayers were delivered with renewed vigour: my unbending dick would be brought to repent.

Mrs Hicks, with her silent asking, became the bane of my pubescent existence, a spectre to rival the likes of the purgatory-damned. I avoided her with fierce determination, kept my eyes on the feet that carried me along the cracked pavement from my God-fearing parents, to my Religion class at school, to Church.

My thoughts were only of her, reprieve offered only in the moments I fell into the porn sets on my computer screen, let myself find my body, and other mens bodies.

But I repented, every Sunday. I asked God, and asked him again and again to send me a sign: a burning bush, glossolalia, a levitating dildo.

And you only have to ask to receive.

So at night, God's hand led me to broad-shouldered priests and the discerning men of the Church cumming on each other in biblical euphoria under the blessed gaze of Jesus on poorly constructed porn sets.

In confessional booths, young, lithe men admitted their desire for other men to Priests who dismissed their pleas and took them in—in their hands with enthusiasm, with their mouths between breaths, and into them with heaving pants.

Buddy Love became unappealing, and when I thought of Mrs Hicks' demanding eyebrows and my crucifixion I imagined my naked body above the altar and reveled in my conviction that the other boys of our congregation would enjoy me above them during the liturgy and contemplate the spurt of the clicking fan. I thought of the men in the congregation coming to the Church after-hours to be with other men. I thought of Jesus and got guilt-free hard.

At some point, I saw those ethereal all-knowing eyes and silver brows at Church and I didn't stare at the floor.

I met her with my own knowing.

A dick-hungry Catholic, Mrs Hicks.

Bland Chicken

When I was nine, I explained to my friends why my skin was darker than theirs.

I explained why my skin was the colour of the cloudy dam glistening under a beating day near my family's house in Kal—caught somewhere between the flashes of red, brown and gold—and why their skin was the colour of the bellies of the soft-shelled yabbies in the dam that we caught, took home, boiled and ate.

I can't recall wondering about what my skin meant to other people, or to myself, before this. I can't recall if I asked my parents or grandparents. I'm not sure that they would know how or where to begin. Instead, my Nan would have said, *Don't worry about the luuhpyauu myarr, now eat, eat, eat*. Smothering her fear for me with spoons of curry.

After an early start to summer, and too many recesses spent between the blistering bitumen playing four square or darting across the flaking grass of the withering oval in a game of tag, my skin had begun deepening into the colour of salmon gum bark.

During the term break a few weeks after this my parents took my siblings and I to visit our extended family in Perth and we spent all of our time outside with our cousins. On the trampoline at Aunty Barbara's house, at the park kicking the footy with Uncle Andrew, and at the beach with Nan.

On the Sunday of our trip Mum dragged us out of bed in the early light of the morning and packed us into the car to head to the Canning Vale markets. She was on the hunt for plants that she could cart back to Kal in her attempt to make a garden that resembled the one she kept when we lived in the suburbs of Perth.

For reprieve, she told us we could each spend a few dollars. Giddy with the possibility offered by the coins clenched between our clammy fingers, we headed off under the supervision of Kristen, the eldest of our troupe—who was eyeing off bracelets braided from strands of plastic.

As we made our way from table to table blinking through the possibilities, I found a woman at a table full of toys, lips stretched into a smile beneath her wide-brimmed hat. She had a satay chicken skewer from the Malay pop-up and when she slid pieces of flesh off with her teeth I was reminded of my Aunty Linda who always ate decisively.

In Looks-like-Aunty-Linda's stall, among the Barbie Dolls and Power Rangers, were Yu-Gi-Oh cards in shiny packets. In the term before the break, Yu-Gi-Oh had become all the rage among the Year 4 boys after Jonathon Kirke had brought his to school. The cards contained angels and demons, magicians and soldiers, dragons and other mythical creatures, which were used by the two players versing each other to determine who was the superior Yug-Gi-Oh Master.

When I realised that the woman was selling packets for a mere dollar—a fraction of the cost of the cards at the games store in Kal—I was exuberant. I bought as many packets as I could, despite overhearing a man complaining about *shit knock-off Chinese toys*.

When we got back to town I couldn't wait for school. I couldn't wait to take my dozens and dozens of cards to the pavement of the undercover area at St Mary's Primary School where the Yu-Gi-Oh contests took place. One of the packets I had carefully selected from Faux-Aunty-Linda had a Blue-Eyes White Dragon card in it and I knew I would be the envy of my friends.

While I watched Ethan and Harry lay their cards out, Gary suddenly turned to me and asked me why my skin was so dark. He pressed his easily-sunburnt arms, with their pale blonde hairs, against mine. "See," he said, "you're so much darker than me."

When I said, *because I'm Burmese*, I didn't really know what it meant or could mean. I knew it of myself—my parents must have taught it to me—and it made sense in this context: an explanation of myself for someone else.

But I didn't know that it could be used by other people to explain me.

With big eyes, Gary said, "Burmese? Like a Burmese cat?"

Having never encountered a Burmese cat I said it must be like that.

Eventually Jonno, who always had the answer in class and never seemed to second-guess himself, contributed the location of Burma for Gary: “It’s in Asia,” he said without glancing up from the cards beneath him.

From then on, I would be referred to by others as “Burmese cat” and associations with my “Asian-ness” were drawn quickly.

That’s why you’re good at maths, Alex whispered during class one day—even though I wasn’t, he simply wasn’t very good.

That’s why you’re quiet—my dad told me that Asian people are quiet and nod a lot, Ben explained to me as we balanced our bodies on the wooden logs mounted in the middle of the obstacle course by the oval.

Then things that they’d never noticed before, suddenly became very apparent.

Ab, yes, I see the slant in your eyes! Gary exclaimed through pursed lips as I tried to pull away from him.

If you’re Asian, why can’t you use chopsticks? Nina asked me with suspicious eyes while I ate a polony and sauce sandwich during second recess.

When I answered their questions, as best I could, it often only gave them more to work with.

We eat curries, I told them, only for them to throw ‘currymuncher’ at me like it should make me small.

So I began to look for and point to the things that I had in common with my friends—like the freckles around my nose and my blue eyes and Vegemite, and I pretended that, like them, I enjoyed football and the bland, poached chicken I ate during sleepovers at their houses.

But when we went to Perth during the holidays I breathed as deeply as I could when my Nan and Grandad welcomed us into their home, which always smelt like curry, and engulfed neatly cut squares of sticky rice topped with freshly shaved coconut.

On these trips my aunts and uncles and cousins, sometimes great aunts and uncles and their kids and their grandkids too, would gather around the huge dining table of Nan and Grandad's—many spilling onto a second table in the loungeroom while the kids sat at a table outside by the mango tree.

Our matriarch, who had spent hours and hours in front of the stove free-pouring cumin, turmeric, paprika and other spices into huge pots, darted from person to person, imploring us to load more, more, more onto our plates. When we tried to resist, she frowned, confused, her eyebrows trying to meet to discuss the problem at hand.

No, too skinny, eat, eat, eat, too skinny, she would explain, scraping more curry from a pot and piling it onto our plates.

There, I didn't have to pretend, because the chicken was never bland.

And when my dad looked over at me with his brown eyes as Nan spooned more and more food into my bowl and called me a currymuncher across the table, there was nothing small about his smile.

Dollhouse

When I was twelve, I stopped playing with Barbie dolls.

Kristen and I had played with them together for years in her bedroom, and eventually Laine joined us and the three of us bullied Mum into buying them new outfits, a Jeep, and a plethora of other accessories.

We named each Barbie: Kristen named her doll Lily; I chose Rose; and Laine's was christened Holly. Their friendships were swings and roundabouts. Their emotions a symphony of highs and lows—of unshakeable love and loyalty, of a misunderstanding twisted into rage and untangled into forgiveness.

Kristen, Laine and I manipulated their impossible bodies with our hands so that they could walk from room to room in the flaking wood doll house that used to belong to Mum. With their long legs, short torsos, tiny waists, and huge breasts.

Eventually, when we got Ken Dolls for our Barbies, they fell in love, and they had babies that slept in the miniature cribs on the bottom floor of their house. Our Barbies became homemakers in the way that caterpillars become butterflies—a bouquet of women given full lives.

They spent their days deciding what outfits to wear, reshuffling the furniture in the house, hosting dinner parties and chatting with each other about their marriages. They drank wine and popped Xanax and pressed the bird-like limbs of their glossy bodies against their husbands hard, carved chests. The sleek nothingness between their legs met in love or boredom or obligation in the house with the missing wall. We peered in with hungry mouths and nimble fingers that orchestrated everything.

Kristen stopped playing Barbies with Laine and I when she was twelve. She said she had outgrown them. Perhaps that's why I felt I had outgrown them when I was twelve as well.

And when I was eleven, Kristen outgrew our home—at sixteen she found new things to play with in a share house with her friends. The already fading notion that we'd play with our dolls one last time evaporated like the smoke from the cigarettes she had been nicking from Dad and puffing under the Jacaranda tree in the backyard.

Over the next year I played Barbies with Laine less and less—watched the hope each time she asked me to play with her sink into disappointment when I said no.

But she wasn't ready for the Domestic Adventures of Rose and Holly to end so she started blackmailing me.

When Laine and I were getting ready for school one morning she found the thing to blackmail me with. She was roasting her legs in front of the humming electric heater in the loungeroom while I tried to make my black leather shoes glisten with a plastic bottle of polish. But the black liquid wasn't leaking into the sponge, so I smooshed it harder and harder against the tip of my shoe, sure that there mustn't be any left. I pulled at the topper to check the insides only to have it spill everywhere. On my pressed, blue St Mary's shirt. On the hand-me-down grey trousers that I hadn't quite grown into yet. On my shoes, splattered, glistening unevenly. On the couch and the pillows. It was a crime scene.

I ran from the lounge to my room and changed into a fresh uniform and buried the ruined one down the side of the dresser in my wardrobe. But there was no hiding the damage to the couch and there was no hiding the fear rising in clenching beats in my chest as Mum found it and found me.

"I promise not to tell Mum about the uniform," Laine said, but that promise-not became a promise-not-if.

I promise not to tell Mum about the uniform if you play Barbies with me.

So I found myself playing Barbie Dolls more often than I cared to.

Eventually the blackmail got out of hand—I was playing Barbies multiple times a week—so, one Sunday afternoon after Church, I packed the uniform—now dried black swirls on blue cotton—into my backpack and bounded for Fairway Deli at the end of Cavalier Crescent.

I beat my feet along the pavers and periodically checked behind me in case Mum came hooning down the road for me, until I got to the charity bin on the curb. The desolate metal box sat there, flaking with yellow paint, waiting to consume unwanted belongings.

I force-fed it my secret and my fear and the ruin I had caused. It smiled at me with shining teeth that made me walk home with an elated bounce.

I got home and realised Mum hadn't noticed I was gone. Without a line of questioning as to my whereabouts I was free, and the sheer joy of rejecting Laine's demands for me to play Barbies meant that it was a very good Sunday.

Without Barbie Dolls, I looked to my brothers to fill my time.

They played cricket and football but my fumbly fingers made me give that up before I had given it a fair go. They played car racing games and shooting games on the PlayStation but they were so unimaginative and my mind wanted more unfolding things. They hung out with their friends at the pools and at the dam and at the skatepark but I knew they resented me when Mum made them take me, so I told her I didn't want to go.

I found games on the computer, but with only one in the house Mum allocated us one-and-a-half-hour time slots each and I kept spending mine playing pinball. But there is only so much of that you can play before your mind is nothing but swirling colours of light and the artificial *ding, ding, ding* of a metal ball against more metal.

Then I discovered a game called World of Warcraft and developed an obsession that couldn't be contained by the limits of Mum's allocation.

In the late hours of the night when I knew no one would be awake—Dad having long chuffed his last cigarette for the evening and crawled into bed—I slipped out from underneath the duvet and stepped, softly, down the hall and across the family room towards the computer. I

stopped breathing when it clicked and moaned and hummed to life—so loud in the cocoon of silence created when a household of six are only warm breaths and soft snoring.

So when I was twelve, I stopped playing with Barbies and I started playing World of Warcraft.

And I made all of my characters female.

