

David Coventry – Open Division, 3rd Place

Apologies, Please

Some days we spoke in signs, the two of us, getting by on nods and tantalising tilts of the head. Some days we said hardly much at all and the way we stared at the spaces in the apartment, this could be interpreted as an argument of some kind, silent and searching out the breaches in our trust. But mostly we had our rituals, food here, music and the repetitive cycles of commentary, how they confirmed the small things about us we enjoyed. And when she was up to it we'd watch films in her room and afterwards we'd discuss what we'd seen. The two of us looking up at the TV I had moved in there some months earlier and placed in front of a bookshelf. And on this Saturday we watched a flick she'd been wanting to see for a years. It was a brutal, monochrome affair. Michael Haneke's vision of the Austrian Apocalypse. *The Seventh Continent*. A couple poisoning their compliant daughter, then themselves. Death and pills and gloom as Jennifer Rush sang live on the TV about being some fellow's lady. Jennifer Rush, Rush or perhaps Laura Branigan singing 'The Power of Love' on the screen positioned in the couple's lounge inside our television. I turned the light on and went to the bathroom once the film had finished, I peed and looked in the mirror. My glasses were filthy with nervous finger prints. On my return we argued briefly about the song.

"Rush," Merren said.

"Rush? You sure."

"Laura Branigan was slightly thicker set, and prettier."

"Is that true?"

She nodded.

"OK."

She sat so her knees rested against her chest. She'd earlier rolled up the sleeves of her T-shirt to reveal her shoulders and now looked like a young version of herself, one who'd escaped a photo frame and wound up here amongst the scatter of pillows and sheets.

"Who was first?" she asked. "Frankie Goes to Hollywood, or Jennifer Rush. Because I'm pretty sure Rush wrote her version. Her and Branigan's version."

"Frankie."

"OK. And then of course there's Huey Lewis and the—"

"Yeah," I said over the top of her. "When was Huey's?"

"I don't know. We're talking all in the space of a few months."

"Three songs."

"Three songs – bang, bang, bang – with the same title," she said. "Bang, bang, bang." She tapped the screen of her mobile in time to her repeated syllables. It lit up, a picture of this room full of family and all her books and pictures and all. Then went dark.

"Frankie was first," I said. "I sense it in my Liverpudlian bones."

"You're from Wellington," she said. "You don't have Liverpudlian anything."

We went quiet. I stood up for a moment and went to her side of the bed. I checked the plastic meds box with the daily schedule. I gave it a playful shake and she told me to stop fooling around and come back and lie down. Merren nestled in on me, the loose fit of us breathing in time with one another. Outside, cars made their sounds, busying the city echo. And buses too, the great escape of sound and air. Later, once the film had stopped moving around inside our heads, she said she felt sick. *Physically sick*, she said.

"Urgh, right there." She pointed at her gut. Then she pointed at her head like both her stomach and cranium housed the same aching elements that were causing complaint.

"You going to be okay?"

She told me it was the movie and we discussed it. Scene, palette, pills, pain. We both felt a degree of awe and illness.

“We should watch the film every week until we’re immune,” I said.

“Immune to what?”

I didn’t have an answer.

“To Michael Haneke?” she asked. “I don’t want to be immune to Haneke. I just never want to hear that song again. I’ll watch the movie again right now, but only if you hit mute during ‘The Power of Love’.”

“Or swap it out for Frankie’s. Can that be done?”

She nodded then shook her head, trying to loosen the vision of Jennifer Rush in leather on the TV in the couple’s room. The version of her on stage with rock ‘n’ rollers, each looking hard like they were born for something less ferociously melancholy. “That’s not going to work. I don’t want to be immune to anything. I think if you make yourself immune – I don’t know. I’m scared the whatever that started everything would stay around for good. The: I don’t know what it is. The *whatever* whatever.”

We ate dinner in the lounge. Tidied, cleared the dishes and made the room good. I read and she picked up a printout of her work and sorted the papers, holding them loosely and bouncing them on the coffee table. She didn’t read, just shifted through the pages and finally put them down.

“Let me tell you something,” she said.

“What?”

“Let me tell you something.”

“Sure.”

“This was like my first gig, the first live show I went to,” she said.

“Where?” I asked.

“Here, Wellington. At the Soundshell in the gardens. I was so excited. Like: *Wow, guitars! Drums!* This was at the beginning of summer just before my birthday. Guitars, big amps and bass. *So* exciting. Mean-looking guys. I was fascinated by meanness.”

