

Young Writers Award 2010 highly commended entry

Fill the Void

by Catherine Kiv

My bones were born in the city.

So were my wife's.

And so were my son's.

In the end it was a slow death.

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There's this place in the Northern Territory, where you wake up to the empty sky yearning above the long slow curve of the horizon, and where the clay is so dry and hard, the rain loses its power in between the droughts. There's this place where men walk with bent knees, from boulders in between their legs, or that type of oversized masculinity, often affecting one's natural gait. There's this place—the mesa country of former wildlife and that towering red rock, where animals come to die and carcasses lay in the sun. Yeah, it's hard to get a bit of philosophy here, about life and its associate, destiny, not with these men with their boots and their hats and their plaid shirts. You just wouldn't talk about the pain and the loss. Not here. Oh no, never here.

This is a place where men come to bleach their memories.

Or at least try.

Travelers call it Yuendumu. Locals call it the Big Y.

Occasionally, when I forget, I call it Home.

Born amongst the city junk and raised in the neatly manicured homes of suburbia, I moved to the country ten years ago—a transition people like to call a seachange. Although no actual crossing of seawaters ever occurred. At the time, before the first step onto that red earth, I was living in the city with a job as an accountant clone, chewing on numbers in a small four-by-two. With a grey table, a grey chair, a top draw, a tan corkboard and the repetitive strain of typing. Tap. Tap. Tap. A hundred thousand times a day. All under the Doctor's orders.

He said I needed to get back into rhythm, find some routine. And so, monotony was the prescribed drug. I would take it in the morning and let the repetition move my body. But after a while I started to think outside those conformed parallel lines. I started to think about *it*.

The revolver.

The bullet.

The cold metal against my taste buds.

Hair and blood and pieces of skull like shrapnel on grey walls.

But the top draw was full of post-its, not bullets.

I had a gun, but people called it a water pistol.

And the walls weren't grey, more a dirty blue.

To get me through those days, there was a tan corkboard, the one you gave me, so I wouldn't forget simple things, like milk and anniversaries. There was a piece of paper pinned onto it, the words: ***A cigarette saved your life. Live it Fuckhead.*** It was written in red. They were my words not yours, although, I had you in my mind when I wrote it. I think about it everyday, about the words and what happened and how things could have been different if I didn't do the things you hated.

All that thinking and all that nostalgia when all I needed was just to forget.

Change came in disguise of revelation, or a small one at least. People say the country is a good place to start over, to get over, over that, over it, over the past—you. So, yeah, the country was where I went.

And so, I left my desk job without telling anybody.

The day I arrived in the Big Y was like any other day at the Big Y, dry and hot. It seemed rain hadn't fallen for a number of years and wouldn't fall on my account. But, the dryness didn't bother me so much. In fact, I preferred it.

Sometimes, I can almost smell the rain in the air.

A year before my departure, I had lived with you and Billy on the outskirts of the city, amongst the low-hanging powerlines, family take-out shops and faded billboard signs—guaranteeing *Longer Lasting*—they were crookedly erected next to the traffic lights. And there were the abandoned shopping trolleys bruised with rust.

Everywhere I went in the city it was *full* of junk. Everywhere I went in the Big Y it was *full* of empty space. Sometimes, non-comparable things just remind me of you.

It's not always like this. The nostalgia. Mostly Sundays.

Sunday.

Bloody.

Sunday.

It's when all the quiet, and all the emptiness of the country is more than a cityman can handle. Besides, being by myself on a blank piece of land isn't enough to keep me busy. So, I would drive the three kilometres to pub: the red dust choking the Ute, A/C broken, right arm burning in the sun. All for a bit of human contact. But, these are countrymen: born in boots, die in boots, boots don't go far in between. There's no room for sensitivity or a monthly-like weakness. So, I tell the locals it's all for the cold beer.

Sometimes, I can almost smell the rain in the air.