In the dreary blue light of my computer screen they battled goblins and wraiths and dragons and other players' characters in battlegrounds. They were not concerned with procreation or homemaking. This was not a game of children or homes. There were only orphans who became adventurers in a world constantly at war. The dolls of pixilation that I manipulated put on boots and grabbed swords or donned robes and manifested fire in their hands and flung it at monsters.

I met boys—or men—on WoW who asked me to be their girlfriend.

My first boyfriend's username was Sparky, but he told me his real name was Jacob. My username was Violet, and I told him my name was Rose. Our relationship meant that we did quests together in the many lands contained within this world and travelled to dungeons to defeat evil-doers.

A few years later I would make my first male character and meet another boy online who would ask me to be his boyfriend.

A few years after that I would discover chatrooms for boys who like boys, and boys who like men, and men who like boys.

Whoever said the internet is a lonely place to live never felt lonely in the place they lived. They never thought of me, in Kal, virtually connecting with others like me before I could physically connect with others like me.

The internet can be a lonely place to live, but it is still a kind of living, and one day it might make possible a different kind of living.

Out of the dollhouse and into the world.

Laps

When I was eighteen I came out for the first time.

Barefoot in a singlet and shorts, I walked to the front of my parents' house in Kalgoorlie and rang Gary. Over the years, he moved from town to town across the wheatbelt of Western Australia so I learnt to know him through my phone, in messages and calls that connected us despite the kilometres between us. I called him with the intent of telling him immediately but chickened out while I circled the block round our house.

I'd passed my red-brick, blue-shingled house over and over and over again, brushing past the huge gum trees that stood guard on the curb as the sun dipped and made shadows from the bodies of mailboxes and lampposts.

My feet pounded left, left, left—Joyce Drive to Cavalier Crescent to Parry Way to Keegan Street to Joyce Drive to Cavalier Crescent to Parry Way to Keegan Street. Dusty with red dirt. Every time I neared the gates of our property I told myself I'd spit it out, but every time I got there I didn't. After a couple dozen blocks he said he'd better get going. I told him he couldn't, and then spat it out.

I'm gay.

Between the time I uttered the last syllable of those two words and his response the clouds had stopped shifting across the sky.

He told me that he knew, that he had loved me before this moment and that he had already planned to love me in all of the moments afterwards. For the first time in longer than I could remember I was not acutely aware of how my heart clenched and unclenched in my chest.

But I was unaware this was the beginning of an addiction.

The second time I came out was a few days after Gary. To Shelby, a friend I'd made in high school. We'd spent the better part of our final year at Eastern Goldfields College doing laps of Kal in my scrappy car in the afternoons and evenings.

I picked her up in Boulder and we made our way down the bypass that ran along the edge of the town and up through the main street, across the bridge that separated the good end of town from the bad, before coming down through the other side of the town to arrive in the parking lot of Twin Dams. After falling out of the car on a sugar-high from frozen fizzy drinks we picked up from the servo, we lay down, side by side, on the prickly grass of the park. I picked and shredded blade after blade between my fingers against the freckled sky.

When I said it—*I'm gay*—it was easier. The clouds didn't stop for as long as they had with Gary.

While squeezing my hand, she told me it was okay and that she loved me and I knew I wanted more of this—more of this beautiful, movie-magic moment.

The third time I came out it was two-fold, and time-lapsed.

I'd spent the better half of a quiet Sunday afternoon before a shift at the local grocery store writing a letter to my parents. I wrote it and re-wrote until every word and every stroke of every letter was measured. Afterwards, I took all of the flawed letters, in scrunched-up balls, to the bin in the kitchen and buried them beneath other layers of rubbish and scrubbed my hands with an itchy green scourer and lavender soap in the sink afterwards.

In the letter I told my parents. I told them that I loved them, that I couldn't change who I was, that I understood if they couldn't accept me. I didn't write that I was terrified they wouldn't love me anymore, that I had already tried to change who I was, that it would kill me if they couldn't accept me. I didn't tell them that I had dreamt of driving on that bypass outside of town at night, alone, when the lights were thin and the lines that dashed across the bitumen in front of the car were barely visible, and veering off across the gravelly shoulder of the road and

into one of the forlorn trees so that I couldn't be a disappointment. I painted every emotion I had into that letter and gave it to Laine to give to our parents when I went away to Esperance for New Year's Eve.

I told Laine she could read it, so she did. She found me afterwards, took me to her bedroom of pink and silver and white and gave me a crushing hug while tears slid down her round cheeks. When I asked her why she was crying she told me that she hadn't realised that I was in so much pain, and that she should have. Then she apologised for telling Kristen while she handed me her phone.

While I walked into our backyard to stare at the chemical glow of our pool I listened to Kristen quiet her eyes and chest and cheeks so that she could tell me that she loved me. When I asked her why she was crying she told me she hadn't realised that I was in so much pain, and that she should have.

I breathed carefully with aching lungs against my sisters' aching hearts and found myself split between my relief and my love for them. With glistening eyes, I enjoyed the exchange of tears, shallow breaths and love, and dreamt of my parents' love and acceptance when they read my measured words.

The fourth time I came out was on the road trip to the neighbouring beach-side town 400 kilometres from Kal for the new year. Every holiday, Kalgoorlians rushed out of town along Highway 94 to Perth or Esperance or, if they'd made their fortune in mining or off of miners, they'd fly away on overly expensive airplanes. Josie, James, Savannah and I'd stuffed ourselves and all of our gear into my too-small car for the trip because we were yet to make our fortune.

I spent the vast majority of the car trip trying to begin telling them and longed for Shelby to be there, with me, instead of in another car with some of our other friends ahead of us.

Driving, I counted the trees as they whipped by and used them to measure the time I had left until we arrived on the crusty blue edge of the country.

As we moved closer and closer to our destination, as tree after tree flew by along the highway, the pressure built and built and built and eventually I said *I have something to tell you*, and then, after some incoherent muttering, *I'm gay*.

None of them said much, beyond *okay* and *we accept you*, and despite the anticlimactic release of energy that had been building up inside and around me, I felt ecstatic in that moment.

When we got to Esperance, we rolled past the pine trees that lined the main road and headed for the public toilet block by the town's crumbling-to-pieces jetty. The town Council would authorise the deconstruction of Tanker Jetty two years later, despite protests by the towns people. But we got to enjoy it for what was the last time for many of us.

After pissing in cubicles that smelt like bleach and salt we walked to the end of the half-kilometre long wooden structure as it creaked beneath us. While we stood at the end of it and blinked through the saltwater whipped up by an increasingly violent ocean, Josie leant in and squeezed me, and my lips tasted salt and my chest bloomed with warmth.

The fifth time I came out was on the tail-end of this expedition to Esperance. On the cusp of 2014, I'd drunk beer after beer, mixed it with shots of vodka and tequila slammers and felt jubilant beyond myself. I'd planned to tell the other members of our friend group who had come with us—Ethan, Steph, and Daniel—prior to the countdown for the new year but I hadn't found *the* moment.

From the deep blue-painted chalet at our caravan park, we skipped and danced and walked to The Pier Hotel on the foreshore to dance and welcome the turning of time, but instead we found ourselves on Tanker Jetty again.

We gathered at its tip, where waves lapped at its weather-worn planks. We huddled together and cheered after James had counted down the seconds until January in his booming voice.

Josie kissed me, then all eight of us embraced in an uncomfortable but warm folding of bodies. I drew all of their attention to me, buzzing with booze, which drenched the fear, and I told them—the remaining few who didn't know—while the wind whipped aggressively at my face and the stars unfolded across the ocean on and on before us.

Ethan was the first to respond—he said he had always known and kissed me with soft lips and whispered *Happiest new year*. The others said *okay, mate* and we went back to the caravan park and drank and drank and drank and I passed out on the futon out the front of our chalet in pure bliss.

I stopped counting my coming outs when I got home from Esperance in the new year. I had become addicted to the acceptance, to the love I received in spite of me. I wanted to come out and out and out because every time I did, I was rewarded.

Until I saw my parents during my belated third coming-out.

As I pulled into the driveway and clambered inside with my bags and the sand I'd carried with me from the various beaches along the south-west coast, I was painfully aware of the booming between my rib cage, of my lungs inflating and deflating, of my sagging shoulders and dragging legs. My parents and I said hello to each other awkwardly, and the immediate, violently explosive reaction I had turned over and over in my imagination on the drive back from Espo fizzled into confusion.

In a daze, I climbed onto the linen duvet of my bed behind the closed door of my bedroom and waited for my friends to come and pick me up so we could watch a movie at the dingy Orana Cinemas.

While I was spraying my pits with an unnecessary amount of Lynx Africa in the bathroom, my mum said that she and Dad needed to speak to me before I left.

In our loungeroom I braced myself, willed my body to become stone, pushed it into the soft of the couch and waited.

They told me that they loved me. That they always had and always would. That I couldn't tell our extended family because they didn't want me to get hurt. That they had wanted an easier life for me, a life like theirs—because that's what every parent wants.

But all I had heard was that they loved me in spite of who I was. That they were ashamed of me. That they had wanted a different child.

James knocked on our front door and I told them I had to go. They glanced at each other tentatively and my mum asked me, with eyes all blue and worry, if I was okay. I lied and told her that I was and walked, dizzy, out the front door, across the red pavers that shook beneath my feet, and clambered into James's car as the tears rolled and rolled and rolled.

I decided not to come out again.

A few months later the new girl at work asked me if I was gay while she stacked shelves with fizzy, sticky soda that sloshed against the sides of its plastic bottle. She had gaping holes where her eyes should have been and when I told her I was, she said it was a shame.

That weekend, at a party, I came out to a girl who assumed I was straight. In the dim light of a stranger's backyard, her face became embarrassment and then disgust in quick succession—twisting like a melting painting.

Later that year, I came out to a nurse at the blood donation clinic who told me that I wasn't allowed to donate blood. I had gone in to weep my veins after I'd read an article about a decline in donors. When I told her that I was gay, and divulged my sex life with blushed cheeks, she told me that she couldn't accept my blood.

Months after this, when I went to England for student exchange, I had to come out to the other Australians I befriended when we were discussing our love lives. I'd watched them all turn to me with expectant eyes on itchy seats in the middle of the bus driving us to campus. They probably assumed but didn't want to ask and I'd known, even then, that their behaviour

towards me would be different as soon as I began recounting my love life with *The last guy I was seeing...*

So, I came out, over and over and over again.

And I didn't.

When questioning eyes asked me but I didn't feel safe.

I didn't come out when I was at the pub in Kal, when I was at a party in Perth, when I was at a dinner with extended family members, when I was at work.

The coming out, which had once filled me with an ecstasy, became a chore. I still craved the acceptance and love of others, but I didn't crave the exhaustion of it.

Unable to maintain my decision to never come out, I decided to out straighties when it was safe to do so. A kind of reverse trick.

At pubs and clubs, in class and at work, no one was exempt from my asking mouth and the gaping hole where my eyes should have been. In Kal, Perth, Espo, Bunbury, London—wherever I could.

Are you straight?

Shining Up At Us

When I was eighteen, I kissed my first gay boy.

Shelby and I had been hitting parties around Kal hard all year. We'd decided to spend the year after high school working at IGA to save up for the big move to the city for uni. She sliced meat in the deli and I cut and prepped and stacked fruit and vegetables in the fresh produce department. But we spent an awful lot on booze that year so we didn't save nearly as much as we could or should have.

Weekends at my house or her house when our parents were away were few and far between, so we were always looking for somewhere else to get drunk and we were almost always late to those parties since we always worked night shifts on the weekend.

So it was a Saturday night, after a slog of a shift at IGA, that I kissed my first gay boy and I definitely smelt like cabbages and celery—I always did after a long night on the weekend at Lionel Street.

Shelby is singing along to the music blaring from her Samsung phone while she mops the whole store in hasty strokes that turns the sudsy water in the bucket murky. I throw damp, empty hessian bags over all of our fruit and veg displays that aren't refrigerated. Ten minutes later, Shelby and I walk out to the staff car park across the road from the shop—it was just an empty red dirt lot spotted with a few eucalypt trees, but it was the staff car park.

“I'll see you in a bit,” I yell from my car as I climb in.

“Yeah, pick me up and I'll direct us to Russell's,” she calls back.