I laughed and Merren smiled at that.

“So, this was – what? 1988?” she said and squinted for a moment. Her eyes looked like mine felt: caught back an hour rewatching the couple and their daughter watching Jennifer Rush, their bodies poisoned and dying. How my eyes couldn’t stop seeing their slow, measured, mutinous hunger for death.

“Sure. Who were the band?” I asked tentatively.

“No idea. Guys with long hair and solos. Rockers on the loose. Anyway, there was this boy. I liked him. I knew him from a school friend. We’d talked several times, we played tennis I think the previous summer. We were bad at it, but it was something to do. Hit balls and laugh and call each other names. Drink iced water in the grass. Then it was December and a band was playing so we all went and I saw him in the crowd. He was wearing flares, which was amazing to me because nobody wore flares then. It seemed impossible – like you know how you can’t actually see the sun because the way the sun is impossible to actually see? That’s what it was like seeing him in these things. They were hideous, but he looked fantastic. I watched the band and felt myself dance, nervously at first, then effortlessly. I kept taking glances in his direction, hoping he was feeling the same way I was, invigorated and new. I watched the guitarist, how he played with his body as much as his hands. I was amazed by how in sync they were. Everything was perfect. The sun, the crowd. The way the crowd moved and the way people danced. A kind of complex unity. Basic and chaotic. I was in love with every little thing.

“But then, I don’t know. They kept playing and the longer they went on, the longer they played the more I heard something. It was a ringing in the singer’s voice, a note that droned

through every song. And then the guitarist. He just played every note like he'd learnt it from a book, and then, then the one time he strayed from the script and went off on his own he was awful, like he was saying horrible things at a party. That he was that kind of guy. Awful. I could suddenly hear it: they were *garbage*. The band was garbage. I could hear their pretension and seriousness. How they'd never written a song in their lives. I turned to the boy. He looked distracted. So distracted and I kept taking glances. Looking, looking and I saw how he was scrutinising everything, looking around and I realised, realised he too knew they were dreadful. I realised he was distracted by how bad the music was, from the people he was standing with, because the band, they were no good. Then he saw me. He looked at me, his eyes, and then he started moving. He passed through the crowd like they were just the sounds each of them made as they hummed along to this sad rocker nonsense. We both started moving, slowly shifting out and away over to the side where the flower beds made a natural border between the audience and the rest of the gardens. A forced rim at the edge of the music. And then he was standing in front of me and we were staring at each other's mouths and eyes.

“I was 14, he was 15; our eyes, our eyes and then kissing off to the side of the crowd. Kissing and kissing. Then feeling each other up in the trees on the hill away from everyone else. We could hear the band singing, maybe a Beatles song. The band was so insignificant all of a sudden. I put my tongue in his mouth and there was that perfect feeling of melting and drifting, of blood rushing. The soft even tide of my body giving in to this, right? Then it was over and I saw the look on his face.” She went quiet for a moment, as if making space for me on the couch. “I'm remembering this, and forgetting it at the same time. All part of the same game.”

She blew out a jet of air.

“I walked home on the disused railway tracks to our house in Kaiwharawhara so excited. So in bloom.” She laughed. “I found myself spinning around and around on the sleepers and rails, my arms out calling: *Where are the trains? Where are the trains?* I just wanted oblivion.” She laughed, lightly and distant and her eyes glowed so I could see the small splendour of old guilts playing out.

“Do you think of him, this kid? Like now and then.”

She shook her head. “No, just now. This is the first time in decades.”

“So?”

She looked at me with wide eyes over her glasses, and then: “So – so the poor blind parts of us, Gregor. I was impaled on this bright new thing we’d just discovered. Right through my chest. And he was brilliantly in love, the way his body was putting colour in his skin, the way his eyes were so clear and widened, how he seemed an inch taller. This kid and his green eyes and how locked in they were to something so perfect. Pleased and perfect, but uncertain how to be pleased. These beautiful eyes looking around, trying to find his mood. I saw him the next day. We played tennis. I let him touch my breast.” She laughed. An indistinct laugh and I didn’t let it complete its run.

“Was he the first guy?” I asked, butting in. “To—”

She shook her head.

“No. But he was the first guy that I really wanted, you know, to touch me,” she said, “if that makes sense. Anyway, then the next day, the next day I had my friend Kylie call his house and ask for him on the phone. I sat beside her as she asked his mother if she could talk to this boy. I held her hand when he came on the line and started speaking. I could just hear the faint outline of his voice from the receiver against my friend’s ear. I listened as Kylie said what I asked her to say. She told him I didn’t want to see him anymore. I listened as she said

those words, that I didn't want to be his girlfriend anymore. And I listened as he didn't seem to say anything, how his voice must have dropped away out of hearing range."

