

## Young Writers Award - 1998 winner

### The contemplators by Christopher John Boulton

We were warm bodies in High School, but grew colder by degrees. This is something that I have just heard, something Jeremy has just said, not looking at any of us, corduroy pockets sucking on his hands, hair in his eyes, the sun licking the space at his shoulder, and it is something that keeps repeating itself inside my head, a mechanism now, the words continuous and quiet and blue, something that I can do nothing but think about right now, something that is all that seems to matter for a while. Not the fact that it is a shockingly nice and typical burning Queensland day, or the way the sky, filled with white, bulbous cloud war-machines, seems to slide over our heads, or the fact that it is near Christmas, late in November, and that it's hot and that, accordingly, the thumbnail beaches that we can see from here, are thronging with tourists, sweating their foreign, lower-state salts into our sands, or the fact that we are all here, the four of us, way up here, sitting and standing, atop the roof of a nine-storey apartment building, waiting for one of us to die.

Chung is somewhere behind me, sitting cross-legged on the concrete, maybe whispering to himself again. He has taken his shirt off and sits with his back to the sun, some weird oriental machine, sucking in the light and warmth that is shed upon him in layer upon layer of solar skin, snatching it from the shelves of wind that slide through the loops he's made of his arms and thighs and across his taut, pale abdomen. He thinks he's meditating but Chung wouldn't know meditation if Buddha was next to him, moving his hips so that his genitals flopped around. Chung just likes the sound of reincarnation. That's what Penny says. She says that she went through a phase like that, during which she became convinced that she could come back as a butterfly if she killed herself. It was a very feeble, misled interpretation of Zen Buddhism, she told me, and butterflies die after something like three days anyway.

Thinking about these things, death and butterflies, I look up at Penny, my head moving just slightly, and she's moving toward me, smiling a little, but not because she wants to. I turn to face the sun, which blinds me despite the dark sunglasses that I'm wearing (but I don't look away), and she presses her face close to mine, her jaw rested on my shoulder, and she says, "What floor is this?" and though I'm pretty sure that I have already answered this question, that Penny has already asked me this question, three times already, I say it again anyway.

"Ninth," I tell her.

"Oh," she says and moves away and I don't turn to watch her but just stand here, feeling my skin burn in the sunlight, listening to the sounds of the tourists below us tumble upward through the air like distant, hollow insects and it is after a while of this that I move a little closer to the edge.

Maybe two weeks ago I had been walking along the rocks, on the beach, with Jasmine, who is my girlfriend, and she had been collecting a lot of shells, shells that she said reminded her of me, that she thought suited me, and I was holding them all for her in cool, sand-encrusted fingers and when we reached the boardwalk, actually strolling, we bumped into Penny, who stopped to talk, and then walk, with us.

Before long - almost immediately, in fact - we were talking about Amie, who was this girl that we knew from school who had attempted to kill herself something like two nights before, but who had miserably failed. "The rope broke," Penny said and I believed both this and what Penny said then, about how Amie was a fool if she had tried to hang herself anyway because hanging, she said, 'is bogus,' 'out,' that 'no one hangs themselves anymore.'

I had nodded, made mental notes of these things, looked at Jazz, who was nearer to the waves, still collecting, hearing none of this.

The three of us ended up back at the rocks. Penny and I stood on this big slab of a sandstone boulder, leaning against another in the shadow of the holiday apartment building that loomed upon higher ground, above us. Jazz was back amongst the rockpools, crouching, hooking her long, clean hair around her ear with an expert finger, looking up occasionally to smile, and Penny and I watched her and smiled back when we were required to and that was when I told Penny that I was pretty sure that I was going to do it soon.

"I'm pretty sure I'm going to do it soon," I said to her.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

And after a while of verbal silence, our faces being licked by the sound of the waves, touched in turn by the tides of our breathing, Penny asked me, "What about her, though?" and she didn't point or say her name but she was talking about Jasmine.

"But that doesn't matter anymore," I told her. "It's not even about that anymore," and not even I knew what I meant by this.

Penny said, "Oh," and kept breathing and we both smiled when Jazz looked up at us and I think that it was probably the next day that we heard that Amie had killed herself, that Amie had done this really bad job of slashing her wrists, actually hacking at them, but that Amie had died despite this. I had gotten pretty stoned and had, I think, called Penny and told her that I was pretty sure I was going to do it soon. But she was way ahead of me.

Jeremy finally moves away from the edge, steps into the crude triangle that we have unwittingly described upon the rooftop of this building, and tells us that he's not sure whether he's ready or not, that he's not sure if he can do it today.

"I'm not sure if I can do it today," he says. "I'm not sure whether I'm ready or not." He takes a deep breath and blinks at me and I don't hear him exhale.

Penny nods and Chung shifts in his place but keeps pretending to meditate and I don't do anything. Jeremy keeps his hands in his pockets and for some reason I get the impression that Jeremy's body is attempting to digest itself. I don't know why this is.

Jeremy asks us eventually 'about the funeral,' kind of worriedly, and Penny smiles and Chung keeps pretending to do his zen shit and I don't do anything.

Jade was this girl that we knew from school who shot herself in the side of the head with her grandfather's service revolver but who only managed to do this after much deliberation and procrastination and who, following this, was the subject of a bad funeral. She had originally intended to 'do the deed' on the Monday, but had not because she had watched 'Home and away,' instead, and then a Bond movie on Tuesday, and had not done it on Wednesday because she 'couldn't have been bothered' and had gone to bed early.

And we all went to the funeral on Friday and even scored a day off school for it, which was cool, but the service itself was an utter joke. That's what Penny had called it. There were lots of people in attendance but Jade actually only knew a fraction of them and the rest were just people who wanted to go to a funeral.