We would walk in the sun to the bakery or the 7eleven for hot bread and lollies and the weekend newspaper, a packet of *it's going to kill you one-day* cigarettes. Each holding a hand we would lift our son over broken bottles, and at bus stops we ate hot bread and lollies, watching the traffic blur by. I would smoke my cigarette blowing it in the direction of the wind, hoping it wouldn't hit your gorgeous faces. 'Cause you always got angry when it did.

Now, I spend most of my weekdays digging holes in the land, and reburying them so I'll have something to do the next day. There's no rational reason; it keeps my mind skipping back into the past. But even when I'm done, red earth clinging onto my body, chest heaving from the work, I know hard labour isn't enough to help me forget.

Because, even when I'm in the shower cleaning the day's work off my body, I remember how you washed your undergarments while showering beneath the heavy water flow, and how we conversed through the white noise. Then you would sit on the tiles, shaving your legs while the water pulled away the soap. And through the grey and white static and echo of bathroom walls, we talked about the weekends and what we would do and how we would do them. When you were done, I told you to stop using my razor, although you never did (stop). Then Billy would come knocking on the door. Knock. Knock. Knock. Asking for another piggyback ride. 'C'mon dad, one more.'

I obliged. *Alright you little bugger.*

A part of me resented him for taking my time and your time and for sterilising the dreams we had as teenagers. I remember how I felt, the first time you told me you were expecting.

And now I'm mourning the son I never wanted.

They say it's not healthy on the soul to keep clinging onto the past like I've had. So, as years go by, I try not to dig through the night and give sleeping a go. Most nights I'm fine, but out here in the country where there are no neon lights and only the silver rays of the moon—I think of you.

Always.

I think of you.

You were sleeping on our bed and the moon shone through the fly screen and painted a grid, like tribal symbols on your skin. I marveled in the beauty as you awoke from your dream. 'Still not asleep?' You would ask.

I smiled.

You smiled.

I kissed your forehead, your eyelid, your lips.

. . .

My dreams dim like sparks starved of air. I wake up to emergent sunlight suspended like smoke in the room. I begin thinking of how we laid in our bed observing the outside world spin on its axis, the evolution of dusk turning into dawn. It's a morning ritual, starting the day with a good memory—make-believing that the next few hours between waking up and going to bed won't be so bad.

But, it's a Sunday today. I decide to go to the pub. I slowly get dressed, and wait outside for that feeling of dread to dissipate before I start driving. I get inside the Ute and put my key into ignition. It coughs and jerks, but ultimately the engine fails to start. I try one more time. The result is the same. I need a drink. I decide to walk the three kilometres to pub. It's a hot day. Sun licking at the shoulders. Red dusk swirling

at the feet. And I can feel it with it step, that heaviness in the shoulders. Even in the light, I walk like a man in the rain. I need a drink.

I make it to the pub and I'm feeling good. Maybe I can move on. I sit at the bar counter and order a cold beer. It's like winter on the lips.

The door swings opens.

A woman walks into the pub.

Her eyes are so sad and so green it's enough to break a drought.

I can smell the rain in the air.

We were at the bus stop eating our hot bread and lollies. I took out a cigarette and began smoking. The wind had an arbitrary flow and the smoke was everywhere. You turned to me and said, 'Go on, get.'

Billy held his nose in agreement.

Okay, okay. I'll move.

I walked a couple of metres down.

'I can still smell it,' you said.

This isn't fair. I'm your husband.

'Life isn't fair baby.' You smiled. 'Other side of the road.'

I love you too.

I crossed the street and you started cleaning Billy's lips with the extra napkins you kept in your purse. I looked away and shifted my head towards the sky.

You could smell the rain in the air.

The clouds were grey and so heavy it's as if the weight could have merged our bones to the ground. The sound of thunder was heard, ready for the final showdown.

Oh babe the rain.

'A storm?'

Yeah, sounds like it.

'We'll wait till the rain comes. Finish your cigarette first.'

Alright.

I had already finished my first, although, it wasn't something I would've told you. I lit a second cigarette and inhaled the smoke through my lips. Exhaling was like a guilty pleasure.

God, bloody, heaven.