I knelt down beside the sofa, her eyes watching mine from a near distance.

"It was summer. I was 14. I don't know why I did that."

"Why?"

"I don't know why. Everything is impossible but it all happens anyway. That's the most profound thing I can say. I find myself back walking on those train tracks, I find myself thinking about that girl. Me with a little 70s gingham frock that I loved. I used to wear it anywhere I thought people might notice me."

"Was she good-looking? You in a little frock?"

"I think so. And he was too, and he was a sweet young amante, clever and kind." She said *amante* and I could hear how it was a word she'd only recently come across. It was something she'd started doing over the last months, looking up words, searching them out. "I think that's why I thought of him just before. He used to write things in a notebook. Which I thought endearing. It's likely he had a nice smile. And I was, I was—"

"A part of me is laughing."

"Okay, I was a lonely girl with nice legs and I thought I deserved something for being as smart as I was. Lonely kids always overestimate how smart they are. Or at least, this one did."

"A part of me is laughing and I'm thinking what a creature you were. It's making me want to kick you out."

"You're serious?"

"Sure," I said.

"I don't think you're serious. You're serious most of the time. But I don't think you're serious. But don't you think the most serious *time* of life, though," she said, "is when you're

between the ages of 13 and 20? The most serious time of our lives is at that age. I think of that kid's notebooks and how desperate I was for my thoughts to be serious, for them to matter in some way. I think I just wanted to make sure he put me in his notebook. That I mattered in a way beyond just being this girl and this kiss. I wanted to be something he would never figure out. And that's why I say it, those years, they are the most serious of our lives. Everything else is just decision-making after you turn 20. But back then you're burning down houses, breaking into churches in the back of your mind. That's serious business."

"And now you're 47," I said, trying to be helpful in some way. In retrospect I sounded like I often did during this time. I'd a habit of interrupting, certain of what came next out of people's mouths, that I knew the map of them. It would lead to arguments, and we'd go at each other until we came to the realisation that the one survivor of all our talk would be shame and regret and we'd quit and apologise. But that day we didn't argue, we were doing something else.

"I'm 47," she said. "I've left a lot behind."

I stared at her. I watched, waiting until she said something else, or I watched and stared because caught in there somewhere was a 15-year-old boy listening on the phone, learning heartbreak for the first time. Her eyes brimmed with the small interior glow of her apartment. I was aware of the pulse of my neck. The flash of her eyes looking for each part of me as she glanced my way. I felt her bliss in the precision recall, that minor act, the retrieval out of the blur. Here's adolescence's death, here's calamity, here's the thing of fear, fury and hope. I put my hand under her shirt and felt where her bra normally crossed her back, the protruding bones, a kind of nakedness marking the dying.

"How long does it take for a boy to get over something?" she asked as we deserted the lounge and made our way back to bed.

"Why?" I asked, taking off my jeans and slipping into covers.

“I used to worry about that kid. I worried I was responsible for every cruel decision he ever made.”

“What’s his name?”

“I honestly don’t know. I honestly—”

“But he exists? Despite you not knowing his name.”

“The idea of existence is such a tricky thing, isn’t it?”

“Not so much,” I said. I helped her with her oxygen. The tubes going up into her nostrils.

“It really is tricky.”

“Verb noun? Pronoun verb pronoun verb adjective noun: Existence.”

“Asshole,” she laughed. “I’m talking about those vanished kids. Those people we used to be and how we spoke a language that I’ve no idea about now. It’s kind of terrifying.”

“I’m terrified of kids, teenagers,” I said.

“So you should be.”

“I look at them and have no idea. It’s like missing someone you’ve never spoken to.”

“You should be terrified,” she said. “They know things you will never know again. It gives them the greatest power.”

I shook my head.

“The greatest power,” she said again.

“Sure.”

She brushed hair away from her face.

“But there’s something—”

“Something else?”

“There’s something else.”

I watched her, waited. She turned so she was facing me. Her hallowed eyes beautiful and awake, a honed edge to each small movement that turned knives to butter.

“You know when you interrupt me it’s like,” she said, “it’s like I have nothing.”

“I don’t mean to.”

