

*This is the winner of the Joe O'Sullivan Writers Prize for 2017 by
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the centre cannot hold

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world*

William Butler Yeats

 William is driving along a stretch of the Great Southern Highway near York. It's a misty winter's morning, just gone eight, the Getz' puny headlights a weak lamp upon a canvas of grey. An illusion of progress; man and machine as one, both equally likely to be dashed against the walls of unforgiving trees that loom and rear on either side. An illusion of safety; a pocket of warmth, the sussurant sound of a mournful singer on the stereo. A soap bubble, an egg shell, a heartbeat.

Back it on up and you start again, Tim Rogers croons. You start again.

Tears spill from William's eyes as the song swells to its crescendo
- and fades.

The song is over, last track on the CD, and now he wrangles it into its jewel case, hunching forward to crack open the glovebox with his left hand while the right charts a course these next precious seconds, while his attention is distracted by the burgeoning and burdensome-burgeonsome-piles of souls pressed on polycarbonate plastic. Selecting one at random, driver's side wheels encroaching on the double white lines with a *thunk thunk thunk*, William slides in the CD and turns his attention to the sharp curve ahead.

William himself is starting again, or trying to, and this necessitates a drive of more than one hundred kilometres to the

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Fremantle Arts Centre, where today he is enrolled in a creative writing workshop with a local author. William is an outlier, the text of his life marginalia to the narrative continuing about and without him. He is an outsider, a barbarian at the gates. All his life, William has had the sense of being too late for a party that seems to exist wherever he isn't. On rare occasions, he makes the effort to surface from his obscurity and silence, but for the most part he cannot bear the thought of not being somebody. His debilitating pride is such that he cannot simply enrol in courses and workshops and then attend them, he must first be made to feel welcome. And he rarely feels welcome.

Oblivion waits this way, just a sharp turn to the left or right. The impulse is there, but not yet the willpower. Perhaps it's genetic. William has a grandmother who has been threatening to drown herself in the river her whole life. Now she's ninety-six. Sometimes he consoles himself with the thought of author Mikhail Bulgakov, hounded and blacklisted for his unacceptably bourgeois politics in Soviet Russia. Bulgakov had the strength of character to write to Stalin asking to be deported, as he felt his work could not co-exist with the regime, at a time when hundreds of thousands were disappearing into the police stations and gulags. Where did he find the courage for this? If Bulgakov could face Stalin, surely William can face a few years or even a decade of rejection and indifference? *If only he could find something to care about beyond himself.*

Like Woody Guthrie on the stereo, William's had some hard travelin'. His marriage of ten years busted up a while back, he's been stuck in the same shitty job teaching the local dropkicks where to put full stops and capital letters for at least as long as that, and now a disc in his spine has popped a hernia. He has no ambitions or interests beyond reading and writing, no friends outside work, no mentors aside from long dead writers. He drinks too much and exercises too little. He doesn't have a girlfriend. Though he won writing awards and scholarships as

a teenager, he hasn't had any luck in this regard for more than fifteen years.

By the time he reaches Fremantle, William is seriously contemplating not attending the workshop. He's paid for it already, and for the fuel. He doesn't know if he can face it, but it's a blustery day with plenty of rain about and he simply doesn't know what else to fill the hours with. He has about a hundred bucks in his wallet and another two hundred in the bank to last until Thursday, but that's it.

There are a couple of free spaces in front of the Arts Centre and this he takes as a sign of slender encouragement. The rain has stopped. He doesn't want to go upstairs to the workshop room yet or he might have to chat with someone, possibly even another writer. He orders a coffee, sits in the corner, making sure to avoid eye contact.

By the time he makes it upstairs, the workshop has started. He sits down at a paint-flecked desk at the end of the row, gets out his journal and pen. But the words wash over him. They might not even be in English. It isn't the fault of the presenter, a rakish woman of about sixty. He cannot engage. After a while the woman stops speaking and the participants commence scribbling in their notebooks or tapping at their laptops. He should write something so as not to attract attention, so he writes:

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo.

It isn't even his; it's the opening to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. William never even finished it, but he still loves that first sentence.

Before long it's time for the break, so William slings his things into his tote bag and shuffles downstairs into the courtyard. He's managed to sit in stony silence for more than an hour without hearing or learning a thing. He imagines himself a literary black

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hole, a void where words enter but nothing can escape.

‘How are you enjoying it?’ a voice says. William startles not only in hearing the words but in perceiving that the question is intended for him. He looks at the speaker: a dark-haired woman of perhaps Middle-Eastern descent, his age or a little younger.