We didn't even get into the parlour because there were too many people in there already and this was very disappointing. But it was a nice, sunny day and the air was warm outside, where we were forced to stand, kind of clustered beneath this old, grey loudspeaker which hung like the mouth of an angry old man from the eaves of the funeral parlour and which broadcast the whole (I don't want to say it but will) 'production' in colourless, static-ey tones. |

The pastor told a story about a caterpillar. Jade's parents lied about her a lot. Jade's mother's hairdresser actually turned up. They played music that Jade didn't even like. She had wanted Tori Amos, but they had played Eric Clapton. Which sucked.

This was a bad funeral and we all vowed then that we would not let the same thing happen to each other, after we each bit it, because if it happened to us, it would also suck.

It's later now, cooler, and the wind coils emptily in one ear as I cross the rooftop, cruising over to Penny, who's stretched out on the concrete, basking, her eyes and expression hidden behind the sleek, purple-framed sunglasses that she's wearing. I sit down next to her, crossing my legs, and I'm squinting, despite my glasses, which I remove and finger.

"Maybe I'll do it today," I suggest to her.

Her head snaps (it's subtle, but quick) toward me. A pause. Then: "Yeah?"

"I don't know."

Chung starts sneezing behind me and I wait until he's done until I say, "What do you think?"

Penny bares her teeth slowly and sucks air in between them, hissing, and this is a gesture of something but I don't know what. "I don't know," she moans, dragging out the last syllable until it's a whisper.

"Come on. Tell me. I want your opinion."

"I'm not going to give you my opinion."

"Yes you are. Do it."

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Please?"

Penny licks her lips, bares her teeth again, doesn't hiss. "No," she says, slowly and clearly.

Nothing happens for a while.

"I like your hair," I tell her finally, because she recently coloured it this cool, blueberry colour and it reminds me of this girl I've seen on TV.

"Thanks," she says, and smiles and I move back nearer to the edge, but not close.

The sky changes colour a little, belching silently into autumn, and Jeremy asks if anyone remembers Clinton.

Clinton was the first one to do it. Clinton was this little, dark-eyed, weedy guy that no one really liked and who put a shotgun into his mouth and 'blew his brains out' - which was how Penny had described it - all over the wall of his father's garage one Wednesday afternoon, after school. He'd been eating a bowl of breakfast cereal but hadn't finished it and it had been left sitting on the bench, between his father's toolbox and his corpse, and there was blood in it, on the spoon that was jutting out, and it was Penny who told me all of these things also. The rest of it I knew. I knew about the rumours that flitted through the school and beyond its boundaries, afterwards, and I knew about the funeral that was held for him, about the huge attendance, and the candlelight vigil that was held afterwards. It was big.

And he was praised for weeks afterwards. The people at school, people who had hated Clinton, who had called him a faggot and a freak, they started to talk about him in kind, gentle murmurs, and I took note of these things.

(I also took note of the fact that, despite everything, Clinton died a geek. He had lived a geek, and died one too. There was nothing cool about the way he had killed himself. He didn't even leave a letter.)

I took note of these things.

Jeremy starts to get bored or something, maybe nervous, I don't know, and he starts to flick at Chung's ears with his fingers, slapping at the back of his head, just to bug him, perhaps assuage his own restlessness. And Chung takes it for a while, tries to be a bit zen about the whole thing, but eventually begins to swat at Jeremy's hands, quickly and repeatedly, like he's slapping at parasites, and tells him that if he doesn't stop it he'll push Jeremy off the building himself and then he won't have to jump, will he?

I have already written my note, and re-drafted it once. Penny helped me do it. She came over to my house one Saturday morning and we watched music videos together and I showed her this really violent and cool one that had been banned in America that I had on tape and she thought that it was cool and we even mentioned it in the note.

The finished product was a great success. It was very poetic and eloquent and it made me sound very artistic and cool and we even included a joke about babies and coathangers which I had seen on TV a couple of nights before.

Penny, sudden and vicious, becomes impatient, a spontaneous emotional insurgence, blooming out, like rage bleeding rapidly from the slim centre of her anatomy and into her coiled outer meats, and she begins to hiss questions at Jeremy, asks him, spitting, if he's going to do it or not, for Christ's sake, or can we all just go home and forget it?

Jeremy says nothing, just looks up at Penny meekly, from his place, huddled nervously at her feet, and they stare at each other like this for maybe two minutes, not moving, and I watch them, and so does Chung, until Jeremy finally turns down his eyes, not saying anything, and until Penny walks away, and lights a cigarette.

I still haven't decided exactly how I'm going to do it. I'm not sure yet. Penny thinks I should slash my wrists, but that sounds painful and I don't want to do it like that, despite the copious amounts of blood. Originally, I had intended to leap from the top of a holiday apartment building, but Jeremy has screwed that up for me now.

Unconsciousness, I'm thinking now.

Carbon Monoxide, I'm thinking now.

I walk over to Penny, who has moved nearer to the edge and is watching the people down there, on the ground, and I look closely at her slim bicep and want to touch it very badly for some reason, but I keep my hands at my sides, bunching into fists. I tell her that it's getting late and that I think I'm going to leave soon, go home, and does she want to get stoned on the way? She asks about Jeremy and Chung and I tell her that they can stay if they want to, but that I think Jeremy's a pussy and that I don't think he will do it today. She nods and her hands keep moving and I can actually hear the tiny, black sounds that she makes when she picks at the long, dark, hard scabs that run along the white flesh of her wrists.

(And I'm not going to do it today, either.)