

Young Writers Award - 2000 runner up

St Nick by Luise Hoffmann

It starts when it's humid in Arizona and I see all their skin for the first time. White, underexposed skin is revealed to the sun in hastily cut-off denims and cheap tourist T-shirts and I feel relief and a strange elation to be in territory I understand again. The rawness of a sun-speckled arm, the arrow of a runner's calf - these are things which hold meaning for me. There is so much language in the toss of a well-accessorised scarf that excludes a Queenslander.

So it starts when the instruments are warm and the sound is fat and heavy, with a languidness that's almost a beer at sunset. Vulnerable naked feet tap in unison Birkenstocks and sinews play across pale forearms that look blankly offended to be in such exposing sunlight. The heat and the music leave me liquidy inside and I even feel the warmth spread to include my bandmates, from the shiny Ghanaian drummer to the overbearing American conductor. The enormity of my predicament thankfully recedes when I can pretend I'm at home as successfully as this.

But then again, most people would probably find themselves overwhelmed, had they been organised by an idealistic multinational to tour the land-of-the-free with a bunch of stereotyped musicians (like Ghanaian drummers and overbearing American conductors) to exemplify a message of global harmony and tolerance. Especially when they, like me, suspect it might be a little more complicated than that. Like me, they might have witnessed inconsistencies like fat musicians being squeezed out of glossy publicity shots and noticed Americans are required to do all the talking in interviews, because other accents are "too hard to understand." They too might be incensed that the American conductor is earning enough to keep a small third world country in instrumental lessons for about 20 years.

But I concede the musicians are good, hand-picked in a way that only a multinational conglomerate can afford, and if you can ignore what it's supposedly saying for long enough, the music is incredible. Today, while the sun makes my hair shiny and warm and my bass sticks to my bare midriff with sweat, the music just oozes from my hands. It preoccupies me. I release myself from the examination of my new, odd world.

And I watch Nick. Nick I watch relentlessly, but he doesn't notice because he's used to being watched. Nick has a halo of blonde curls and plays a golden saxophone like he's possessed. Already, only three weeks into our tour, we know he's special and he can pull us in the wake of his shiny haze like a musical Pied Piper. Sometimes, isolated and homesick, I watch him and think, if I am a song, then he is the music. Only, he doesn't know it yet.

Sometimes, I smile to myself and think, I'm the only female in a stage band of 26. There's a fair chance he'll find out.

The heat and my new understanding of my surroundings makes me reckless and confident, so that night I eschew the solidarity of my southern hemisphere friends to seek out North American Nick at dinner. He's outside, on a piece of dry Arizona earth, staring at the sky, and he smiles when he sees me. "You're glowing," he says, and I can't hear his accent. "That was weather from your homeland today."

I radiate my satisfaction.

He laughs. "I'm glad you like it - it's there for you. I thought you needed it."

Maybe it's my complete lack of personal context that makes me accepting, but I'm not surprised when he tells me that he controls the weather. He tells me that he doesn't have a real father, that he was one of the first IVF babies to be born in America, that maybe father is some famous musician. He laughs and tells me that he's called Nick because he was born on Christmas Day and the other alternative for coincidentally-timed immaculate conceptions lacked subtlety.

He tells me that I'll know if he's happy or sad when I look outside in the morning and see fingers of rain on the window pane, or feel the light pressure of the sun on my bare shoulders.

I laugh and tell him that in my country he couldn't be moody because we expect sunshine all the time. His smile says "If I were there with you, it would always be sunny." It's easier than I ever imagined. He takes my hand as we lie back on the ground and the stars drip from the sky and fall on the grass around us like dew.

That night, our music twinkles and I follow Nick wherever his golden saxophone is leading him. I ignore our scores, I ignore our American conductor, and soon everyone else does too. They're good musicians, and they can see our new system just flows. The audience cheers and stamps, while our American conductor waves his arms impotently from his raised podium and fumes, his enormous wage evidently unable to guarantee his indispensability.

After that, even though it's mid-February, the weather is always good and the only dark cloud on the horizon is our American conductor's mood. Having realized his superfluousness to our musical output, he dedicates himself to promoting the worth of our "cause" to any media vehicle that will listen, and vainly waving his arms at us on a nightly basis as Nick and I gradually restructure our performance. Crowds follow us from show to show, and as the music thaws them, they flow and cohere and meet and talk and see light and magic in each other's eyes and fall in love, and we do more for global harmony than we ever think possible. And my body is always singing, because if I am a melody, then Nick is my instrument and I have found my voice.

Crowds start to follow Nick, and even me, because of our togetherness. It seems expected that he will talk, and sometimes he does, while our American conductor smiles grimly, and tries to make himself look taller. Everyone is perpetually smiling and easy-going and brown in our relentless sunshine, while our American conductor sweats desperately in the corporate suits that justify his worth.