‘Yeah, I’m ...’ he stammers, unused to forming words. ‘It’s fine.’ ‘Mind if I sit with you? It’s nice out here in the sun.’

Nice. The sun. ‘Yes, it’s ...’

‘I’m Alma,’ the woman says, extending her hand. He is to shake it. Her hand is warm. ‘I saw you in the workshop.’

‘I’m William.’

‘Pleased to meet you, William. What do you write?’

Write? ‘Um, not enough.’

She smiles. Her hair is wavy and tousled and she’s wearing a black jumper. ‘Nor me. But I’m trying, you know?’

William knows; he’s nodding. They are connecting. He can feel a coil, an invisible rope. ‘I liked your bit about ...’ She spoke, didn’t she? Read her work aloud. ‘About your health issue,’ he concludes. Could it be that he was secretly listening all along?

Alma exhales. ‘It’s a bit embarrassing, sharing like that, but it’s all I can think about.’

He’s nodding again. All she can think about: the cyst on her ovary. ‘So you’re having surgery?’

Her face lights up; these are the magic words. Out it pours: she’d been having abdominal pains, bloating. Then ultrasounds, blood tests, an expensive specialist appointment. It’s her left ovary, the cyst swollen up to the size of a tennis ball, two centimetres bigger this month than last. The doc doesn’t think it’s cancerous but he won’t know for sure until he operates. If it is, she’ll lose the ovary. And she wants a baby. Even though she isn’t in a relationship. Her operation is set for this coming Wednesday and, despite having private health insurance, it’s going to cost her twelve hundred dollars.

‘It must be hard going to the ultrasound place when you’re

not, you know, pregnant.'

She bites her lip. 'Look, let's just get out of here, okay?'

'Okay, but where will we go?'

'I was thinking the casino.'

The casino? The only time he's been there is for an English teachers' conference a decade ago, and he didn't do any gambling. 'I don't have much money.'

'Think I do? I need to raise the cash for my op.'

'Next you're going to tell me you've got a system.'

'I do have a system.' He doesn't know her well enough to tell if she's serious. 'Come on, they're going back in.'

Turns out Alma didn't bring a car, doesn't mention the existence of one, so they get into the Getz. William is getting hungry, hasn't eaten since seven. They get a clear run of green lights on the Canning Highway. He isn't sure whether she's intending on ending up in bed with him after the casino. Given the state of her ovary, he imagines not, but he's been wrong about this sort of thing before.

The moment they step across the threshold of the main casino, William finds himself being tailed by a security guard. No one's asked him for ID in many a year.

'You look like maybe you want to sign up for a membership,' the guard says. He's talking to William, not Alma.

'How do you know I'm new?'

'Call it a hunch.' The guard ushers over a pair of casino employees wielding iPads and they sign him up. The women give him his rewards card and a voucher for a free drink. They don't seem to notice Alma.

'The bar's over there,' Alma tells him when the women are gone. 'I'll meet you in a minute.'

The barman takes his voucher and pours him a glass of the house red. William doesn't want to put fifty bucks into the pokies so he asks the barman to break a fifty.

'Can't do that, sorry,' the barman says, pointing to a sign. 'Regulations.'

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'Fair enough. What's the cheapest thing on the menu?'

This is a better tack. 'A tomato sauce will cost you twenty cents.'

'Then I'll have a tomato sauce.'

Alma finds him at a table near the bar. 'What on earth are you doing with that?' she asks. He explains and she gets herself a wine. She shares a joke with the barman, no doubt at William's expense.

He's still hungry and he still hasn't eaten, and now he's drinking on an empty stomach. She wants to play the pokies so he watches her do it for a while, until he thinks he understands how everything works.

'So, what's the system?' he asks. 'Keep pressing this button until I win.'

At a dollar a pop, it doesn't take Alma more than twenty minutes to lose fifty bucks. She wins a bit here and there, but it all goes back. She particularly likes a machine that depicts a graveyard or crypt. The point is to get a board full of a symbol, or as close to a full board as possible. It's rigged, of course, but Alma won't accept this. He gets them another wine and a bowl of chips, but she isn't hungry. Now she's half way to losing another fifty.

'Maybe bet a smaller amount each time?' he says.

'How many stories have you sent out this year, Will?' she asks. The two topics don't seem related.

'I'm sorry?'

She doesn't take her eye from the screen or her finger from the button. A monkey could do the job just as effectively. 'You want to get a story published, don't you? How many have you sent out?'

He thinks about it. 'Um, one?'

