

CONVERSATIONS
I'VE NEVER HAD

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CAITLIN MALING



FREMANTLE PRESS

For Colin

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The path to the dam

Our dads laid the lime-
stones. We couldn't lift
or nudge them with our toes
because of what we might catch
under. Like you can't put your feet
down the bottom, we were
too soft for yabbies and you
never dive from the bank
because the logs move
overnight. We kept to the surface,
struck with water-boatmen –
sun-skitterish pinpricks of life –
scattering away from the ripples
our fingers made. The year
they laid the path, my father
lived elsewhere and I
put my head under
for the first time,
past the warm spot,
swam deep,
it was so dark
and so cold,
there was no
way up.

To Robert Thompson

When you and I were ten you killed the baby.
I learnt about it on the radio
on the way to a Power Rangers birthday party.
That night, I drank Coke with the sugar left in
and we girls ran little pink circles
around each other for hours, only coming together
to cut to pieces someone's older brother.

Walking my little sister to school
the day after seeing you on the television,
I practised hardening my hands, tried picturing
her fingers as prison bars I had to break. For years
we would walk past a half-demolished home
the yard littered with stones like frags.
And for many days trying to feel the weight
of that brick in my hand
I developed imaginary callouses.

Now you and I have grown up together,
but I'm still not at that point
where I can take your mind in mine,
feel that little hand you felt pulling away
and only tighten my grip in response.

Sundays

waiting
for my father
to be late home
from surfing
my mother
would cut the sky
to ribbons
she would take
her sewing outside
and lay it on
the glass table
and with the kitchen scissors
tear silver
through the fabric
I would lie
under the table
and with
each precise injury
the cloth
bled sunlight
all over me
she was always
one of the
wise women
from the end of the world
picking apart
all she
created
she would never
turn her head

to see
if he had
come through the door

Donnelly River, 13

On the diving board above the dank dam water
Luke's lifting up my bikini top again.
A Ceaușescu baby, he arrived fully formed,
since then he's never not been touching one of us
and I think his parents named him after a Disciple
so he would always be surrounded by hovering ghosts and histories.
On the banks below, all my parents' friends are on 2nd marriages,
3rd homes, and my divorced parents who are 4th and 5th generation
go back just as far as this country lets us.

I wish the water wasn't water.

I'm sick of falling and righting and warming and cooling.
On the edge of the board, fighting off Luke's need for closeness,
I'm just jumping and jumping and hoping for wooden splintering or
flight.

I try to name the things I see in time with jumping
and it's all paperbark-gum, snowy-gum, white-gum, red-gum, mallee.
Every family holiday in Australia might as well just be gum-gum-
gum-gum-gum-gum-gum. It doesn't matter that they have leaves
and sometimes flower, nothing falls,
the sky is always a eucalypt haze stretching,
making you think there's a horizon.

In the water, my sister has figured out how to lock her legs round my
middle,
hands round my neck and push me under.
No matter how I land she's on me.
Each time she circles her arms and expects me to float,
I dive to where the water's only brown, like you're inside amber.

Only I know to follow the air up
once it erupts past your teeth like a hatred
and fights the sediment to the surface.
If I jump high and straight enough,
slash into the water, toes and fingers flexed down,
maybe I can plant myself among the weeds
and let the bottom-dwellers refine me, skin-fleck by skin-fleck.

Still things can change.

Dad was shovelling sand to protect his new baby
while I watched from the porch hammock,
my copy of Mishima on my chest like a confession stone.
The sound of the shovel in the half-granite dirt making me look
 over my pages
as a snake with storm-cloud skin came through the house,
down the steps, and straight at Dad still shovelling.
I said nothing
yet Dad turned in time, struck the head clean off.
The park owner said it must've been the mother-snake;
now the babies would die without her to dig them out.
Dad's wife made us move cabins anyways.

Now, next to my towel, the boy from the next door cabin is calling
 out,
asking me when I'm coming down
and if I want to walk back along the track together.
He's a high-jumper at WAIS, which means he's hot,
a boy who would normally throw stuff at me on the bus,
but here I'm the only teenage girl,
so he's willing to pretend for both of us that I'm hot too.

Last night I practised mothering his younger brother.
I held him on my lap, stroked his hair
and let the high-jumper see how I could care.
I told the boy his autism was ok with me.
But he'd never been told he was different
and he leapt from the top bunk like he was being axed from himself.
He ran round the small cabin punching the walls,
screaming *I'm not special, I'm not.*
His parents said I should leave,
so the high-jumper and I lay on the dirt between cabins,
closing our eyes, lightly pressing on their soft sweating folds,
pretending to see the stars.
When I opened mine he was leaning over me,
his head engulfed by the corona on my retina,
his face moving in a way stars shouldn't,
closer and closer,
and I didn't want any of that or in that way,
and so I hit him with Mishima on the brow
and ran back to my cabin
to keep my stars on the roof above my bed.

I can see all the roads away from the campground from up here.
In the distance above the damn gums
is the jetstream of a plane
taking off or landing.

fourteen

we used to sit in the town square and dream drowning dreams
where life would swallow us whole and like jonah we'd be
transported fighting to somewhere foreign it was just you and me
at dusk and our laughter lingered like smoke and snaked its way
through the abandoned core of fremantle we'd journey
to the edges to beg for alcohol like children someplace foreign
do for food and when we got it take it back to our lair which lay
beneath the jungle gym where night would catch us alone and unawares
and the light of the bong was all that froze out our childhood fears
of the dark sometimes the homeless and hopeless would join us
on our journey and one a noongar took cigarettes from us
and in friendship offered a sniff and you who always dreamed deeper
than i took it and your eyes filled with the same silver as the paint
and you went up and away from me while i plagued by vertigo
watched you get higher and tried to tether the remains of you to me
so that come 1130 when your mother picked us up from where
we were meant to be at least half of you was there to greet her

Asphodel

When I think *we girls*,
I think *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Our summer,
when we caught the train back from playing pool
with the US sailors in Port
and I fell asleep on your lap
the sailor hat I'd earned wedged on.