I get home and take a quick shower that doesn't quite cut through the smell of me from a long day and douse myself with cologne. I try to arrange the cacophony of curls on the top of my head into something that resembles order before I yell a quick goodbye to my mum and dad on the couch and open the front door and two minutes later I'm out the front of Shelby's house.

“So how do we know Russell?” I ask Shelby.

“He’s one of Robert’s friends. We went to school with him—JPC, he was the year above us. His parents moved to Perth but he lives in their old house alone.”

“Righto, and the occasion?”

“It’s his birthday actually.”

“Oh, should we get him something?”

“Yeah, let’s pick him up something from the bottle-o?”

I drive us to the drive-through bottle-o down the road off of Burt Street and we grab a ten pack of Smirnoff double blacks each and a bottle of tequila for Russell.

Ten minutes later we’re dragging our bodies and the booze out of the car and walking up to the gate of 46 Cavalier Crescent.

It’s one of those old weatherboard houses with a wooden porch. I put the carton of drinks under my left arm and shift the tequila from my right hand to my left so I can open the waist-high gate out the front. It creaks slightly while the golden glow from the porch light illuminates a shabby garden. An empty pot plant sits lonely by the front door. Music from the backyard oozes over the top of the house and around its sides.

Shelby knocks on the front door. Nobody answers. Shelby knocks louder. We wait. Then, the door opens quickly and a boy with baby-blue eyes and an orange singlet stands in front of us, backlit by the red and green party lights shining through the back door at the end of the hallway. The music funnels through with it.

“And who the fuck are you?” he says.

Shelby smiles, “I’m Shelby, this is Jay.”

Russell clicks: “Ah, right, fuck, sorry, Roberto’s mates. Well come in then,” he says, standing aside.

Shelby and I shuffle inside and past him and he closes the front door.

“Happy birthday, we got you this,” I say, holding out the tequila wrapped up in a brown paper bag.

“Shit, that’s so nice of you, you don’t even know me,” Russell says, grabbing the bottle.

“We figured it’d be rude to rock up to a birthday party without a present,” Shelby explains.

“Well none of these louts brought me anything,” he says, “except Roberto.”

Russell pulls the bag off the bottle and beams: “My favourite. Roberto got me a bottle of tequila too, and we’ve been getting through it.”

He looks at me, and then at Shelby. “Shit, are you two sober?”

“Yeah, we just came from work,” I tell him.

“Well let’s go do some fucking shots then,” Russell smiles as he turns and walks towards the fly screen door to the backyard.

Shelby and I make up for lost time quickly. We race through our cans of Smirnoff during drinking games between shots that Russell keeps handing us.

When he hands me my fourth his fingers brush mine and linger.

“Thanks,” I smile.

“Anytime, beautiful,” he says with a wink.

The party rolls past, hour after hour, game after game, drink after drink, shot after shot.

It’s three in the morning when Russell announces its time for an adventure.

Shelby and I finish our game of beer pong against Roberto and Ash—our third game and third win for the night—before Russell leads us past the withering garden, out the front gate and on to the street.

He marches towards something without telling us what that something is, and we all totter behind without asking, chattering amongst ourselves, most of us with drinks in hand.

Twenty minutes later we’re walking up to St Mary’s Primary school and then we’re reaching and grabbing and pulling our bodies over the fence.

We run amuck on the playground; our bodies too big for the slide, for the monkey bars, for the flying fox. The sand is soft between our toes and Shelby grabs my hands as we dance on it, sinking.

We move past the classrooms, out towards the obstacle course by the oval and fail miserably when we try to walk across the logs in the middle. Russell is moving towards the soccer goal at one end of the field.

“Anyone gonna climb this thing with me,” he yells over his shoulder.

Shelby and I start running towards it and she beats me there.

Russell gets up first, slides along the top of the post until he’s sitting in the middle.

Shelby and I climb up one side each and slide next to him.

We watch our friends try to do cartwheels from our perch.

“I’m gonna have to show them how it’s done,” Shelby says as she swings off the goal and lands on her feet with bent knees.

“She will too, best cart-wheeler I know,” I tell Russell.

“She’d have nothing on me, I did gymnastics for a spill when I was a kid.”

“I always wanted to, but never did. This girl I went to school with showed me how to do a roundoff though. Right over there,” I say, pointing to the end of the obstacle course.

“Oh shit, did you go to St Fairy’s?”

“Yeah.”

“Figures,” he says with a smile. “I went to Boulder.”

“Oh, yeah, I live out there.”

“Whereabouts?”

“Keegan Street, down the road from the prison.”

“Yeah, I know it—big, dirty dam across the road with yabbies in it?”

“That’s the one.”

Russell leans over and bumps me with his shoulder playfully and I smile while the tequila makes its way from my stomach to my head.

Russell is looking at me now and I make eye contact briefly before looking away.

He keeps staring at me.

I keep looking over and then away, over then away.

“Oh, come on,” he says.

And then he’s leaning over and up and into me and his mouth finds my mouth fast and hard and I’m afraid I’ll fall off the soccer goal. But Russell’s hand is on the back of my head and his tongue is darting into my mouth.

I put my right hand on his thigh and lean into him, taste tequila in his mouth. He bites my lower lip so I bite his lower lip. He moves my hand to his dick, which is getting hard under his shorts.

We pull away from each other and I’m all smile and he’s looking at me and I reckon he’s about to call me really fucking stupid but in a good way.

“Fucking beautiful up here, isn’t it?” he asks, “What a view!”

The oval rolls out beneath our feet to where our friends are trying to stick handstands and we’re all illuminated by a soft glow from everything out in space shining down at us.

Russell leans over and kisses me again and I want him to kiss me over and over, touch me more and more.

I can hear Shelby cheer loudly when she notices us.

Then they’re all cheering.

I smile against Russell’s lips and pull away.

Look down and see Shelby shining up at us.

Laughing, Russell yells at them:

“Fuck off breeders!”

Discovery Settings

When I was 19, I signed up for Tinder and Grindr.

An application on my phone that promised to connect me with other humans who were romantically interested in me, Tinder simply didn't. cut. the. mustard.

Since my last attempt at a romcom of my own had been at the tail-end of high school with my then-girlfriend, and ended as a dramedy when I broke up with her only for her to make out with my then-best-friend a few hours later, I was eager to find the man of my dreams.

My Prince Charming had an everchanging face—it was of whichever affecting porn star had last graced the screen of my computer. But I would quickly find that my Hollywood moment with the leading man was not for the here and now.

The trepidation through the minutes it took for the app to download from the internet was palpable. After pressing my index finger to the rounded square of the app on my phone, I spent far longer than I should have curating my profile. The photo of myself that I eventually uploaded for this was of me in a kitchen making an apple pie, with skin stretched by a full smile and eyes that mimicked it. I was sure this was my ticket to the big screen—you know what they say, fill a man's heart and he'll let you fill his hole.

At the forefront of my withering fantasies was the fact that I was in Kal—as a teenager, I would frequently blame nearly every misgiving fate had dealt me on this condition of existence, often erroneously—but my disheartening experience with Tinder was not one of these errors.

Since the app is location-based, the first problem I encountered was location. If we're gills and mucous and glassy eyes and gaping face holes and finding love is catching the right fish, then I was casting my lure out into a desert in more than one sense.

So there I was, peering down at a photo of myself holding an apple pie captured in my phone screen, as a red circle expanded out from me on the screen, fading in colour until it

reached the edge of the white space and disappeared. Another red circle was always close behind it, mimicking a radar.

I watched it *blip, blip, blip* before a message flashed up: *There's no one around you, expand your discovery settings to see more people.*

Under this was a button for the discovery settings so I followed it to discover why I was undiscoverable. Under maximum distance I was set to 80 kilometres. Without registering that Kalgoorlie is 75 kilometres in width and length, I expanded this to 160 kilometres and waited expectantly. The red circles expanded and disappeared tauntingly.

Eventually I conceded to the rhythmic, lonely thump in my chest—which craved the whirlwind, the crises, and the climax of a film not to be—and googled other dating apps.

I was pleasantly surprised to find Grindr—an app on my phone that promised to connect me with other humans who wanted to have sex with me.

Forget the romance I had envisioned: who needs their heart filled when their hole can be filled instead. But Grindr simply didn't. cut. the. mustard.

When I pressed my index finger to the glass of my phone screen to open Grindr, I never could have imagined that this would be the case.

In fact, after all the tears I'd shed in the first few months of announcing my sexuality, I had imagined a dream-like sexual becoming. It was all rainbows and glitter and blowjobs and cumming during anal penetration—essentially the dimly lit set of one of the productions captured on my computer screen.

But the world as I knew it, in its endless tirade of eroding my Hollywood dreams, would deny me again.

Although I was suddenly inundated with rows and rows of other users, the vast majority of them didn't have profile pictures. Instead, they'd opted for the grey and dark grey silhouette of anonymity. Their by-lines read: *discreet, straight but curious, looking, hey, pics for pics, and right now.*

In the evenings, undeterred by faceless users, wrapped up in my sheets and the light from my phone screen, I scoured profiles.

But their bios also read: *no fem, no spice, no rice, no chocolate.*

Before that moment I hadn't fully considered the nuances of my body and how they were perceived by the other profiles in Kalgoorlie.

The photo I had uploaded became contorted in my mind, each feature of my body was pulled apart and scrutinised.

Wider, flatter nose, but freckles.

Thick, dark hair but blue eyes.

Add, subtract.

Total sum.

I saw myself: making an apple pie, with brown skin, and slanted eyes.

I was fem, rice and spice.

The photo now marked me as a particular, undesirable fish that would only ever be thrown back.

But as I would soon discover, at the end of a lonely night, a warm hole was a warm hole.

Like The Kitchen Sink Being Drained

When I was 20, I started to voice my deep contemplations about buttholes.

“Do you think buttholes flower?” I asked Josie as she pressed a button on the coffee machine in the kitchen of our share-house.

She glanced over, paused before replying, a dubious expression on her face. Then: “Excuse me?”

“You know, like vaginas flower.”

Her eyebrows turned into bristling arches while she poured too much milk into her coffee and spooned too many sugars into its engulfing folds.

“Like, when you first fuck, and it hurts, but the more you do it the less it does,” I said. Josie sipped her coffee slowly. “Flowering,” I say emphatically.

“Honey, I don’t think that’s a thing; and if it is a thing, that’s not what anyone calls it.”

“Huh,” I say with a huff, “Okay. But do you reckon a butthole gets better at getting fucked?”

I watched her consider carefully before answering: “I don’t think it permanently stretches, if that’s what you mean. I think buttholes stretch during sex, but they, like, de-stretch afterwards.” To demonstrate, she made an O with her mouth and produces a sucking noise with her tongue—like the kitchen sink being drained.

I ruminated on this while I grabbed the orange juice from the fridge and poured myself a mugful, plopping three cubes of ice in with an orange splash.

Josie and I headed into the backyard and I rolled a ciggy and slid it between my inquisitive teeth.

“How come some of the dudes in porn have loose looking buttholes then?” I asked through a film of percolating smoke.

Josie looks at the ceiling for a brief moment, like the answer lies hidden—somewhere through the bricks and the drywall, upstairs, in my bedroom. “I guess you’d be using it a lot as a porn star, so it wouldn’t snap back as quickly,” she answered eventually.

“Yeah,” I said slowly, “that makes sense because I used my dildo last night and I reckon the more I do the less it hurts. But you’re right, ‘cause if I don’t use it for a while then I guess it—” I trail off before mimicking her sink-draining mouth in conclusion.

She rolled her eyes.

“I renamed my dildo Callum,” I tell her.

“Why, what happened to Dylan?”

“I feel like I outgrew him.”

She giggled. “Alright.”

As we rolled a second cigarette each our conversation fizzled out, but my thoughts were pulsating with puckered buttholes.

I carried my dense mug inside and placed it gingerly in the sink before wandering over to the jam coloured felt couch in the loungeroom. I pressed my body belly down into it.

I watched my fingers, noticed how short the nails were and wondered what it would be like to push them inside myself if I didn’t chew them—if they were allowed to grow past the tips of my flesh. This question swirled together with a myriad of other questions and I realised I knew far too little about buttholes.