'And how many times did you send it out?'

He can see where she's going with this. 'I think twice.'

'I see. How many competitions have you entered?'

'I entered the Margaret River one. Didn't get anywhere.'

‘So that’s one.’

‘One, yes.’

She’s down to twelve dollars from her original hundred. He has no idea how much lower she intends to go.

‘You’re feeling like a big, fat failure, aren’t you? Not that you’re fat.’

He grasps the last of the chips from the paper cup. ‘You think I should come to the casino more often, is that it?’

She flashes him a quick grin between rolls. Eight dollars. ‘It’s the same thing, isn’t it? Some competitions cost money, so it’s like gambling. Pay fifteen bucks for the entry fee, probably get nothing. Occasionally you’ll win something though, just like this.’ She’s just won twenty dollars on a field of skeletons. ‘I got second prize in that Peter Cowan prize a couple of years back.’

‘You did? That’s great.’

‘You didn’t ask what it paid.’

‘That’s not really the point though, is it?’

She’s back down to fifteen dollars again. ‘It was a hundred bucks.’

‘Well great.’

‘Yeah, I just lost a hundred bucks in half an hour, didn’t I? Or close to it.’ She’s down to ten.

‘I don’t think I understand.’

‘I guess I thought I might win the twelve hundred I needed, that’s all. Instead I’ve lost a hundred. But life’s about gambling, isn’t it? You could have stayed at the workshop, so why did you come with me? Thought you might get a root, didn’t you? Busted ovary and all. Still might.’

Alma hits the button for the final time with her final dollar. The stars won’t align.

She’s reaching for her wallet.

He puts his hand over hers. ‘No, my turn,’ he says. ‘Here, you take a twenty and go get us another wine.’

‘Right-o, Casanova.’

William loads twenty dollars on his card and turns his

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attention to the game. If he bets a dollar per round, he'll be out before she gets back from the bar, so he makes it fifty cents. No skill, no choice, just whack, there goes another fifty cents. He loses twenty times in a row. After a while, he can't even be bothered looking at the screen.

Alma gets back with their drinks and hands him a few dollars in change. He's down to eight dollars.

'Don't bet fifty, bet a dollar,' she says. 'It improves your chances.'

'Does it?' he says, but he decides to humour her. But he stuffs up and ends up betting three dollars instead. Now he's down to five.

William hits the button again and the screen half fills with gravestones. Then the board re-rolls the other squares and most of them flick over to gravestones too.

'Shiiiiit,' she says. The game draws a fence around the gravestones, a fucking big fence. WIN: \$632.50, the screen says.

'Fucking hell,' she says. 'Quick, press *Collect*.'

The machine spits out a paper ticket and Alma shows him where to exchange it for a wad of crisp fifties. The machine won't pay out coins, so he takes thirty bucks for himself and hands the rest to her. The look on her face makes it completely worth it.

'Promise you won't gamble it,' he says. 'In fact, I don't trust you. Let's go back to the car.'

'But I need the other six hundred! Even with this, I'm only up five hundred.'

'Just listen to yourself, would you? We walked in here an hour ago and now you're walking out with five hundred bucks. There's the door. I'll even buy you lunch. I'll even drop you back at home.'

'That root's looking like a slam dunk, isn't it?'

William hasn't had sex in so long that he's kind of forgotten about it, which is just as well. He takes her hand before she can

object to leaving. He gets behind the wheel three wines won't kill him-and she sits there clutching her fifties. It's kind of sad, seeing her this happy. Five hundred bucks isn't that much.

Turns out she lives in North Fremantle, practically around the corner from the arts centre. Now the rain's coming down and he's worse for wear on account on the wines. They go through the Maccas drive-through.

'Here we are,' she says, pointing to a non-descript brick and tile on Thompson Street. It's still raining and he has a long drive ahead of him. She gets out and opens the front door, then notices that he's still sitting behind the wheel.

'What's your problem, stage fright? It's all right, you won't hurt me.'

'It's not that.'

'You don't like me, is that it? I thought we were gonna have a thing together.'

Maybe a big thing, maybe a small thing, who knows?'

'I like you, Alma. I just don't know.'

'I don't know if I'm gonna be alive this time next week, do I? Maybe I'm gonna bleed out on the table or from an infection after the op. Maybe you're gonna get yourself killed driving home from in that little matchbox. It's like the pokies, Will. Like sending out those stories. You've got to gamble.'

William gets out of the car and follows Alma into the house. In his mind's eye he can still see a field of cartoon gravestones ringed by a cartoon fence.