“It’s like you have taken out my breath, but not just my breath but my chest. That there’s a cavity in there and it burns until it’s hollow and cold. That’s what it’s like when I’m thinking and you—”

I stayed still, my mouth full of words, full of humming bees and tense cicadas just there at the rim of speech.

“This is what happened, OK? Just listen. Two summers on, like two-and-half full years. It was just after my final year of school started and I had a boyfriend, a guy called Zach who was at uni and he had a group of friends and they decided they wanted to go paintballing.”

“You went paintballing?”

“He was a few years older, at university. A group of his friends. They were all like, artists and shit. Like musicians and filmmakers and you know, and they wanted to go and shoot the shit out of each other in a field. Bunch of skinny, wobbly long-hairs.”

“And this boy was there, that’s where this takes us.”

“Turns out, yeah, the guy I’d kissed and dumped, turns out he was working there in the summer. But I didn’t know this yet. So anyway, we all showed up in our cars and everyone was laughing and joking and jumping around like idiots. The place was over in Pauatahanui on a hillside. It was all manuka and totara in March, beautiful, still. I liked it and really just wanted to hang out and eat the food we’d brought with us, but my friends, they—” She took some water. “They were all hepped up and hyper, dancing around and they seemed really into the idea of doing this thing that normally they’d scoff at. Which was kind of fascinating in itself. Zach said it was like this experiment. But they were really just being kids. We were given overalls. Green or black for whatever team. We were shown how to use the guns and how to reload them and so on. And then we were set loose on the hill. I remember there were

rules but nobody paid them any attention. There were teams and nobody cared. Everyone running around. It was quite fun, but tiring and hot, you know? I remember shooting this gun and laughing and having no idea where the pellets went. I heard the odd yelp, but otherwise it was a bunch of idiots running around, all dressed up for war, shouting and firing and missing. Me and one of the girls, she was wearing a sarong and it kept riding up under her overalls and the whole thing was driving her mad. We both realised we were kinda bored so we went into the trees where there was a stream and nobody seemed to be in there. We found a nice spot by the water in the shade and sat and I tried to help her with this goddamned sarong. We could hear the guys and the other girls in the distance and we took off our shoes and shared a cigarette. It was fun hiding away like that. We laughed and drank from our water bottles and literally put our feet up. I remember we were both sitting there looking at our bare feet up on a log and comparing features, veins and toes and tendons and laughing some more. It was the best time, just being there while everybody else pretended to be at war. *They think this is art*, the girl said. *Because they think they're artists they think this is an act of art. Really, they're just idiots.* And it was true: irony equals idiocy most of the time. We laughed and it was calming just being there. We pretended to shoot our little pistols at the birds flitting about in the glade. *Pow, pow.* Laughing. But then everything, all the noise of Zach's friends, it all went silent. It was just those birds tweeting away. The rest of the guys, I don't know, they seemed to just disappear because we couldn't hear them. It was suddenly quite odd, being alone in this forest with this girl. I realised she knew my name but I didn't know hers. She seemed oddly afraid suddenly, saying: *Where are they? What's happened to them?* We got up, put our shoes on and found ourselves whispering, walking on tip toes through the foliage. We started on the way back towards the hut we'd all set out from earlier. The light was honing in through the branches and leaves and there was just the sound of the creek. Then the girl put her hand on my shoulder, she whispered at me: *Zach*, and stopped and pointed. I saw

the back of my boyfriend down by the creek, crouched and cupping water into his mouth with his hand. He was wearing his green overalls like mine and he looked so nice there by the stream. We stood still in the cover of the trees, just watching him. It seemed like there was something I was supposed to do. I didn't feel like I should be there. I didn't feel like this was somewhere I should be."

"I'm guessing you shot him," I said.

She nodded. "I took up my pistol. I aimed at the back of his head. I remembering thinking, *This is why we came here. This is what we all got hot and bothered about.* This was the game and this was why I was here and I aimed and I shot him. I thought this was part of the game and the pain, the pain wouldn't be real pain. Just, I don't know. Just an event within this thing we thought we were engaged in. Or it counted as something other and ironic and on a deeper level I'd no idea about. I aimed at the spot directly below his cranium, the soft part before the neck becomes bony. I fired and that was where I hit him, right in the soft part. That was the game and that's why we were there. I fired and I hit him."

"__"

"Yeah, and he yelped like, like a motherfucker. He jumped up and fell down and was just shouting and he turned around and I don't know, I was horrified that I'd done this and he was fucking furious and it was, it wasn't Zach."

"Jesus."