My relationships, or lack thereof, could chalk a portion of it and none of my other friends and I had broached the subject; certainly no one in my family had, or likely would, speak to me about it.

The men captured in my phone screen on porn sites were too busy getting into it to talk about it; and it must not be considered polite conversation for the characters of primetime television.

I sunk into the couch, aware of how heavy my sprawling limbs are, like vintage cutlery, and started to collect the questions—let them roll around together in my head.

How do tops and bottoms figure out their positions? How common is rectal bleeding? Can you shit yourself during anal? What does a butthole taste like—as expected, or unexpectedly worse or better? What position is least painful? Does it move from painful pleasure to only pleasure? Can you ever fuck as hard as porn stars, or is that only for buttholes that sound like a draining sink? Is a mouthful of spit a sincere amount of lube? Can you use so much lube that you're farting sticky bubbles for days? Is it absolutely necessary to douche? Will a man's dick ever feel as good as an intensely vibrating dildo named Callum?

On the couch my body became unsteady and the cactus on the coffee table seemed to be laughing hysterically as it drooped slightly from water deprivation. It was a gift that was meant to be impossible to kill, its laughter twofold and knowing. I asked the cactus why everyone, everywhere makes fucking seem so sexy. It laughed some more.

When I watch a film or porn, sex is sexy. For the latter, this is ideal. Unsexy porn would be disadvantageous for jerking off. Especially when you need a quick orgasm—it would require tugging to detrimental effect. Dick burn.

In porn, the dudes get right into it, despite an unrealistic preamble. One is established as the fucker, the other the fuckee. The plumber and the plumbed. The police officer and the criminal. The priest and the altar boy. Clear roles for their fifteen minutes of fame and my five minutes of venereal pleasure.

But the characters in movies, and telly shows, of the gay rom-com genre could be a little less knowing. They meet in a plant-filled coffee shop populated by hipsters, or at party on a rooftop terrace under the muted warmth of cheap fairy lights, or pass each other in a bustling street by a flower shop, or are introduced by scheming friends. Their love is full, their monogamy undiscussed, and their sex is hidden beneath sheets in snippets and nothing is amiss and no questions are asked or answered between them.

I think of the first blowjob I gave.

I was messaging a boy on Grindr for a week or so. We were both drinking in town on a Saturday night and decided to meet up afterwards.

He knocked on my front door and we exchanged soft-smiled hellos before deciding to hit the curb out the front of my house for a cigarette. I could make out all of the curves and arches of his face from the light cast by the streetlamps or the moon or both. I marvelled at his eyes because they were darker than they had appeared in his photos, darker than the red dirt around us. He ran his slender fingers through his mousy brown hair while the leaves on the salmon gums across the road waved at us. He chuffed on the dart like someone who hadn't smoked many before.

We went inside, lay on top of my duvet, chatted idly about how our nights had been and then he started kissing me, softly and tentatively, but then more eagerly. We were a mess of limbs, our bodies each clambering to find a way to fit with the other.

Somehow, I found myself up against the rigid headboard of my bed, and before I could reflect on my position for the blowjob I wanted to give, I transformed into a blow-up sex doll as he thrust his dick into my face while my mouth made draining sink noises. Eventually, he realised how unideal my position was and we shifted.

I jerked him off until he came, sticky, in my hand—his cum not entirely unpleasant as my nose caught the scent of it. He took my load in his mouth and we wiped everything up with my t-shirt and had a shower. He asked when we could see each other again and I said soon without without really meaning it.

Afterwards, I couldn't stop thinking about how hard it was to take his hard dick up against that headboard. Friends I'd asked had concocted vague sentiments about it—blowjobs, sex, whatever—coming naturally when you're in the moment but there was nothing natural about how my body had become inflatable plastic.

I took notes from this experience: dicks are salty, hair is pricklier when it is on someone else's body, not scraping the shaft of the penis with your teeth is a practical skill that one must hone, there must be an ideal position for sucking a dick.

There is a grass-coloured velvet cushion on the couch and I put it on my lap because, blow-up sex doll or not, the memory of our naked bodies made me hard.

Another question swirls above me on the couch: *does pineapple make your cum taste significantly better?*

Pre-sex with fling-Nick I asked a lot of questions. We went out for dinner and drinks at the pub down the road from my house in Kal and he was funny and smart and I thought: *it's just like the romcoms.*

I drove him home and the whole way there he pressed his hand against my thigh even though it made shifting gears really difficult. Out front of his place in the crisp air of mid-June we made out in my car until I couldn't taste him anymore—only us—as the heater funnelled warmth into the minimal space shared between us.

I wanted to stay in his bed, in between his sheets, but he didn't ask, and I didn't want to seem overly eager. So I drove home. I switched off the car to find that he'd messaged me to tell me his dick was wet with precum, that he had a nice night, that he liked kissing me, and looking at me. I told him that his flurry of messages were perfect and thought *this is better than the romcoms.*

But then I launched into a tirade of omissions and questions over text: *I obviously want to fuck you; I haven't been with many boys, and the few I have been with were drunken, sloppy, messy experiences; I have never done anal, do I need to get an anal wax and bleach like my mate Sally?* He replied: *you don't need to get an anal wax and bleach like Sally and you don't need to overthink everything so much.*

A few days later, fling-Nick and I made our way to my bedroom after a night of crackling conversation and exactly one beer more than we should have and became the unsexy film I always wanted to watch but wanted desperately to avoid on this particular evening.

In the shadows cast from my bedside lamp he couldn't get hard, and I said something disquieting about how weird it felt to hold his dick in my hand. When he meekly asked why, I said it was because I hadn't held many before, even though it was actually because his dick was flaccid. His insecurity was pouring forth like cum in a circle jerk porno and I didn't want to make it worse. I assured him that it was okay: *Probably just beer-dick*, I said.

But I was disappointed, and he probably felt it. We got ourselves beneath my pinstripe duvet and fell asleep. Not touching.

Beside him, drinking in the smell of him, I played our film over again and again in my head and wondered if things would have been different if I'd gone down on him, or if I'd somehow been able to make myself plastic and my mouth a draining sink.

I took notes from this experience: beer can make your dick limp, everybody has insecurities about sex, communication is key.

Josie handed me an envelope addressed to me while I watched dust dancing in the light filtering through the window above the couch. It was from my bank. My excitement withered and I wondered if blue balls are something you feel emotionally or physically.

With Trent, it felt like the answer might lie somewhere in between. After a decent Tinder date, he asked me to go back to his place and I said yes with more confidence than I possessed. We smoked weed on his balcony in East Perth and I was worried it would make me want to run away but I felt like I suddenly had the confidence I hadn't possessed and in his bedroom, on soft grey sheets, his naked body smelt like salt and expensive cologne.

He kissed me with a mouth of crowded teeth and I played with his curly chest hairs while I stroked his dick and worried about cumming too quickly.

Then, with a grunt, he came. His right leg spasmed while his face contorted into what could only be pleasure but reminded me of a painting of a girl melting. I became worried that I would never cum; worry that he soon shared as he kissed me softly and jerked me off too

enthusiastically. When it started to hurt, my dick softened and I thought, *tell him to go slower, so you can cum*. But I didn't. So Trent asked me if I was gonna cum and I laughed an octave too high and said, *I don't think so*.

He stopped and we watched a movie about a dog dying and I wondered if someone could learn to make you cum like you could make yourself cum—if they could know your body like you know your body.

I took notes from this experience: don't smoke weed before sex, cum faces are weird, boys named Trent are 100 per cent likely to ghost you later.

The cushions sank beneath me on the couch, like it couldn't handle the weight of all my questions, like I was an aged Tupperware container struggling to stay afloat in murky dishwater and I wondered if I should douche every day so that I am always prepared for anal sex.

I certainly wish I had douched the day before I got with Aiden.

After a party that ruined the taste of jaguar, he asked me if he could go home with me. When we got back to my house he went to the bathroom while I tugged off my clothes in the cool of my room and kicked dirty laundry under my bed.

He came back to my room and we rolled on top and under each other, kissed each other and licked each other. When he pushed his finger inside me, I took a sharp breath and pressed my lips to the prickly underside of his jaw.

I reciprocated and he moaned slightly, but when I pulled my forefinger and its neighbour from him, he grabbed my hand and sucked on them. He went to the bathroom again and I heard the running and draining of the sink before he came back to nestle himself into my chest.

As we fell asleep beneath cheap sheets I thought: *why didn't we get back into it? Why did he suck my fingers afterwards? Why didn't I suck his fingers afterwards?*

I took notes from this experience: maybe sex without alcohol would be easier, maybe only one asshole is to be explored at a time, never drink tequila again.

From the couch, Josie's bare feet slapped against the dirty white tiles of the living room and pull me out of my titillating reverie.

"What are you thinking about?" Josie asked.

My eyes glazed over and I answered dreamily:

"About flowerholes."

Josie shook her head and walked away.

The ceiling was an expanse of white save for a single black smudge and I thought briefly about how it got there before turning back to tight holes and gaping holes and everything between.

Eventually, I fiubd some of the answers to my questions.

I'd go to Bunno and get cream-pied, I'd meet my first boyfriend on Tinder and learn about fibre tablets that make douching somewhat unnecessary, and I'd learn to fart lube-cum bubbles.

I'd learn that sex can be sexy and unsexy and it can be something in between.

I'd learn that every flowerhole is different.

Grandma Has Gastro

When I was twenty-two, I got cream-pied for the first time.

Cousin Cass the astrology-enthusiast would later argue that some stars had gathered in my favour or that Mercury was in retrograde or some other cosmic alignment had occurred for my buttole to turn into a leaking moon.

But I think that it was the inevitable thing—I decided it was owed to me since I had been on a very average Tinder date the week before. His name was Tyrone and he was one in a series of very average Tinder dates. Across Perth, I was collecting failed romances like Jupiter collected moons.

I met Tyrone in the city at a bar after work and we shared a jug of gin mixed with elderberry syrup and soda on a table under a jacaranda tree out front while I itched for a cig. I didn't have one because I wasn't sure that I was allowed to—there weren't any ash trays on the jarrah tables.

On top of that, Tyrone's cardigan screamed "I don't punch darts" and I'd learned the hard way that I couldn't and shouldn't chuff in a lot of public places in the city. I'd gotten a shock of rosy cheeks when a security guard at uni told me that I couldn't smoke on campus, and at my first uni party at the Tav on campus I was surprised to learn that this non-smoking policy applied there as well.

Later, Josie and I would learn to wrap ourselves up in the folds of the Tav's dancefloor to light our cigs with servo-station lighters that briefly illuminated the bodies pressed around us in gold and twisting shadows before blowing the smoke into the concrete pavement below us.

While I suffered from nicotine withdrawal I probably imagined more than I felt, Tyrone's cardigan pulled itself off of his body and I pulled myself out of our conversation. He told me he worked at a health clinic, but I was more interested in the couple sitting behind him.

She was a pair of brown eyes beneath a tangle of red curls and he was a shock of spiky, silver hair and he looked at her like I looked at his cigarette and like Cousin Cass looked at the stars.

Tyrone was smart, kind, and funny but not in a way that excited me. After we finished the gin he walked me to his car. I didn't say that we should do this again. He didn't say we should do this again. We hugged with too many elbows and I smoked a cig in my car on the drive home. I decided to stop dating for a spill.

A few days later Grandma called me and told me that she wouldn't be able to go to down south with me at the weekend to see The Sapphires perform at the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre: "I've got gastro, love. Gotta be by a toilet at all times."

After she hung up, I called Kristen and we agreed to give the ticket to Cousin Cass—Kristen's co-worker who isn't our cousin but has the same round face and colouring as our family. She was christened an honorary co-worker many moons ago.

So, on a Friday evening I took Forrest Highway to Kristen's house in Capel. We drank cheap red wine in the backyard under a canopy of leaves from the peppy and eucalypt and the lights that she and Dave, her husband, had strung along their branches. I told her about the recent failures of my love life and she told me about the recent successes of her career in local government while ringtail possums shook the foliage above us and the dogs sat below, looking up.

On Saturday night Dave drove us into town and dropped us off at Yours or Mine for dinner where we met Cousin Cass. We inhaled fried pieces of cauliflower and pork belly bites and slammed cocktail after cocktail and Cousin Cass said that she was glad Grandma got gastro.