Problems only begin when the media start requesting Nick for interviews. I prime him with clichés: it takes a whole village to make a child through ignorance stupidity and hate man slowly destroys himself what's happening to you is happening to me; but other words spew forth from his golden haze instead. When they analogise our band with a global village, he points out that they've just ejected someone with AIDS. They ask about our Bangladesh band member, and he talks about the hypocrisy of tokenism. When they offer him warm fuzzy directives about global harmony, and he launches into a patient tirade about the monolithic power of the IMF and the World Bank. When they ask about our corporate support, he tells them how much our conductor gets paid, and mentions words like "antiglobalism", "multiclass", "corporate dominions", long before they're part of a common vernacular. The American conductor tires of fuming impotently, and makes numerous red-faced phone calls on his mobile phone. I take Nick's hand and it feels like water slipping warmly through my fingers.

It dawns on me that our days are numbered. I weep at him and his stupidity, and it rains solidly for two days. On the third day there is sunshine for a morning until, at lunchtime, he is formally ejected from our group. Two days later, our location, Portland Oregon, is flooded. He disappears.

I stay with the group for some misconceived notion that I can carry on where he left off. My song has lost its voice, though, and I find myself donning corporate logos and murmuring platitudes without even an internal protest. Illogical weather movements plague us, and they invent a scientific basis for this and give it a name: el nino. Two and a half months later, I am ejected when I can no longer hide my pregnancy.

At home, I go back to university and occasionally find Nick, or at least a mention of him, floating just out of my reach on a worldwideweb that I don't understand. Nick, however, has grabbed this nebulous, limitless sea with both hands, exerting the same control over the undefinable power of the internet as he did with music.

According to isolated reports that float to me across this strange medium, he Robin Hoods the internet now, absolving third world debts and rescuing charities. So again, he flows, and while once the gravity of my bass parts supported his soaring, now the denseness of my technical ineptitude renders me utterly earthbound. I laugh and think about sending him my bank account number.

He's caught and jailed in early 1998, and the strange weather patterns that follow become known as la nina. I'm quietly relieved to be on the other side of the world from his distress, having recovered the equilibrium of my culture in leafy Brisbane where stabilising backyard cricket is always an option, and music is a solo occupation and merely a crutch for boredom. When I see the demonstrations in Seattle and then in Washington, I know he's there, but the point escapes me. I have a new song now. She is little 4-year-old Gabriella and her existence is a constant melodious hum. I admire her golden curls and elfin, pointed face as she blinks her water into lemonade, and I think vaguely, I'll have to remind her not to do that at school.

She pulled one out and twisted it in her fingers as she tried to find the right end.

"Don't," said Katherine. "You'll get cancer."

Fiona put the cigarette in her mouth. She held it in the middle, Noela noticed, like a straw, not at the side of her mouth like you should.

"You have to light them," said Noela.

"So. I can still smoke them like this."

Fiona gave them all one, except for Katherine who pushed her away. Noela put hers in her mouth and sucked it. No smoke came from the end. After a while there was a bitter taste and it started to go soggy. They spat the cigarettes into the water. Fiona tipped the whole packet in and they bobbed around in a clump near the bank, a little flotilla drifting out to sea.

Soon the others got bored and pushed the raft back out into the water. Noela sat down on the bank, a safe distance from the motorbike. The headlight looked a big eye. She looked down at her arms and legs, the mosquito bites and waterlogged bandaids. The dam was so thick and brown with clay that the particles clung to your body and showed up all the little hairs you couldn't usually see. Noela rubbed at them, and there was her skin, bald and back to normal again.

The water on the surface of the dam seemed calm and warm, but there were things underneath that were strange and terrifying, and when you lost your way on the bottom you could feel them choking your lungs. Underneath everything ordinary there was something terrible. Even her own body was like that. She liked it the way it was now, flat and skinny; but she knew that even though she owned it she could not control it. She could not stop it from changing. Her mum got her a book about it and left it on the end of Noela's bed, but Noela couldn't read it. She'd peek at a page very quickly and slam it shut before she had time to remember what she'd read. They were adults' secrets, the things in that book, and when she thought about them they made her feel so sad she could hardly move.

The others had paddled out into the deep part and were jumping off again. Noela's brother stood on the edge of the raft, tensed to jump.

"Watch me," he called to her.

"I am watching," she said.

She trailed her hand through the water, catching strings of mucus-slippery toad eggs. If you looked closely you could see baby tadpoles shifting and spinning in little black balls. Noela pulled the eggs out of the water and draped them in the dirt on the bank. When the sun got to them the slippery bit would dry in flaky silver trails. It looked like snot. That made her feel sad too, seeing the tadpoles all dead and dried up. She always promised herself she wouldn't do it again, but every time they came back to the dam she still did.

Out on the raft they had stopped jumping. There was a dead smell in the air. Noela hadn't noticed it before, but the wind had got up and they had to bunch their nostrils against it. It was coming from behind the opposite bank, where the dam wall rose then fell away into the gully below.

The smell of death, like the smell of old cars, was familiar to them, especially after rain. Animals were crushed in knot holes, and baby birds blew out of nests. Out in the bush they would find a bundle of claws and rotting fur, or smashed eggshells, but mostly they could find only the smell, and sometimes, months later, a fragment of bleached bone.

"Someone should go and see what it is," said Katherine.