You could hear the roar getting louder.

And the smell of petrol.

I turned around.

There was a red car.

There was a white car.

In the red car, there was a teen called Josh; he swerved into the white car's side, to put the other guy off his game. In the white car, there was a twenty-five-year-old called Howard. Howard lost control and crashed into where you and Billy were sitting.

It came in still-shots.

Your face.

Billy's face.

The white car.

You.

Billy's arm sticking out from underneath your body.

But the greatest memory I have you is *that* moment—the sandpaper sounds of breathing, new wind making leaves crackle like static, heavy clouds rushing from the very edge of maps, the rain, that blood, all that blood—filling your ears, slowly jogging down your neck and resting in between your caffeine breasts.

I held you and Billy in my arms.

And you smiled.

'Hey stranger.'

I moved your head closer to my chest.

'This isn't as bad as it seems,' you said.

I've already called the ambulance. They shouldn't take long. Just hold on.

'Is Billy okay?'

Yeah, yeah, yeah he is, he's just sleeping.

He was a ragdoll in my arms.

And yet, there was only a small scratch on his cheek.

'Tell me he's okay.'

He's good.

'Is he okay?'

Goddamit Sarah.

'Tell me.'

He's okay. He's okay.

'Good.'

I think I can hear the sirens.

'I'm tired.'

Hold on.

'I'm so tired.'

Just hold on. Goddamit. Please. Hold on.

'My feet feel cold.'

Your shoes had flown off against the speed and pressure of the white car.

I took off my jacket and wrapped it around your feet.

You started coughing blood.

Hold on. Please please. Hold on. I love you...I love you.

People started to gather.

Cars stopped.

Sirens grew louder.

Finally, there was that thousand-metre stare of yours.

I placed my hand on top of your eyes and glided them shut.

I kissed your forehead.

I kissed your eyelid.

I kissed your lips.

'Hey,' a voice says.

The woman who walked into the bar sits next to me and I can tell there is something in her eyes that remind me of you. It must be all that green growing in her eyes.

For a moment, I want to forget and move on.

Maybe I'll learn her name and she'll learn mine. Maybe, we will sleep in each other beds and after some years, breathing the same space, we'll start to move in patterns, like airplanes on a tarmac. Maybe, at breakfast we'll pass the things we need without words, an order to follow: right step, left step, bowls in top cupboard, cereal in pantry, milk shelved on the refrigerator door. Peck on lips...

'Do you want me to buy you a drink?' She asks.

This new woman moves in close. Close enough to kiss.

I quickly drink the remainder of what is left in my glass and place it onto the table. I don't say anything and just stare at that empty glass.

'You're a real talker.'

I scratch my nose.

'What's your name?'

I shrug.

'Are you okay?'

I stare at the glass, trying to forget.

'Hey.'

Can you smell the rain?

'Sorry?'

The rain. Can you smell it?

'It hasn't rained in decades.'

Sometimes, I can smell it.

'Yeah, the drought can do that to you.'

I look at her boots. It's as far as I am willing to go.

'Have a drink.'

Yeah. No...I have to get back to my wife.

'So you're married?'

Yes.

'Your wife won't mind you having another drink.'

Maybe.

'I'll buy you a drink.'

Thanks.

'Two beers thanks,' she says to the barman.

She turns to me. 'I like a man who is committed.'

I rim the top of my empty glass.

'What's her name?'

That's private.

She doesn't say anything.

The barman gives us the beers.

I drink. She drinks.

'Okay. I don't need to know her name. Do I at least get to know yours?'

Steve.

She smiles. 'I'm Angela.'

Hi Angela.

'Nice to meet you Steve.'

I play with the ring on my finger. The woman lights a cigarette.

Oh.

'What?'

You smoke.

'Yeah. You don't?'

No. I do.

'Do you want one?'

No. I've had my one for the day.

'You limit yourself to only one? That's discipline.'

Long story.

'I have time.'

I finish my drink.

'Do you want another one?'

It's the wrong kind of place to be thinking of you. But sometimes, I let myself forget.