"It was this boy."

"What the fuck."

"It was this boy, the boy from, you know. But he wasn't really a boy any more. He was, like, 18."

"Did he see you?"

“No. Because, well we ran, didn’t we? This girl whose name I didn’t know and we just: zip, out of there.”

“What was he doing there?”

“He was working, like I said. He was working there and I had no idea. But it turns out he was a friend of one of the guys who was friends with Zach. That’s why we went there. Because he was a friend of one of these guys and, I shot him.”

She went quiet.

“What does that mean? *You shot him*. It was a paintball.”

“I know. I know. But, here’s the thing. While we were leaving, like an hour later. We were handing back our guns and protective glasses and all that jazz and he saw me and he smiled at me. Jesus, he smiled at me and I just said, *Hey!* like I was 14 again, all a bit giddy at seeing this handsome boy. And, and that should be it.”

“What should be it?”

“That should be it, that should be the end. I’d shot my boyfriend. But it wasn’t my boyfriend, instead it was the other boy I’d hurt so thoughtlessly and he’d smiled at me in this way that seemed so precise and like he really did understand why I did what I did after that concert. He got it and he smiled and I just wanted to kiss him again.” She put her hands up to her cheeks, gave off a kind of sigh. “So that should be it. And that would be it if I hadn’t learnt something, something like years later.”

“When?”

“A few years, maybe three years later. I was out at a gig at the old Bar Bodega on Willis street. Some bands and this guy, a friend of Zach’s from back then, he came up to me when I was just watching this band play. He came up to me and I remembered him. He was tall and I remembered how he used to have a beard before guys started wearing beards and he was this guy, you know? Sort of stood out. Anyway he was just talking away and we found ourselves

talking about people and stuff, people I remembered and didn't remember. It was nice, you know. He bought me a beer and it was fun and then he said the boy's name."

"The name you can't remember."

"Right. He said it and I just remembered how he smiled at me at the paintball hut and I just felt nothing but this old, stupid crush. Anyway, he died. He was like—"

"He died?"

"Yeah. He's like dead."

"Fuck."

"And I learnt how he died. He had a stroke at 20."

"Jesus."

"Yeah. Dropped dead at 20. His brain. He had an aneurysm."

"And you learnt about this over some beers?"

"Yeah, and I was so shocked. This, this aneurysm and he was dead."

"Oh, Merren."

"Yeah."

"Shit."

"And I just. I just, and from that moment on I felt the worst, worst overpowering guilt. Like I had killed this person."

"You didn't kill him."

"I know, but the thought. The thought that these years later this, the impact of that stupid fucking paintball, and—"

"And—"

"Yeah."

I scanned the bookshelves, the idea of a spine there. A title and the shape of the words because often you don't see words, you just know their shape, and in that shape they hold the same code of title and whatever else.

"And I don't know what it is we do, you know?" she said. "I don't know what it is we do and survive and I don't know what it is we do and die." She was crying then and she didn't want me to touch her. She just needed that moment, its admission and how ultimately true it was within whatever language or lifetime.

We lay still in the quiet, something she usually loved like love's loudest moments, like the back-arching moan of dawn-sent sex, like the shriek of song and how its notes can never be separated. But here the silence sat heavy, a bulge in each of the four walls and ceiling. She talked some more but eventually she realised that was it and she turned the light off. The sudden snapping to of the day. We lay still in the aftermath, quiet as the last several hours slowly remembered themselves behind this wall of mute silence pushing through the room. Dark then, immediate with the hush. The absence of light felt sudden, true, as if all our belongings had vanished in this hastily arranged blackness. I could feel her looking at me.

"Honey," she said, interrupting all that seemed suddenly settled, "you're still wearing your glasses."

"I haven't taken them off yet," I said.

"Honey," she said. She started coughing, the hard kind. The kind when her lungs felt like they were tearing and the room was filled with her pain and the pity that is everywhere after.

"Hon, your glasses."

"What?"

"You're still wearing them."

"All the better to see the dark," I said, and expected something in return. Something awake, near sleep but not dreaming. I expected something funny but not a joke, but then we

were both turning to look. The sound of the brakes from a bus outside the apartment, electric and quietly bearing down on the road. The last express out of the city and everyone at the stop looking up and glancing our way, its wide headlights sending beams buckling from store front to office to our window.

“You’re still wearing them,” she said.

I removed the glasses, took them from my face and felt her close her eyes. I found a lens cloth on the night stand and began slowly with the wipe, cleaning the corners.