Noela's brother got off the raft. Noela watched his blue togs disappear over the crest of the bank. After a while she got up and swam back to the raft. The motorbike was making her uneasy.

Her brother came back from looking and slid into the water like a stick. When he got to the raft he sat right next to her and tried to huddle under her armpit.

"What is it?" said Katherine.

"Nothing." He had a slug of snot glistening at one nostril.

"Tell us. You have to."

"Shut up," he said, angry now. "It's just nothing."

Noela knew what had to be done. He was her brother, so she had to be the one. She grabbed his arm and twisted the flesh.

"I'll give you a Chinese burn." She twisted harder.

"Fuck off." She was surprised to hear his voice waver. He wasn't just whingeing any more, but really crying. Noela hadn't expected this. She let go of his arm. Katherine and Fiona were silent, staring at him. The sun was hot on their faces.

"I wasn't trying to really hurt you," said Noela. She put her arm around him and pulled him in to her chest, the way she had when he was little.

"Fuck off," he said. He pushed her arm away.

"One of us will have to go," said Katherine.

Fiona went to look. Noela's brother was still crying next to her, little sucking breaths that he couldn't stop. Sometimes she hated him, then other times she thought she loved him more than anyone, even her mum and dad. But she always ended up doing something to hurt him.

"There's a dead man down there," said Fiona, standing on the crest. They never knew when to believe her. There's buried treasure here, she'd said once, I saw it shining, and they'd spent hours digging up the road to find a bit of old beer bottle. Sometimes she said things that could never have been true. There's a turtle down our plughole that talks to me. Just pretending.

"He's got ants coming out of his head."

Katherine slid off the raft. Her ripples clapped against the bank. Noela shut her eyes and willed them to stop.

"Don't," said Noela's brother, but Katherine was already gone. It didn't seem safe without her. She hit them sometimes, bossed them around, but they had an unspoken convention that nothing could go wrong when she was around. The bush only seemed empty when she wasn't there.

Noela and her brother got into the water and followed her up the bank. The smell was stronger as they neared the top. Katherine picked up a stick. She held it like a sword and whipped it against the ground. Pieces of rock bounced down the slope and into the water.

It seemed to Noela that the noise of the cicadas all around them was getting louder and louder. She wanted to go home, wrap herself in her towel and watch the cartoons. They'd be starting soon and if she didn't get back she'd miss them.

"I don't want to do this any more," she said. "It's stupid."

"You have to," said Katherine. She started walking again. "Follow me. If anything happens I'll give a signal."

She was whispering, going into an American accent the way she did in games. They followed her. At the top of the crest they looked down, and there was the dead man. He was lying face down at the bottom of the slope, just where the kangaroo grass started. There wasn't much blood, Noela thought. She had expected it to be gory, the ground stained red and intestines spread out like with the sheep she'd once seen butchered. But there was only a dark dried gash on the side of his head, and a line of brown ants going into one ear.

"Told you," said Fiona.

The man was wearing jeans and a red flannelette shirt, with his hair in ponytail. He was younger than Noela had expected. He might have been one of high school kids who hung around in the town, but she didn't recognise him.

Nobody wanted to cry, not even Noela's brother, who had stopped sniffing. If they cried the man might get them. A car went past up on the road.

"Somebody should throw a rock at him," said Noela.

Fiona sifted through the dirt and found one. She threw it down the slope but it missed and landed in the grass. Then they all tried, scooping up handfuls of gravel and hurling them at the man. They never knew whose rock it was that hit him, but it struck his back with a noise like a drum and rolled off into the dust.

It was the rock that finally made them panic. Dead men were so alien to them they hardly knew what to think, but they were intimately familiar with stone and the way it stung your flesh. It was their weapon in petty disputes. They were terrified most not by the fact that he was dead but by the way he could lie there and not be hurt by the rock on his back.

They slid down the bank, wading through the mud around the shore. When they reached the road they started running. When Noela was older she would wake up from this moment in her dreams and wonder why they hadn't told. They kept the dead man a secret, and left him there to gather more insects until the police found him two days later.

It might, she thought, have been the strange sense of guilt they felt. Until they found him his death was unknown to the world beyond the ants, and it was as if in discovering him they had brought it into existence. They had thrown rocks at him and tasted the bitterness of his cigarettes. Or it could have been that telling would remove him from their world of imaginary horrors and monsters and make them admit he was real. In the end Noela thought it was just because she didn't know how to tell anyone. She talked to her mum about school and her cat and what was for tea, not about blood and dead men. She didn't have the right words. Explaining it would have been exhausting.

Noela saw the trees blur past them as she ran. She had a cramp in her side. She knew now what had happened at the bottom of the dam. She really had drowned, and the girl who had swum to the surface was a new, different girl. The others must have drowned with her because they were all different too now. They had seen the Motorbike Man.

They slowed down when they reached Noela's driveway. Her mother had put glasses of cordial on the verandah table for them. The television was on and Noela could hear chirpy mouse voices singing. Her mother smiled at them.

"So," she said, "Did you have a nice time?"

"Yes thank you," said Noela, breathless.

They all stared at the ground.