

Reflections

MJA Dr Eric Dark Creative Writing Prize

Out of the sky

Winner

Medical practitioner category

You could barely make him out at first, a distant figure walking along a fence in a vast red landscape that was otherwise without boundary. A sentry line of posts stretched north and south. Close to the man the posts were well defined. Each carried the letters BHP in blisters of black solder. Through each post ran five taut wires, the uppermost barbed. But in the distance the posts lost form. They shimmered uncertainly and then seemed to float in the air before disappearing into the shifting light of summer heat.

Occasionally jet airliners arced high overhead. Thin white vapour trails lingered in a sky of perfect blue until currents of air gradually teased them into wisps of cloud. These passed unseen by the man, who remained absorbed in his task of inspection and repair. Except for the faintest humming of the wires, he could hear nothing. There was not the slightest breeze. Nothing challenged the stillness except his slow movement along the fence line. Now and then he would pause to work a piece of truant wire or kick away the wind-borne skeletons of plants with the stiff, economical action of an old man. Behind him trotted a dog, sniffing keenly for the scent of carrion.

By two in the afternoon both man and dog were gone. A diminishing speck of white could be seen on the eastern horizon. A rolling plume of dust followed like the tail of a comet, splitting the visible world in two.

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The windows of the ute were down and the cabin was a maelstrom of wind and dust and the drum roll of heavy-tread tyres. It hadn't rained in months and the sun had sculpted last season's puddles into endless ruts and corrugations. The dog struggled to keep its footing on the tray as the ute pitched and shuddered. The man was speeding. He had to be back in town by three. He would know his destiny at three.

After half an hour, dirt gave way to bitumen and the noise from the tyres abated. The man responded to this sudden peace by glancing to his left where compact discs lay strewn across the passenger seat. After a moment of consideration, however, he reached for a cigarette in his top pocket and lit up. Short square fingers fumbled with the dashboard lighter. He would have a smoke but he was in no mood for music.

It was ten to three when he arrived at the clinic. The waiting room was crowded, as the doctors were



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There was always a middle door: the door of real or false hope



running late. He took the last remaining seat, trying not to catch anyone's eye. He wondered whether he stank as there had been no time for a shower.

Within moments a loud voice rang out:

"Well I'll be buggered, Skinny! Not you too mate!"

And sure enough it was Boyd Carroll. He hadn't spoken to Boyd in years. He chose to avoid him. Boyd, the school hero, the entrepreneur, the town worthy. His story was legendary: riches to rags to riches again with mining leases in booms and busts that came and went over the decades. Boyd had built a small empire while Skinny drifted from job to job. He was a plausible man.

Boyd was flanked by his second wife and their teenage son. Neither looked up. The wife kept to her magazine while the boy was bent over an iPhone.

"Can we swap places love?" said Boyd to an old woman sitting on Skinny's right.

In moments he and Skinny were sharing reminiscences. They had worked together as station hands after leaving school. They had chased the same girls, drunk in the same pubs. It was Boyd who had found Skinny on the track after his motorcycle accident. Skinny had come off alone and was trying to crawl back to the main road with a broken leg. Boyd had saved his life. Boyd, the better man.

They were eventually interrupted by the receptionist who walked over to advise that "he won't be long".

At this juncture Boyd clapped Skinny on the shoulder and declared:

"Well Skinny, we've got to fight and we've got to win. The big C isn't going to get me: can't fit it into the diary, mate."

"That's right Dad, you'll beat it" piped up his son without lifting his eyes from the iPhone screen.

Boyd returned to his family and Skinny returned to contemplating the patchwork quilt of fortune and misfortune which constituted his life. He sat bolt upright with hands on each thigh like a soldier awaiting court martial. Memories vaguely formed and dissipated as he stared at the three doors directly in front of him. Strange notions took hold. Skinny fancied that the first door represented reprieve, the third hanging and the middle door — well that was the middle door. There was always a middle door: the door of real or false hope. It was like the pokies, he thought, plenty of chances but in the end the house wins.

It was no surprise to him, then, when the middle door opened and he was beckoned in by a doctor

who seemed, predictably, much too young. He had flown in that morning from Sydney bringing with him God's verdict. Out of the sky.

The doctor's words ran and coalesced like rivulets in a flood. Essentially he offered Skinny chemotherapy and radiotherapy with a 50-50 chance of an extra year or two. When Skinny left the room (was it minutes? was it hours?) he gave Boyd no sign of triumph or defeat. He just nodded in Boyd's direction and left the clinic. Boyd was then also beckoned through Door 2.

Skinny drove home with a thick pile of notes on everything to do with his illness. He briefly considered reading them but then tossed the whole lot onto the kitchen table before going to his daughter's old room at the back of the house. He fancied her presence in the tiny particles of dust which rose and fell in the thin shafts of light from a window above her bed. She lived within the stale air. Her favourite dolls sat patiently on a shelf, and posters of rock idols clung precariously to the walls on balls of desiccating Blu Tack. Apart from these vestiges of family life, however, the room was crammed with mountains of opera recordings. Each LP, each CD, each cassette lay neatly stacked, ordered and catalogued. Skinny carefully selected an LP and took it to an old gramophone player in the living room. He turned the volume up and went and got a beer.

* * *

The following days went on much as usual. Skinny worked. He went to the club. He listened to music. Fortunately he had a niece to help him with the arrangements.

"No, Robert (his real name) you can't have a smoking seat. Yes, Robert of course I'll look after Luciano (the dog). Yes, yes, I'll take Offenbach (the

cockatiel) to my place. Come on Robert, look on the bright side, you haven't been to Sydney in years."

She was a sweet woman who had enough problems of her own, and he could not express anything but gratitude as she quickly condensed his life into a set of numbers: flights, hotels, appointments, admission dates, medical insurance, travel insurance and a raft of other details.

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One of the most beautiful sunsets in living memory lit up the horizon on the day Skinny's niece drove him to the airport. The landscape was evaporating into dusky hues of green and blue as they reached the outskirts of town. A large ruby red sun was receding into tufts of pink cumulus. The sky had an impossible translucency.

They pulled up outside the terminal entrance. His niece gave him a quick kiss with the engine running. She had to get home to feed the children, she said. There was no aircraft on the tarmac but it would come. Boyd was also just getting out of a car. He had a bigger entourage with him this time. Skinny could hear the words of encouragement, the terms of endearment.

It was nearly 2 hours later when an aircraft finally accelerated along a line of fading white marks and took off into the night. Those on the ground marked its progress by sound alone, but for several minutes its navigation lights were clearly visible. They blinked sharply, urgently, in the black, moonless sky before being lost in an ocean of twinkling stars.

Just one person looked up to notice this union of temporal and eternal lights. He was sitting alone on a distant hill, facing the darkened plain. He was wearing a heavy coat and a dog sat by his side. The *Addio del passato* from *La traviata* filled the cold night air.

Skinny knew he was a happy man. □