At the Entertainment Centre we grabbed glasses of wine and found our soft, red seats and sipped then gulped while the Sapphires belt out tune after tune.

We made our way in waddles to The Rose for more drinks, entered the pub and pushed our way to the bar where I ordered three espresso martinis and tried and failed not to stare at the

boy with the moustache in the pink t-shirt and black and white chequered linen pants. He was gesturing to a group of girls who laughed louder than they should have.

I found Kristen with Cousin Cass and a boy and a girl—he was Cousin Cass’s cousin and she was his girlfriend. I explained to him that if Cass is our cousin and his cousin then he is my cousin too.

During our conversation I kept glancing over at Moustache, to catch his eye, but he didn’t look at me. Cousin Cass told me his name (Luke) and his backstory (a gay hairdresser in town that everyone knows; a gay hairdresser with a boyfriend).

Since getting smashed by Luke seemed unlikely at that stage, I smashed drink after drink and smashed dart after dart and got the bouncer to take a photo of Kristen, Cousin Cass and I outside in the smoking area before we moved on to Fitzzy’s.

After we spent an hour lining up at Fitzzy’s they bee-lined for the bathroom while I waited outside for them in the smoking area when, suddenly, something collided with my body. I inhaled the smoke of my cig too sharply before it was flung from my hand.

And it was Moustache.

He asked me three times who I was.

I told him that I was from Kal, that I lived in Perth now, that I was visiting Bunno for the weekend. He told me that he knew I wasn’t from around here—because he knew everyone and everything about everyone in this town. All the gay boys, all the no-homo straight boys who think a warm hole is a warm hole and all the married men on Grindr.

He pushed his tongue into my mouth but pulled away to say, *we shouldn’t do this here*. He did it twice more: tongue, *we shouldn’t*, tongue, *we shouldn’t*.

Kristen found us and told us she had been watching some guy with a shaved head who had been watching me and Moustache. When I went to the bathroom Shaved-head followed me in so Kristen followed us in and he pissed in the bathroom sink while she stood behind him and dead-eyed him through his reflection in the mirror.

Cousin Cass found a boy and wanted to leave with him and Kristen wanted to go get pizza and Luke wanted to take me home so we all parted. *Be careful*, Kristen said as she left, squeezing my hand tightly.

We went back to Moustache's house—which was his parents' house—and tiptoed through the front door and into his bedroom and fell about each other as we pulled our clothes off. Luke spat in his hand, and readied it for my butt cheeks, and I told him that I had never done anal before. For some reason he didn't believe me, but I know that if he had seen me the next morning as I pushed his cum out of myself on Kristen and Dave's retro-pink toilet that he would have.

On the way back to Perth the next day I still felt like a leaking moon, and a week later I decided that I should start getting regular STI checks.

A quick google and I found M Clinic—a sexual health clinic for men. I made an online booking but I had selected the wrong date. When I called them to amend it the receptionist told me his name was Tyrone.

Tyrone asked for my name and I knew that he knew that I was his shitty Tinder date and when he asked what date I would like to re-book for and I told him that I wasn't sure and that I'd do it online later. I thanked him and said goodbye in one breath.

I decided to make a booking with another health clinic.

Loving Simon

When I was twenty-three, I saw my first big gay film.

Big in that it was the first film by a major Hollywood film studio to feature gay teenage romance. Big in that it felt like something I had been searching for without knowing it. Like a dream you've forgotten.

Sitting on the coffee-stained couch of the dimly lit lounge room of my share house to the crackling of potato crisps in my housemate's teeth I saw the trailer for the film about Simon Spier. He announces that he is just like everyone else except for the "big secret"—the one about him breaking up with his middle-school girlfriend because she doesn't look like a boy.

"P.S. It doesn't seem fair that only gay people have to come out, why is straight the default?" Simon asks before the trailer cuts to the faces of the film's other characters flicking by as each one announces their straightness to the absurd reactions of family members.

"Oh, God, help me Jesus," cries one mother and I laugh because I'm on the other side of the fear of coming out—because my Catholic mother shed those tears years earlier.

The final frames for the film roll by.

"We have to go and see it," Dani says between mouthfuls of flaking salt and vinegar crumbs.

Meanwhile, Julia was trying to tame her frizzy ginger hair with a pink corduroy scrunchy while I was ruminating on the 30-some second trailer I had just watched.

I could feel Dani watching me—I was taking too long to respond to a statement with only one answer.

"Yeah, alright," I said, "When do you want to go and see it?"

"Whenever we're all free," she replied with a crunch.

A vague plan was set: our household would go to the cinema together to see it. Josie, the designated lesbian; Julia, Daisy and Dani, the designated allies; and I, the designated gay.

But betrayal lies at the precipice of every gay's heart, so one evening, when it was just Josie and I, and we were bored to gay pieces, we decided to go to the movies.

We um-ed and ah-ed about what to see but it was impossible to ignore *this* film.

Josie resisted. But I reminded her that *we* were the gays. This was a gay film. This film was for us. Josie relented.

While Josie went upstairs to get ready, I rolled darts downstairs for the road, unsteady fingers pinching tobacco into paper.

I gunned it out of the driveway in reverse, running over a plant or two lining the chalk-coloured fence, to Josie's shrieking—half laughter, half fear. We headed to the highway and rolled down the windows and spun the volume dial to 30—the highest it could go in my ageing orange Kia Rio.

The flint wheel in the cheap lighter made a metallic rasp as the thumb of my right hand struck it, illuminating, for a brief moment, the shabby interior of my car and the bodies folded into it.

Most of the smoke ebbed into the frigid night air, but some lingered in that enclosed space, adding to the layered stench resting about our shoulders.

"That'll be twenty dollars," the girl behind the box office says. She smiles an ugly shade of too-bright pink lipstick as she hands over our tickets and I wonder if she knows we're gay. *Of course she does, why else would we be going to see this gay film*, I think.

Josie and I get popcorn and coke and I bend into my bucket to lick pieces of crunchy, fluffy corn into my mouth.

When we get to cinema 10 there is still a half hour until the film is scheduled to start and mustard signs inform us that the cinema is being cleaned.

Josie moves slightly, from one foot to the other.

Josie adjusts the popcorn bucket pressed between her right arm and breast.

Josie shuffles towards the wall of the cinema and leans against it.

“You’re tomatoing,” I say to her, following the patterns of the blotches surfacing on her skin.

“Shut up,” she grumbles, sweat lingering on her face.

I can feel the heat radiating from her body and the anxiety rolling towards me and it turns into nightmares of bible-thumping, latent homosexual homophobes raiding the cinema in protest.

I look around to distract myself and watch the other filmgoers making their way into *Love, Simon* and Josie and I play guess-the-humans.

A young gay couple.

A middle-aged lesbian couple.

A mother chaperoning her 11-year-old daughter and her boyfriend—who the mother knows is gay.

A woman with her two kids.

An elderly couple.

A group of teenagers.

The sweat dries on Jose’s face and we go inside.

We sit in the cool of the cinema in anticipation. The screen comes to life.

Josie and I play the ad game—a game I used to play with my siblings. Players decide their order and then ads are distributed according to that order and you get what’s in the ad. At the end of the game you see who’s best off financially. Since it’s only Josie and I, I go first. The first ad is for Audi. The second is for the RSPCA. The third is Commonwealth Bank. The ads keep rolling by and by the end of it we’re not entirely sure who’s best off. Trailers for other films flash

by and Josie and I agree we must see some of them but acknowledge we'll end up illegally streaming most of them.

The film starts, and we don't utter a word to each other for the entirety of the screening.

Josie and I walk back to the car in silence, each of us too occupied by the noise made from the thoughts reverberating inside our skulls.

Moments from the film skip by and blend together.

I am all joy and anger and a swelling chest and a twisted stomach because somehow Simon had given me so much and so little.

When Simon's mum sat him down and told him that it was okay to breathe, I thought she was talking to me. I exhaled audibly and wished that my mum had said that to me. Wondered if I had only been breathing like fish gulp air before it.

When Simon yells at Martin for outing him to his school the rage is palpable and I revel in that rage, share that rage, because I know how it feels. Years after I came out to Josie, James, and Savannah while we drove to Espo for the new year I found out that they had all already been told by a mutual friend beforehand. They sat there while I tried to find the courage to tell them despite the bubbling anxiety in my chest. When it eventually spilled out of my mouth and into the space left between our bodies, they said so little and I was glad for it but now there is only a rage fleshed out from pain because it was mine, mine to tell like it was Simon's to tell.

When Simon dreams himself into a colourful dance sequence as a university student, my disappointment flooded the cinema with a perfume that overpowered the smell of the buttery, salty popcorn. In this sequence there are markers of pride at every turn, but Simon tells us: "Maybe not that gay." The audience laughed and my forehead creased with confusion because I didn't understand what was funny. I wanted to unfurl my body from my chair, walk down the steps of the theatre and climb into the screen and tell Simon that if he wanted to be dance-

sequence, rainbow-colour-coordinated gay that he could be. I wish someone had told me that sooner.

When Simon and Blue share their first kiss it doesn't feel triumphant. It felt wrong that Simon forced Blue out of the closet. It felt wrong that their straight classmates surround them and took photos of them like they were a spectacle.

There were parts of me reflected in Simon that I had never seen like that on the big screen before.

All of the gay films I had watched, I had done so greedily from the safety of my bedroom, from within twisted sheets.

This was different.

Simon made me feel like I mattered, in a way I hadn't before.

Simon was me in ways, but he wasn't me in too many other ways.

He was a white boy, from a well-off upper-middle-class family. He was living in the vanilla burbs. His parents were woke. He passed as straight.

I wanted the out boy in the film, Ethan, to be the main character. He was black, gay, and Christian—I almost couldn't have asked for better.

Simon was palatable and I didn't want palatable.

The commercial and the posters and the slogans and the interviews and all of the marketing for *Love, Simon* that had engulfed me in anticipation of this night swelled and amongst it all I remembered: "Everybody deserves love."

That's what they had chosen to market the movie, and I read it as *even gay people deserve love*. And it was like remembering a dream you've forgotten. Because I always knew that I was deserving of love.

Josie reaches in and pulls me out of myself and we compare notes on the film. This made me cry, this made me angry, this was beautiful, this was stupid, Jennifer Garner was a gem.

“I’d watch it again,” Josie says, “if only so I can pretend Simon’s parents are mine.”

“I wouldn’t,” I say, “give me *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* or literally anything less vanilla again anytime.”

Alpha

When I was twenty-one, I was rejected by a boy on Tinder because of my underwear.

Tucked between the fleece sheets of my bed and the quiet loneliness that becomes loud in the midst of winter I gazed into my phone at the carefully curated profiles of other men in a 160-kilometre circular radius.

Swipe left to reject what they captured of themselves in photos and a short biography, or swipe right to express interest.

If they swipe right for what you've revealed of yourself, you match—and then you're able to start a conversation with them. Perhaps a, *How are you?* Or *Wanna get a coffee?* They might get straight to the point: *Free tonight?*

They may never message you.

If you message them first, they might reveal that there isn't much behind their profile. Or during their conversation with you, you might reveal your deep-seated insecurities and they might select the unmatched button and disappear from your app. They may never message you back.

Sean: *Very chilled, love camping, mild addiction to cars and Netflix, my couch and I are on a first name basis, trying to adjust to beardless life after movember.*

Swipe right: although he misspelled basis, he would look better with a beard.

Michael: *interests include Disney, trivia, puppies, Game of Thrones, film scores, Attenborough, board games, Mario Kart (because I always win), plants, banter and butt grabs. Australian made with local and imported ingredients.*

Swipe right: for butt grabs and the opportunity to beat him in Mario Kart.

I pull myself out of Tinder and open Facebook.

Through my bedroom door I can hear one of my five housemates in the kitchen; the hum of the kettle and the gentle opening and closing of the fridge and then a drawer.

I scroll past photos and posts from family, former-friends, and those I met briefly or never at all. My uncle has posted a tirade about “boat people.” I want to comment that his dad was a boat person, and his sister’s parents-in-law are boat people, and even if he didn’t have those connections he would still smell like misinformation and fear. Like Lynx Africa body spray. Instead, I switch back to Tinder.