Back home, you have that hat with all our treasures lined up,
like the kewpie dolls Roo would bring Olive
back from the canefields.

I remember being in Innisfail after Larry,
the thicket of palm leaves and sugar cane capturing the road
and on the TV that night a man crying, dead bananas at his feet:
me dad started this farm and now me sons won't be able to work it.

And I wish someone had taught me
to hide photographs in bottom drawers,
a lock of hair under my pillow. The three of us
kept ours in different colours – red, blonde and black –
us pretty girls all in a row.

Where I live now, bananas cost 70 cents a pound.
I have no way to explain how precious they are.

sixteen

in our magical years our
bad haircuts black lipstick years
we laughed the night to pieces
threaded youth through the streets
trailing smoke losing hours
we knew we were starblessed
using our cigarettes
to stitch our names
in the gaps between
cassiopeia and orion
we were selkies we
were sirens we were
the itch at the top
of a man's mouth he
tries to ignore
circes we drifted
our island down the tce
collecting pigs

Shark days

Dad hands me the knife as I tie two one-kilo weights to my waist like penances. He says *it's rough today, onshore, current'll take you out*; he says *I remember when you were young, you'd run at the ocean arms open. It's cold*, I say, *visibility's way down*. But I take the knife, strap it to my ankle over the neoprene, thread my flippers through my belt, and set out round the rocks for the edge.

At a break in sets we jump, swim straight at the horizon – the one they tugged the whale to last summer. It had beached and the town came to pour water, anoint it, until the smell set in and the boat was sent for.

Dad pushes past in a froth and pauses over a patch of reef 30 feet down. *I can free dive 60*, he says, *you should be able to manage 40*. Dad points at the abalone growing, points at the knife, hands me a net and heads down for a cave I can't quite make out.

I dive, just grab hold of the reef and let the current shake me. I can't pull the knife without letting go and I can't let go without surfacing, so I wait for Dad up top, facing my mask down so I don't see how far offshore we are. He rises, trailing his spear and the blood of a pink snapper shedding scales.

When they towed the whale out the sharks came in. The sea was a fisherman's moon, red and billowing, gone in the morning.

Dad sends me back down, until I break the knife trying to split the abalone from the reef and we take the long way back to the bay, though it's dusk and October is the end of shark migration.

Bloodlust

there is a bloodlust
to ordinary time
tick of clock or heart
that pulse
your neck and jawbone hide
how deep in the retina
thoughts dance out
to earthquakes on the tv
the breath hissing
like a pot on the boil
(thank god it wasn't here)
at each stop sign
each school crossing
the quickening of ligaments
over accelerator
the sinuous impulse
just to push

eighteen

After the man
hit the toilet door
with the cricket bat
(his girlfriend was inside),

because we had been smoking
since 9 pm and now the sun
was fracking all the anger
(suzie was mad her nails

were dirty and mags
no one had complimented
the cactus and I that everything
was turning yellow)

out of us and into the room
with all the other smoke,
I got in my car
(it was yellow),

to go home, or to work
and at the top of banksia hill
cut the power, “went stealth”
let the car roll itself.

Over the river,
a thousand kites rose
and all the way down the hill
I didn't see any tangle

or fall. They ate the sky
and were so beautiful,
green and red teeth,
so beautiful I didn't know.

Concessional: Cassandra to Helen

I admit
I always wanted,
I always wanted more.
I always wanted oceans,
men on oceans,
a shore of men,
teeming, little bows,
little arrows, firing up
from the shore at me
who was always wanted.

When I said I didn't,
didn't want, I meant
didn't want in the sense that
I didn't want this
not to come to pass,
to the extent that I tried
not to want, but
I always wanted.

Helen you were one
of them. They fired
you answered: you fired
and you were answered. Helen
you were always the shore
men so sought
and you sought to be
that shore so
fired upon. Helen you
have no walls.

I let you –
The temple is beautiful.
I let you –
The moon is adrift.
I left you –
Quiet the.
I let you –
Fall in stones.
I let you –
Bring the roof to pieces
of light.

Pine

i

And everyone knows how it ends.
With the body pine-sweet
and rotting in the plantation past Wellup,

from where, unwitting, we would bring needles
to our mantles those chainsaw Christmases,
when we took the ute out the highway
and I learnt to lean down on the blade
'cause it takes all my weight to cut,

my stepfather saying *they aren't natives*
anyways, they are only there to be taken down,
you can't thief something that shouldn't been
in the first place.

ii

Driving round the Donnelly we crest
among the jarrah to a massacre
of old-growth, pine saplings creeping
with a tender hunger,

air sugar-thick as blood or toffee and silent,

until Mum says it was Mario the sometimes magician
who dabbled in children's parties
that done it. He felt wrong and they'd walked out on him
at the Conti that night, his fingers curling round
a blonde. *His Eyes.* Mum says. *His Eyes. Didn't belong*

anywhere. But everyone knows a white man
who drives a white car and likes to stand too close.

iii

Nights, I find myself walking down Bayview.

Above the Council Chambers,
those same Norfolks gesture
like they must've to the others.

I climbed one once as a child,
wrapped my legs round the trunk
and let the bark bleed my palms
just to keep myself from leaping.

Now, my stilettos stabbed into the dirt
are all the roots I have.

I would be easy to fell
(if a car stopped) I'd go sweetly.