Lucas: *I’m just here to make memories, I don’t care if they’re good or bad.*

Swipe right: You can’t lose.

James: *I have a one year old but he wont be calling you a mummy bcz he has only one mummy in this world lets click before anything, Im str8 forward who doesnt like to have a good fuck tell me what ur after instead of miscommunication. Other people say that Im not like the other guys so please don’t judge a book before his cover*

Swipe left: my only dream is to be a yummy mummy.

Mell: *420 friendly, proud Mum to Handsome 27-month-old American X English Staff named Argo who is Happily the Love of my Life*

Swipe left: this capitalisation without rhyme or reason is terrifying.

I pull myself out of Tinder again and open my messages.

The wind whipping through the crack in my bedroom window sounds like soft screaming and I am the only source of warmth in this high-ceilinged room. I can hear my closest housemate pissing into the toilet bowl that sits in the bathroom between the walls separating his bed and mine and I imagine the chill in his sock-less feet.

A new message from my sister flashes on my phone: *Miss you sister girl.*

She must be drunk.

Me: *Miss you too x*

I open Tinder again.

Jayden: *Anyone with Alpha underwear can swipe left*

In this moment, I am wearing Alpha underwear.

Every Christmas my mum drags out the boxes and boxes of Christmas decorations she's collected over the years from the shed, which includes the stockings for Kristen, Troy, Blake, Laine and I. Five bright red felt stockings hang off of the TV cabinet from around mid-November to Christmas Eve. On Christmas morning I always wake to find one at the foot of the bed in the spare room and there is always, without fail, underwear in this stocking. Alpha underwear.

I scroll through Jayden's photos and find one of him wearing a white Calvin Klein jockstrap and white shoes and white angel wings in the streets of Perth. His body is shimmering with glitter beside two other shining bodies and I realise that this is from Pride last year. I didn't go because I was working on the weekend.

In another photo, Jayden is with his parents in front of a fountain wearing an expensive-looking suit and university graduation regala. He is smiling up at me from my phone with teeth that have asked but never been denied. His Dad's smile reminds me of when my mum told me that money doesn't buy happiness, but it can buy comfort and ease and sometimes they can feel like the same thing.

I remember Daisy told me it is better to be alone than with someone shit, so my loneliness become a blanket and I am warm beneath it.

I swipe right.

My Alpha underwear are not visible in any of the photographs I have uploaded to my profile and I assume this is why we match.

I move my finger to find the unmatched button.

Tinder asks me, through a drop-down selection, why I would like to unmatched: *offensive messages, inappropriate photos, bad offline behaviour, feels like spam*.

I cannot select more than one of these, so I press *offensive messages*.

Jayden disappears forever.

Rising, Rising

When I was twenty-four, I stopped going to one of the two gay clubs in Perth.

An hour after an Uber to Julia's house along roads wet with the day's rain glistening under streetlamps, I was a bottle of rosé in and rosy-cheeked.

Two hours later I was two bottles in and waiting to get inside The Court with Julia, Dani, Damo and Josie.

Out of the Uber, we clambered down James Street, past the line that stretched to its edge and bent down along Beaufort Street.

"Jesus, it's always so busy here now," Julia complains, the rubber soles of her shoes squealing against the slicked pavement.

"All the straights," Josie grumbles, then, loudly, to everyone and no one in particular: "This is a gay club."

"They don't know that," I tell Josie, "when I went to my cousins eighteenth last weekend I asked her where all of her friends were going clubbing and she said here. When I told her it was a gay club she told me she didn't know."

"Remember when we used to go?" Dani asks, "when we first moved here—we'd just walk straight in."

"Yeah, and the whole stage was ours, no elbowing for a spot to chuck a slut drop," Damo answers.

"Better yet, the smoko area wasn't heaving," Josie sighs.

"Yeah, but where else are we going to go?" I ask.

"Damo made us go to Connies last weekend," Julia says, bunching her jacket up with her hands against her chest.

"Ugh, but the music is so shit there," I moan.

“Yeah, but at least there are clearly more gay people than straight people,” Damo says, gesturing outwards with the palm of his hand to the people surrounding us.

“Yeah, and I went to Mustang and then Joe’s Juice Bar with Laidley and Thom a few weeks back and it wasn’t shit but it wasn’t The Court—or what The Court used to be like anyway,” I say.

“What do you mean?” Julia asks.

“Remember when we were at Groovin’ the Moo, Jules—and I got the *I’m not gay but*.”

“Ugh, yeah,” she answers, eyes rolling and then blinking as tiny drops of water hit her eyelashes.

“Well I got that three times that night. *I’m not gay but I’m totally accepting, but your eyes are so pretty, but you’re a great dancer*,” I recall for them.

“Jesus, why are straight boys so insecure about their masculinity that they have to, like, no-homo a compliment to another guy,” Julia snaps while a group of girls totter in front of us and the line moves toward the entrance.

“Yeah, but I’ve been hearing some shitty stuff coming out of The Court too,” Damo says, “Like, especially transphobic stuff—like people getting told they’re in the wrong bathroom.”

For the next half hour, as the line trickles out of the rain and into the club, we complain loudly about what The Court was and what it is now and I dip out of the conversation while I try to remember my first time there.

When we all first moved from Kal for university we were fresh meat on the club scene of Perth because there wasn’t one back home—unless you counted the Gold Bar playing *So Fresh: The Hits of Summer* 2000 and the top 40 songs from mainstream radio stations on a Saturday night while people jigged around their bar stools. We spent the first few months drinking cider-wine

and vodka-wine at Unit 24 of Vickery House—the on-campus student accommodation at Curtin University.

It was at Unit 24 that I met my first non-Kal gay. He sauntered into one of the parties, through the heavy security door of the flat, in a pair of black skinny jeans and a black mesh crop top. He had a Louis Vuitton bag thrown over his shoulder, which he would later tell me cost a cool couple of grand.

I was immediately intimidated by him. I was wearing a similar pair of black skinny jeans but I'd thrown on a loose black t-shirt and tied a dark blue flannie around my waist so that Josie and I nearly matched—the only difference between us was that her flannie was a deep shade of red.

I knew that the gravitas of our shared sexuality would bring us together. A gay can recognise another gay from across a football field—Louis Vuitton or not—and it's hardly surprising that we gravitate towards each other in social gatherings. If sex isn't on the table, it's comforting to have someone there who gets it. If you've been the only gay at a party enough—where you either have to smile through your teeth when strangers ask you inane questions about where things go or who you'll ask to surrogate your children, or blunt your rage when someone makes an offensive remark—you just enjoy having someone to have normal conversations with. Or someone to complain about the prying of the straighties at said party with.

I had gotten pretty used to this because after I'd come out about half of my mates came out too. Who knew so many gays were to be found in Kal. Mum always said that birds of a feather flock together. But this boy and I were birds of a different kind. He was different. He wasn't like all of my gay mates. He was so shiny.

It was like the first and only time I'd gone to the Queer Department at the University to find my community. I dragged Josie with me during Orientation Week after I'd found a couple of gays at a booth outside the Student Guild advertising the services of the department and their role as Queer Officers. We walked into a communal space with a fridge, some couches and

chairs that looked like they'd been plucked off a curb, and a coffee table stacked with magazines and board games. We plomped ourselves down on a couch, too anxious to make conversation with anyone but each other, and left after a half hour because the anxiety was rolling out of both of us, so ill-equipped for this new gay frontier—for the RuPaul references, for the films they discussed, for the way capital-Q-Queer Theory worked its way into their chattering teeth.

That I'm-a-fake-gay mentality licked at the walls of my skull when the shiny boy with the Louis Vuitton sat down next to me on the lawn outside Unit 24. I rolled and smoked a cig and my throat throbbed. He lit his taylor-made cig without saying anything and then asked me what had brought me to Vickery House. I explained that Julia and I were mates in Kalgoorlie, and that she had invited me here. He explained that he and Dani, one of Julia's housemates, had grown up together in Manjimup and I eased into the skin-itching grass. Mosquitos danced around and between us as we exchanged notes on growing up Catholic and gay in small towns and he shined and shined.

Later that night shiny boy convinced Julia, Josie, Dani and I to go to The Court with him. We tramped down Hayman Road to the bus station and clambered up the steps of the bus to the city while poorly trying to conceal our opened cans of alcohol from the driver.

When we got to the city we made our way to Northbridge, walked straight up to the bouncer, who checked our IDs idly before letting us in, and went inside to the soft throbbing of music and a smattering of lights.

I had never seen anything like it. The club was huge. An indoor bar and a dancefloor with a stage gave way to another bar and another dancefloor with a stage outside and a smoking area under the canopy of a tree in a courtyard right out the back.

More than that it was that we were suddenly spoilt for choice: there were so many gays in one space that I felt dizzy, the gravity of them all pulling at my body. Here, I knew that I wouldn't be asked inane questions about my sexuality. Here, I knew that I could wear what I wanted to wear, dance without inhibition. Drop my bottyhole to the ground on bent knees

before rising, rising. If I wanted to throw on a mesh crop top and a Louis Vuitton bag, I could. I wanted to. Later that night when I kissed shiny boy on the dancefloor—who I'd later remember told me his name was Damo—I did so without any fear. Eyes closed tight, lips pressed hard, tongue darting unencumbered, hands moving along the curve of his back and lower.

“Your ID?” the bouncer asks from beneath his oversized pink high vis vest, dragging me out of my memories and back into the rain.

All of the bouncers and security guards were wearing the vests—they were the managers response to a petition circulated by a group to make the LGBTQIA+ community feel safe at the venue or to change their branding as a queer space.

A series of news articles had been run about it, with a myriad of members of the Perth queer community coming out to share their experiences of verbal and physical abuse. My friends and I read on in disconnect horror and then continued to make weekend trips to The Court, convinced that this space was still better than others.

“Yeah, no worries,” I say as I whip my ID out of my wallet.

The bouncer laughs at me: “This is your Flybuys card.”

“Shit, sorry dude,” I say, smiling meekly, afraid I’m about to be denied entry, and hand him my driver’s license.

“All good, go through,” he says.

Inside, we walk past the bar, across the smoker’s courtyard and into the toilets while music thrums from the dance floor. Another pink vest stands guard inside the men’s bathroom and there’s a queue for the cubicles. I let the alcohol convince me I don’t mind pissing in front of the pink vest and stand in front of the urinal, eventually relieved by the twang of piss against metal.

I wait for Jules and Dani outside the girl’s bathroom, and when they finally emerge we push through the throng of people and line up at the back bar. The bartender hands us four

G&Ts and a Bundy and coke and I wave my bank card against the eftpos machine, which extracts \$56.50 from my account.

Josie, Damo and I part with Jules and Dani—they head for the blinking lights and eyes of the dance floor and we head for the smoko area.

We slip past body after body and find a sliver of space by the tree growing in the centre of the courtyard. Mid-cigarette a couple approaches us.

“Can we borrow your lighter?” the girl in the silver slip and smoky eyes says while her friend smiles—all teeth.

“Of course,” Josie says, handing her lighter over—carefully though, measuring them up, trying to figure out how likely they are to steal her lighter. She had had it for a few weeks now after being surprised by its design at the servo station down the road from my house. It featured a bikini-clad woman, all bare skin and curves and voluminous hair and soft smile, kneeling on a skateboard.

“Love the lighter,” the girl says, handing it back.

“Cheers,” Josie says.

“So how are you guys doing?” her friend with the long limbs and the green nail polish and the brown hair asks.

“Good,” I say, wondering if he knows that he looks so perfect next to the tree, “and you guys?”

“Good,” he says, holding my gaze.

I tell Silver-smokey and Tall-as-a-tree about the first time I came to The Court—about the freedom of it, in the energy that perfused everything.

“And he made out with me,” Damo adds, “like most young gays we were two cats on heat and went for it before we realised we were only ever gonna be friends.”

“A mistake every gay has made,” Tall-as-a-tree says, winking at me.

Silver-smokey tells us about her first time here, which was with Tall: “Now look, all these straight girls and boys coming without their designated gays. One beard per queer is the only measure they should be taking after that petition.”

“But we can’t police them like that, they’d cry straightphobic,” I say.

“Darling, they’re already crying it. The straight pride parade is coming, or haven’t you heard?”

I laugh and, after giving her and Tall-as-a-tree a kiss on the cheek and telling them to find us on the dance floor, we part from them.

We edge our way through the crowded dance floor, flooded with bodies, and grab onto Jules and Dani when we find them.

On the dancefloor a girl tries to edge me out to the fringe of the stage after I bump into her while she makes out with a broad-shouldered boy wearing a cap.

Sweat-licked bodies press skin to skin and ears throb on the dancefloor and it becomes intoxicating and overwhelming at the same time.

Damo, Josie and I are all looking around, trying to make eye contact with someone, anyone to hook up with. Damo locks eyes with looks-like-Troye -Sivan and Josie’s already dancing with looks-like-Missy-Higgins-circa-2004 and I’m looking for Tall-as-a-tree but he’s nowhere to be seen. I can see Troye leaning in to say something to Damo and then Damo is making a big O with his mouth and then he’s nodding and then he’s in front of me and he’s yelling that we should all get a drink.

Josie leads us all back to the bar where Damo tells us that Troye isn’t gay—he’s just here with his mates because this is where all the “birds” go.

“I’ve been catfished by breeders here more often than I’ve been catfished on Grindr and that’s saying something,” he says with a flourished roll of his eyes.

Suddenly, there is a violent eruption as we wait in line. Two men, pulling away from each other, then towards each other, then away, then towards, with clenched fists, in a strange dance. They are a loud blur among the crowd gathering by the bar.

Josie is a quiet slip of cotton shirt trying to stop them and Josie is a soft face meeting a hard first and Josie is on the pavement and she is rising, rising quickly against them—pushing them a part.

It is over as quickly as it has begun and Josie's right eye, where the small red birthmark sits at the edge of her eyelashes, looks flushed with blood.

“I'm okay,” she tells us, while we all fall around her like rain.

But I am looking for pink vests and I am looking for a past when there were no pink vests.

Later, when we get home and sit in the backyard and listen to music and roll and smoke Jays, Josie and our friends and I will talk about going to other places and safer spaces.

On trips back to Kal we will take our bootyholes to what counts as a dancefloor at the Gold Bar.

Despite the doof-doof music of the generation that followed ours streaming through the speakers at Connies, we will take our bootyholes there as well.

Eventually, we will go back to The Court and spend the majority of our time complaining that it isn't what it used to be.

We will go back again and again.

We will complain again and again.

We try more than our fair share of clubs and pubs and festivals and realise that we can make space for ourselves and it can be taken. That it can be shared and that we are not welcome.

Either way, we go out, shake our bootyholes, bend our knees and drop them as low to the ground as we can, before we're rising, rising.

Faggot

When I was twenty-three, Josie and I stopped calling each other faggots.

In the too-bright lights in the garage of her share house we danced on the edge of a turning year and the vibrations from a beating speaker. The freckles on our faces moved to smile at each other as we came in together. Her sweet cologne mixed with the stain of cigarettes yet to be washed out of her pink plaid shirt and she raised her clammy hands in front of her—to me.

Our friends danced and stood and sat around us, dipping their hips gauchely to the beat and drinking and smoking and laughing. Out of sight, a girl blinked away tears and left the toilet bowl a splattering of orange punch through the wisps of ginger hair that had escaped her hastily wrought ponytail. Across the hall a boy drooled on the cotton pillowcase of a stranger's bed in the dark and dreamed of nothing.

My hands met Josie's, her fingertips a fingernail from reaching mine, and she whispered, "I love you, faggot."

I snorted and said, "I love you too, faggot."

Our lips met without thought and I felt the bristles of fine hairs and there was nothing but salt and rum and the artificial mint from the poppers in her cigarettes. But I didn't say faggot softly enough, so Josie's housemate flinched like the word was sharp and said, "Jay, that word is banned in this house."

Josie and I had both heard that word in Kalgoorlie and learnt what it meant before we learnt that it applied to us. Before I breathed "I'm gay," to her while she sat in the backseat of my inadequately sized car on the way to Espo, before she breathed it back to me as we marched towards the pub with our friends a few days later.

I first heard it at school—I don't know the moment, the first one, but it was used by other boys, and girls, when they needed more punch. Gay, poofster, homo, and fudge packer, donut puncher, and lolly woofster—their syllables weren't sharp enough. At St Mary's, on the lips

of children in scuffed and re-polished black leather shoes and blue, ironed shirts the word seemed like it belonged somewhere else. Our cohort carried it to John Paul College as we sprouted unruly hair on unruly bodies and when I heard it there, for the first time, I imagined it drifting past me and through the hallways of lockers, and across the four-square courts, and bristling through the leaves of trees by the tennis court and going, going, going somewhere else. Imagined the word had never even existed there among the salmon gums and the grass struggling under a too-bright sun. But it never did. It stayed there, taking up space that didn't belong to it.

I was in woodwork the first time it was applied to me—or perhaps the first time it was applied meaningfully. With saw-dusted hair, Fionnualla and I worked at a bench varnishing our miniature display cabinets, our hands moist from the heat trapped between our skin and the safety gloves. A boy approached us from behind: “Are you a faggot?”

I pivoted slightly so I could see him, but I was temporarily trapped, open-mouthed, while the air in my lungs refused to move through my vocal cords. The room shrunk around me like the machinery—the band saw, disc sander, linisher and drop saw—were advancing on me. All jagged edges.

“You are, aren't you?” he asked, “gay, I mean?”

My eyes darted around the room to take stock of other demanding eyes, but there were none—only these, set against spiky ginger hair and sizeable teeth.

Meekly, I said “No.”

But he wasn't buying it: “Come on, of course you are,” he said.

Again, a weak: “No.”

Then Fionnualla, gold hair whipping furiously: “Why do you have to be such an asshole Fernie? Why do you care? Are *you*? Is that why?”

Fernie paled, his meaty fingers became confused by clammy palms, and I became background noise as he assured Fionnualla that he wasn't before quickly darting back to his work bench.

When Josie and I first decided to reclaim faggot, we were at her share house. I don't know the moment, the first one, but it was the year I spent more evenings than I can remember sitting with her in her backyard drinking honeyed-tea or over-sweetened orange juice or bitter beer or tart wine and rolling tobacco into papers. Evenings that rolled into each other.

Perhaps it was the night the rain filled the ash tray until it spilled over, sending butts floating across the glass-topped metal table before they slipped onto the pavers below. We had crept out the front door in socks and thongs and stood under the lip of the garage to smoke and the pounding around us might have softened the word faggot as we used it.

We got bolder from there, used it with each other—as a joke, or with affection. We used it in front of our friends and their partners at gatherings. Then, eventually, we used it loudly in public, enjoyed how it made other people glance with worry. If a friend, acquaintance, or stranger would ask us about this we would say, *It's fine, we're gay*. But when Dani didn't ask, only stated, "That word is banned in this house," we could not answer her.

Shortly after the new year Josie and I and all of our friends gathered again, for my birthday party. It was like we had hit repeat: booze and cigarettes and loud music and dancing bodies and vomit and dreamless sleep. Josie and I arguing playfully before I called her faggot, affection oozing into the syllables.

Repeat: Dani flinching from something sharp.

Dani: "What did we say about that word, Jay?"

With glittery eyeshadow and pursed lips, she said something about language being important. So I okay-okay-ed her and sipped on a can of cider and wished I was slightly further from where I was in my metallic chair in the garage—closer to the lip of it, where it could be just Josie and I, and the word faggot between faggots.

After we called a taxi I chugged the rest of my cider and stumbled up the driveway to the road and clambered in to the car to rest myself against the heat of Josie. A brief nap and we arrived at Connie's. We stomped to the line where a broad man with a goatee waited to take our IDs.

While Josie and I waited to pay our entry fee she reminded me of all the Wednesday nights we'd spent at Connie's for their lesbian mudwrestling.

"We should get back here on a Wednesday for it," she said.

"Only if you agree to get in the ring and win the \$100," I replied with a grin.

I tried not to think about how quickly saliva was pooling in my mouth and how much my stomach felt like it didn't belong to me while we moved, step by step, to the front of the queue.

I got to the counter and a big wig with spider-leg lashes and thick lips and an Adam's apple said, "That'll be twenty, darling."

I handed her my card and she bumped it against the eftpos machine.

"Don't have too much more fun," she said as she stamped my wrist and winked.

Josie and I climbed the stairs into the club and she grabbed my wrist and held it up to me.

There, in thick, square letters was my entry stamp.

I smiled at her, and at the word as it lifted off my skin and rolled around us. Josie grabbed my hand and we climbed the steps and there was nothing sharp about the word then, or the next morning as I noticed the stamp again, on my prickling skin in the hot shower:

Faggot.

Shade

When I was 25, I started wearing nail polish.

Again.

My mind found rolling images of my sister, her voice, teaching me how to brush the bristles around the curves and beds of the nails neatly. Of her demonstrating on me, of me reciprocating with her, of her amending my mistakes. Of our identical hot pink nails.

My mind couldn't find the images of our decision to stop painting our nails, of the words we used for this decision, but eventually my nails were left bare.

Until they weren't again.

For the Greek Gods Toga Party on New Year's Eve my housemate lent me a bottle of syrupy gold polish. She painted them the day before, in the shadows cast by the neighbouring buildings on our block of units stacked on units. But there were no instructions—this was not a demonstration.

With it on, I noticed I engaged differently with my hands—like my fingertips were governed by less gravity. When I woke up to the gold resting against my pillow, caught between blinking eyes, I marvelled at them, at the veins spidered across my hand, the pores of my skin, the creases that marked my knuckles, the pink of the flesh at the tips of my fingers. When I unbuttoned my frayed jean-shorts in front of the toilet, I was afraid of ruining it, this extra layer *on* me. When I washed the dishes and dipped my hands into the steaming water, I expected the gold to part in tendrils and exhaled audibly when they surfaced undamaged. When I started chewing my nails, I could feel the saliva-coated polish in my mouth, fished it out, chewed less. When I washed my body, I marvelled at how my fingers lathered suds across my chest, down my legs—how they looked against my dick, how I enjoyed it.

At The Court, on the eve of the coming year, I was wrapped in white fabric and gold jewellery hung from my ears, my neck, my wrists. My fingertips enjoyed themselves as I raised them above my head to the pulsating beat of the music, as they moved around my body and with

my body and against my body, as I pulled a boy's eyes into mine and enjoyed the pain of his teeth around my lower lip, as they stroked his dick over his jeans, as I placed them against my friend's cheeks and kissed him gingerly after the countdown.

A week later, I found myself in a green velvet armchair under the muted lamplight of my bedroom, a stolen bottle of rich gold polish in my hand. I applied it generously to the frayed edges of my chewed nails. Pursed lips exhaled a shallow breath gently, and tired eyes admired the transformative effect of oozing chemicals dried softly. They were enjoying themselves again, and I was not afraid of this extra layer of me.

I experimented with various colours, and my housemate's nail polish collection became a bottomless pit of shades, until the bottom fell out and I started raiding grocery stores and chemists for their budget brands. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple. Until I splurged on a budget-less brand: butter London, in a glittering pearl.

With it, I noticed that I engaged differently with my body. It was so fabulous that I walked with my shoulders pulled back, their blades arching like wings. I sauntered with my hips and lips and thought of my mother who always reproved me for my objectionable posture, for my bent back and trawling toes. She would love this. My feet beat less audibly against the red-brick pavement of my university campus, I danced in my kitchen in sweeping grooves while chopping mushrooms and frying sliced onions, my arms pulled me through the water of Fremantle's South Beach with recently realised elegance.

With it, others engaged differently with my hands—like the fingertips were governed by more gravity. I searched faces—in their various shapes, in the edges of cheek bones, in the curve of eyelashes—for responses. Running along the murky river by my house, a man with white spikey hair glanced at them with bold eyebrows. At the grocery store, the boy who scanned and packed my groceries gave me a toothless smile. At a restaurant, surrounded by my extended family, numerous moon faces shone with disapproval.

When my mum made the trip from Kal to Perth on The Prospector—the yellow-headed passenger-train that beats across the desert—she came to stay with me.

With a smile: *Your skin looks good.*

With concern: *You look like you've lost weight.*

With confusion: *Why are you wearing nail polish?*

With conviction: *Take it off, please.*

Under the fading sunlight that illuminated my living room, with my toes pressed into the linoleum floor, my heel had come up and down and up and down and up and down in inaudible movement as my knee mirrored the motion.

With a smile: *Thanks.*

With concern: *I haven't lost weight.*

With confusion: *Because I want to.*

With conviction: *No.*

Escaping the conversation, I moved over to the kitchen counter and made tea on the stove before my shoulder blades flattened into my chest and my chin followed. I fell into a white-painted wood chair with the ceramic teacup warm beneath my heavy fingernails.

When I went to a café by the black swan-dotted river my pearlescent nails brushed page to page of the novel I was reading and were as dazzling as ever in the soft glow of autumn. On my back, the spindly grass manoeuvred past the collar of my shirt and brushed itself against the nape of my neck and I paused, burnt out the day with my lids, and fell into a sleep. I was aroused by my friend Sim, who had seen me on the lawn while she was ordering a coffee.

With a smile: *What's with the nail polish?*

When Daisy and I decided to go to Kalgoorlie to visit our families I over-packed my duffel bag for the trip, but I didn't pack a single shade. The shoulder-to-shoulder buildings of the city gave way to a single road running out across a tree-dotted landscape. Empty fields waited to

be consumed by the burst of canola flowers. As we pressed my scrappy car out of the city and onto Great Eastern Highway, she noticed I had taken my nail polish off the night before.

With concern: *Did you take your nail polish off because we're going to Kal?*

When we got to Kalgoorlie, we stretched our bodies against a darkening sky, saw our families for dinner, made plans to go to the pub. When I was getting ready I found a crusted bottle of dark purple nail polish in my sister's bedroom and brushed the paint on quickly before I walked out the front door. I met Daisy at her house, and our friend Matt joined us. He beamed beneath his golden beard and embraced me. We cracked tinnies, lit cigarettes with the *skitch*, *skitch* of lighters and the crackling of burning paper. Luke examined me.

With confusion: *Why are you wearing nail polish?*

In the pub, I noticed the other patrons engaged with my body differently. Amongst the smudged lights, stale cigarettes, and splintery wood of the tables and chairs, I was foreign. Some of the FIFO guys I hadn't met before asked me where I was from. When I told them I was a local, they glanced at my nails, at my clothes, at my body.

When I went to breakfast with Dani the following morning, we ordered bacon and eggs and sausages and toast and beans and mushrooms and tomatoes and hash browns.

With conviction: *Did your sister paint your nails?*

When I barrelled out of Kalgoorlie the next day I watched my fingers grasping the steering wheel as the red dirt rolled past me and I felt the gravity of my fingertips.

A few hours after I got back into Perth, I retrieved my depleted bottle of nail-polish remover from under my bathroom sink. I breathed the acetone deeply, let it make me dizzy and drenched soft tissues in it. As I methodically wiped my nails, the tissue turned a storm-cloud-bruise purple.

I stopped wearing nail polish.

Again.

Two months later I tried again. I dug out my bottle of butter London and soaked my nails in pearls the night before work. On the train to the city the next morning, iced latte keep-cupped in hand, rose-coloured sunnies hanging from the rim of my t-shirt, I was convinced that the other passengers were jury members of my own personal trial. Their faces became contorted in my mind. I imagined their thoughts. The man with the spectacles peered through them, at me, voicing his disapproval: *you can be gay, but you don't have to be so gay*. The woman with nude lipstick pursed her lips: disapproval for how my nails matched my outfit, for how I had applied the polish, for the frayed edges of where I had chewed them. I walked from the train station to our office quickly. Walked quickly from our office to the train station at the end of the day, funnelled music loudly through my earphones and stared at my phone intently.

I stopped wearing nail polish again.

A month later I tried again. I picked a glossy black, wore black jeans and a black tee to boot. Convinced myself I looked punk, and that it is widely accepted that punk boys wear nail polish. As I drove from my house to the train station for work, a sweat gathered at my hairline and the other cars around me moved too quickly and too slowly all at once. As I thought about getting on the train and walking through Northbridge I turned up the music playing through the stereo so that I couldn't hear myself breathing because it was too deep, too sharp, too loud. I pulled into the gas station, drove past the pump in the middle and back onto the road in the opposite direction, towards the highway. After deciding to drive myself to work and pay the exorbitant parking fees in the city, I regained control of my breathing.

I stopped wearing nail polish again.

I started wearing nail polish again.

Another trip back home saw me in the unforgiving lights of Kmart. Kalgoorlie's Kmart looks like it was torn from 1990. That's probably why they were knocking it down and building a new one. There, I found a shade of hot pink nail polish in the beauty section and my childhood sung in my ears.

With a smile: I let it fall with a soft thud into my shopping basket.

With concern: I went and put it back.

With confusion: I circled back to the beauty section and let it fall into my shopping basket again.

With conviction: I purchased it.

Returning

When I was twenty-five, I returned to Kalgoorlie.

Mum messaged me to be careful that morning before I took the six hundred something kilometre drive across Great Eastern Highway and to message her every time I made a stop at a roadhouse. Bushfires had been ravaging the country for months, and the road between Kal and Espo had been closed and opened too many times to keep track of.

Small, brightly coloured posts littered the side of the highway and indicated the fire warning for the day. To the far left of the scale in green it read low to moderate. Blue for high. Yellow for very high. Orange for severe. Red for extreme. On the far right the word catastrophic was captured in thick, white letters against red and black horizontal lines. As I zipped past post after post, from Perth to Meckering to Southern Cross the warning was yellow.

I got into town and pulled into the red-bricked driveway of our family home. A real-estate sign was cable-tied to the fence. A sticker with “under offer” in red block letters was plastered to it.

This would be my last birthday in Kal and the sign had a sadness to it that spread to the palm trees in the front yard, to the money tree potted by the front door, and into every room of the house.

I spent the afternoon drinking coffee at the kitchen counter with mum and catching up on the latest family gossip. Uncle Rodd and Auntie Heidi had split recently, and the fallout kept escalating. In the latest act, Auntie Heidi had threatened to kill Uncle Rodd’s new girlfriend. Everything had gone to shit after they had decided to join the swinging community of their small town. My aunt was too paranoid and jealous for a venture like that, but she did it anyway.

“There was nothing to do in Paraburdoo,” Mum said, “if you think Kal’s bad imagine a place a fraction of the size.”

“Not nothing to do in Para,” I respond as I get up, “lots of sex. I bet Grindr goes off there.”

Buzzing from all the caffeine, I got ready to go to Paddy’s Ale House for my birthday dinner. Mum, Dad, Laine and I all put on jeans and t-shirts and clambered into Mum’s van.

We circled the pub on the corner of Hannans Street and Boulder Road. Mum and Dad argued about Dad’s driving—he’s too impatient, she claimed—while Laine and I chuckled from the backseat.

I grabbed beer from the bar and the boy behind the counter is Clay-or-Clint-or-something—I know him from high school and from his Grindr profile. He knows me but he pretends he doesn’t.

I eat steak topped with prawns and chips with creamy garlic sauce and throw back a few G&more beers while my parents tell us about when they first met and their years together.

“Your Dad bought me an iron for my 21st birthday and I was livid,” Mum tells us.

“You still are,” Dad smiles.

“Your father’s never been very romantic,” Mum says, “make sure you both find a boy who is.”

We get home and I have a ciggy in the backyard at the table that Blake built with Grandad and wonder how many more I’ll get to smoke here before June—when Mum and Dad pack it all up and move to Bunno.

A message notification pops up on my phone as I scroll through an assortment of photos of people I like and dislike on Instagram.

From Dani: I’m out front.

I push the butt of my cig into the pot plant on the table and walk to the garage door that leads to the driveway.

Dani is sitting in the interior of her car and smiles and waves at me when she sees me coming.

“Hey darling,” she says as I open the door and get buckled in.

“Hey Dan.”

“Thanks for coming to this thing with me.”

“Nah, no worries, not doing much else to celebrate my 25th. So is it at the Gold Bar, or?”

“No, it’s at my cousin’s house.”

“Oh, shit, it’s a party-party?”

“Yeah, it’s for Riley’s birthday.”

“God, alright, well I hope there’s no one there I know from high school or something.”

Dan and I walk into the backyard of her cousin’s house and I immediately recognise two of the eight people there from high school. Bethany Mapleson and Lukas Grubelich. Dan and I put our drinks in the fridge in the kitchen, say hello to her cousin and her boyfriend, Riley, who asks if I remember meeting him at a music festival a few years ago. My memory jogs and I tell him I do.

Dan and I pull up chairs outside and Abby emerges from the house with a stack of yellow and green cards.

“Alright everyone, we’re playing Cooked Aussies.”

“What’s that?” Dan asks.

“It’s like Kings Cup but its all, like, Aussie culture and stuff—you’ll love it.”

Abby looks at me then: “Oh, Jay, are you Australian?”

Dan jumps in immediately: “Oh my God Abby, you can’t ask people that.”

“What! He’s just so brown! I didn’t mean it like that, bloody hell!”

I laugh without conviction and tell her that I’m a cooked Aussie, and during the game I am invested in proving this and never falter. When we have to put on *Kath and Kim* accents, I nail it. When the rule card dictates that we have to end every sentence with the word “mate,” I

slam it on the end of everything I say with a smirk. When the category round is Australian slang, I use “fair suck of the sauce bottle” and a “few kangaroos loose in the top paddock.”

Dan and I get through the Fat Lamb, a fruity, syrupy cider-wine we bought, quickly and the game ends. As the night gets on, a few people leave, and then a few more. Someone who’s name I can’t remember offers me a shot of Jager, then another. He slaps me on the shoulder and tells me I took it like a champ.

Like most parties I attend—whether they’re in Kal or not—I get cornered for gay talk.

One girl asks me if I’m dating any boys and tells me about her girlfriend.

A boy corners me in the laundry and gives me the curiosity spiel.

Dan and I go to the spare room and lie down on the bed to talk about boys. Riley, Abby and the Jager-shot-boy join us and we talk about how hot Lukas is. Abby doesn’t agree. Jager-shot boy is lying in Dan’s lap and she mouths the word “help” at me.

I get outside and chat with Lukas for a long time. We were best friends at St Mary’s and for the first few years of John Paul College. I remember that we used to talk about porn a lot. I remember that we got caught watching porn in Mrs Brown’s S&E class. I don’t mention this to him. He talks about his work as a physio and his ex-girlfriend and I talk about my parents’ imminent move to Bunno and my boyfriend.

The next morning it feels like my head is titillating on my shoulders, like my stomach has been turned inside out.

From Dan: Fat Lamb never again. Drive safely x

Mum, Dad and Laine hug me goodbye after I pack my shit into my boxy Kia Rio.

I drive down our street, onto Gatacre drive, and out to Great Eastern Highway.

The sadness from the under-offer sign has permeated my car and I struggle to imagine a future when I stop returning to this place.

Pavement

I wonder if, when I'm 26, I will ever feel comfortable in my own body—in the infinity of myself, perceived through me and through others.

I wonder if I will ever be white enough—if my blue eyes and freckles will be enough against my brown skin and wide, flat nose.

I wonder if I will ever be Asian enough—if my inability to use chopsticks, my subpar math skills, my tongue that has never known the language of my grandparents, will not matter to others.

I wonder if I will ever be gay enough—if I will be the gay best friend of wine tours and shopping trips and boy-talk.

I wonder if I will ever be masculine enough—if I will suddenly enjoy football on the weekends and bourbon and dirt beneath my fingernails and motorbikes.

I wonder if I will ever be enough.

I wonder if they know that their contradictions are lessons.

I wonder if they know that I am deciding I am enough—by negotiating with myself, by wearing nail polish at the Gold Bar and smiling politely at their bland chicken and by asking questions when they assume who I am or what I will be or what I will do.

I wonder if they know that I am finding comfort in the splattering of freckles on my face, in the curve of my nose, in my curry-hungry mouth, in the pearl splattered paint of my nails, in the swing of my hips and in the heel-to-toe press of my feet against the pavement.